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Keratin Kapital: Black Hair and the Economy of Otherness.

Understanding the state of black hair in South Africa through the import of Indian hair

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Introduction: Why Indian Hair?

In March of 2015, a large group of women gathered in the Maboneng precinct of Johannesburg to participate in the inaugural Johannesburg Natural Hair Meet Up. As the name suggests, this event was a platform where African women with natural hairstyles could interact with their fellow *Naturalistas*[1]. The event offered tutorials on how to achieve and maintain various natural looks; including cornrows, locks, and afros. Apart from style guides, the event hosted a panel discussion where women could voice their opinions on natural hair. There, the biggest concerns expressed was the acceptability of natural hair in the workplace, and how natural black hair was considered 'unsuitable' in most corporate environments. The 'unsuitability' of black hair had its roots in South Africa's racialized past, where it was devalued as the most visible stigma of 'blackness', second only to skin colour (Mercer 2000). As a response, black women have a history of chemically straightening their hair in order to present a more 'fitting' image. However as demonstrated by the *Naturalistas*, contemporary women seemed to opt for a different approach; an approach which appeared to be mirrored by their fellow countrywomen. According to the Euromonitor (2014) report on black South African haircare trends, the country exhibited a decrease in sales of damaging hair care products. Interestingly, this trend coincided with the exponential influx of imported hair into the country for the purposes of artificial hair integrations i.e. weaves and extensions (Balachandran 2015). However South African women were not demanding any type of hair, but rather hair from a particular place: India. This begs the questions: Were these developments a different response to the repressive structures that held black hair as inferior, or were those grooming practices reflective of a change in women's attitudes towards their own hair? As an answer, this project will focus on how the purchase of Indian hair exposes the state of black hair in contemporary South Africa, and how women engage with that environment through its usage.

Central to this focus is exposing why Indian hair was privileged by black South African women, and how its properties furthers the understanding of hair in the country. Since Indian hair is making its way into the country through a transnational exchange network, I will give consideration to anthropological literature on commodities, paying specific attention to the ways in which hair operated at various stages of its commodity pathway. As will be shown, such networks were buttressed by racial ideologies that were central to their functioning. As such women were not only involved in a simple system of economic exchanges, but also

[1] According to numerous event attendees, this term refers to a movement in which black females take pride in their natural black hair

participated in – and thus reinforced – an "economy of otherness". However women also utilized this economy by converting the racially charged commodity into social and symbolic capital, which they leveraged for their own gain. While it is the intention of this work to further understanding of the multiple realities black women face with regards to their hair, it is necessary to make one point clear. I am neither female nor, in the context of this paper, black. As such I have never experienced the difficulties outlined in this paper, despite this my connection to this topic was a personal one.

Con(texture)lizing the question: why black hair?

My interest in black hair had its roots in a conversation I had with my friend Nonhle. In recognition of her new job, we had arranged to meet at a bar for celebratory drinks after work. Upon arrival I was surprised to see the difference in my friend. In the years that I had known her, I had never seen her appearance so conservative. The plain white blouse, black pencil skirt, and heels were a far cry from her regular attire of bright tops, African print dresses, and sneakers. Yet what struck me most about her appearance that day was her hair. Accustomed to her favoured TWA – an acronym she once told me meant 'teeny weeny afro' – it was unusual to see her with straight shoulder length hair. After greetings were made I complimented her new look, remarking how I did not think her hair was that long. As we made our way to our seats Nonhle mentioned that she recently got a weave[2] for her new job; "to add to that professional look" she said with a sly smile.

While the comment was made in jest, it piqued my interest. Was her TWA really unsuitable for the workplace? For Nonhle, the answer was no. She had gone to her interview with her teeny weeny afro and had been accepted for the position regardless. However she did mention something noteworthy. Even though her workplace had no objection to her hairstyle, she could not overlook the fact that black hair in South Africa was inescapably political. Nonhle knew many black women who felt the pressure of getting their hair "right". When asked what "right" hair meant, she elaborated the tensions black women faced between having natural or unnatural

[2] A weave is a hairstyle created by integrating pieces of real or artificial hair into a person's existing hair, typically in order to add straightness or increase its length and/or thickness.

hairstyles. Indeed these tensions were fundamental to the literature on this topic, which focused on the politics that informed such distinctions

An overview of literature

Black hair

Over the last fifty years black hair has received considerable attention in academic circles, especially among sociologists, philosophers, and anthropologists (Banks 2000). During this period, two important themes have emerged in scholarship on this issue; namely how hair is a significant site of meaning in societies with a history of racial discrimination, and how hair can be used to mediate the lingering effects of a racial legacy (Mercer 1987, Taylor 1999, Banks 2000). These themes, as well as the body of literature in general, have focused primarily on hair and its impact on African-American women. The work done on these women has proven invaluable in understanding how hair represents broader articulations about beauty, power, and the multiple realities that black American women face (Banks 2000). This work is theoretically significant as it examines this scholarship, and amends it to a South African context. In adopting the theoretical frameworks used on American hair, it is my hope to stimulate local scholarship on the matter that will prove just as invaluable for black South African women who face similar issues. However as noted above, prevailing literature generally applies a binary logic to the topic, focusing on the debate between natural and unnatural hairstyles.

For example, scholars such as Taylor (1999), Tate (2007), and Thompson (2009) explored how African-American hair grooming practices have traditionally been seen as acts of either subjection or rebellion depending on the method of treatment. In chemically straightening their hair, black women were reproducing the racist assumption that straight, Caucasian-styled hair was a necessary component of beauty. Conversely those women who left their hair untreated and maintained natural hairstyles such as afros and dreadlocks were making political statements that challenge these racialized standards of what beauty ‘should be’. However treating hair with a binary logic overshadows the way in which it is tangled within other politicized issues such as gender, class, and identity. This project will make use of commodity analysis as a critical lens through which to better understand the social topographies of black hair.

Commodity

To understand the significance of the weave – purchased hair that is woven into already existing hair – this research adopts an economic approach and will analyse the commodification of hair. My motivations behind observing hair as a commodity are influenced by the thoughts of Appadurai (1988) and Kopytoff (1986) who assert that exchange goods are entangled in a host of meanings that are framed by socio-political concerns. Commodities, Appadurai (1988) says, are not static objects whose worth lies simply in their exchange value, but are instead items that are symbolically charged by their sociality as well as by their links to hierarchy and power. In following this theoretical proposal I aim to demonstrate how purchased hair is reflective of a socio-political context that impacts the daily lives of black South African women. Further, the purchase of *Indian* hair places South African women within international circuits of meaning (commodity cultures, political discourses etc...). Focusing on its exchange offers the prospect of disseminating how global circuits affect local representations of black hair. Moreover, as Bourdieu (1986) notes, exchange enables individuals to gain access to resources that can be used to secure benefits, resources such as social and symbolic capital

Social and symbolic capital

Social and symbolic capital are theories which elicit the central theme that capital is captured in social relations, and that its capture evokes structural constraints and opportunities as well as actions and choices on the part of the actors (Lin 2001). While there are various perspectives on capital, I will use the concepts as set forth by Bourdieu. For him, social capital refers to the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures (Bourdieu 1985). Important to my research is his point that this form of capital can serve as a resource in the social struggles that are carried out in different social arenas or fields. Thus hair has the potential to be mobilized to offset the discrimination shown in the workplace. Symbolic capital refers to the means in which a person presents their prestige, and serves as value that one holds within a culture or group (Bourdieu 1986). Accordingly, if a certain representation of ideal hair is collectively recognized among a group, then members who possess that form of hair will have a greater standing within it (Bourdieu 1986, Siisianen 2000, Lin 2001). However since both forms of capital are contingent on group membership, it is necessary to define who I mean when I refer to “black women”.

Identifying actors and where to find them

With the end of Apartheid and the beginnings of democracy, South Africa witnessed a dramatic expansion of the black middle-class due legislative reforms and racial redress (Ndletyana 2014). This group, popularized by the media as 'black diamonds', were characterised by their aspirations for a better standard of living and good-quality products. It was these aspirations, in combination with the disposable income they possessed, that made black middle-class women the prime procurers of high quality Indian hair (Euromonitor 2014). As such, this is the group I refer to in this paper. To be clear, I do not use 'black' in this text to simply mean 'non-white'; nor do I refer to Asian, Indian, or Coloured racial groups. Instead I use it to denote Black African women. Additionally, by marking 'black' in quotations, I am referring to the word used in racist terms.

Yet for the purposes of my research, how did I distinguish middle-class South African women from their upper and working-class compatriots? According to Seekings (2008) and Visagie (2013), the South African middle-class are those with a certain occupational status (a white collar job) and income (R10 000-R25 000 per month). However, what was most important, was that middle-class women were prepared to pay for premium Indian hair, and hair of this quality could only be found in high-end salons. Thus by using such salons as sites of research, I was more likely to encounter my intended demographic. Over the period of four months (April–July 2015) I frequented two high-end "ethnic" salons located in the suburbs of Johannesburg, South Africa: Lizzy's Hair Bar and Afristyle salon. While there I spoke to numerous women as they had their hair styled or waited for their scheduled sessions, however I shall recount the conversations with six particular clients as we had repeated in-depth encounters. Furthermore, the words of the respective salon owners will be detailed as they provided valuable information.

Despite the black middle-class woman being my primary focus, as I was investigating their dealings with a specific type of hair, it was also necessary to engage with the people who provided it: Indian women. During the month of December 2015, I travelled to the largest sourcing point of hair in India, the Tirumala Sri Venkateswara Temple in the Chittoor district of Andhra Pradesh. There thousands of pilgrims had their heads shaven – or tonsured – as a symbolic gesture to Lord Venkateswara, an incarnation of Vishnu, the Hindu God of

Preservation (Berry 2008). Apart from my general observations about the temple and the tonsure process, I shall recount the conversations I had with six women who revealed the meanings and values their hair had for them, and why the sacrificed it.

Ethics

As with all methods of data collection, certain ethical factors need to be considered. As noted before, black hair has historically been marginalized and thus remains a sensitive area for black women. As such I had to be very careful about my line of inquiry at the salons as I did not want to give the impression that their grooming decisions were *only* a response to that past. Further, because I was concerned with discrimination in the workplace, there was the potential that those women may have misinterpreted my project as a publication to name and shame their specific places of employment. To avoid this, I made it abundantly clear that I am not trying to isolate their companies, but am rather attempting to determine how prevalent hair-based discrimination was in the corporate environment. Further I did not wish to create any problems where none existed, and was mindful that no such discrimination may have existed for them. Procedurally, I offered a consent form to each of my interlocutors as well as a participant information letter that outlined the purpose of this study.

Being ethically sensitive was of even more importance during my visit to the temple. In dealing with people who gave their hair for religious reasons, I had to take a specific approach to data collection. My concern was rooted in Berry's (2008) observation that many temple pilgrims are unaware that their hair is being sold at all. Thus my questions centred on why pilgrims offered their hair, as opposed to their opinions on what happened to their hair after tonsure. Because the temple was a place of pilgrimage, it was populated with many people from across India and was a crucible of various languages. Not knowing who I was going to speak to, or in what language, letters of consent and information were impractical. Thus with the help of a translator and English-speaking pilgrims, I gave a verbal account of my purpose there and the conditions of consent. Further I submitted a letter of permission to the governing body of the temple for approval to conduct research on the premises. These ethical procedures were reviewed and approved by the Wits Human Research Ethics Clearance Application (non-medical).

Chapter outline

Since my theoretical approach focuses on the commodity pathways of hair, this paper is broken down into the modes of production, consumption, and distribution. In doing so it will reveal the politics that underpin each phase. First however, this work will establish a broad overview of the discussions currently held by women in South Africa.

Chapter 1

To understand the contemporary debates that women are having, this chapter will detail my experiences at the Johannesburg Natural Hair Meet Up. The information gathered there is then situated within the wider body of literature on the topic of black hair. In doing so this section aims to expose the limitations of such conversations – both real and literary – and how they distract from the complexities that encompass hair.

Chapter 2

To reveal such complexities, chapter 2 explores the commodification and consumption of hair. Examining these processes lays bare the values women assign to Indian hair, and consequently how those valuations are reflective of the ways in which women view their own hair. As clarification, I shall use the ethnographic examples given to me by the women from two salons I frequented. Lastly the ways in which commodification engenders "otherness" is detailed in this section, and how women navigate this development through the use of various forms of capital.

Chapter 3

While the values that women assigned to hair made it a consumable product, certain attributes were also generated during its production phase. As such, this section deals with the production of hair by focusing on its place of origin, India. Here I will demonstrate how hair is made alluring through a specific discourse that exoticizes hair. Examples of this type of narrative are made clear through the descriptions given by websites that promote the sale of Indian hair. To conclude, this chapter recounts how this discourse "others" Indian women by fragmenting and objectifying their hair to a degree that renders the person invisible to the consumer. Despite this, my interactions with women at the Tirumala temple revealed a connection between South African and Indian women.

Chapter 4

Once stripped of its human producer, hair is then reinscribed with new meanings, albeit from a particularized angle. Stripping hair of certain aspects of its "Indianess" allowed it to be reinscribed with distinct categories of race, class, and gender that further encourages its consumption. Such a process occurs during the distribution of hair, which is dependent on the circulation of images – both mental and iconographical – that constructs a particular representation of "blackness". This section will use such images to describe how hair advertisements make claims on black cultural identity in order to sell its product. Since I have shown these images to my salon interlocutors, this chapter will also outline the interpretive strategies women use to make sense of certain hair representations.

Chapter 1: The Politics of Distraction: Masking Conversations

"Later, she said, "I have to take my braids out for my interviews and relax my hair. Kemi told me that I shouldn't wear braids to the interview. If you have braids, they will think you are unprofessional."

– **Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie**, **Americanah**

To understand whether other women shared my friend Nonhle's contentions on the state of black hair in the country, I decided to attend the inaugural Johannesburg Natural Hair Meet Up. As the name suggests, the Meet Up was a platform where African women could interact with their fellow *Naturalistas*[3] and discuss all things hair. Held in the Maboneng precinct of Johannesburg, the event offered tutorials on how to achieve and maintain various hairstyles, as well as panel discussions given by prominent figures in the black hair movement. There, discussions on workplace discrimination centred on the theme of natural versus unnatural hairstyles, and how the former produced an "inappropriate" image for women. While the term "natural" generally refers to the innate texture of black hair, the racial undertones associated with that texture were a point of contention. Further, those women were attentive to how the perceived "black aesthetic" such hair promoted had potentially damaging consequences as it could limit their economic mobility.

The politics of distraction

Indeed, the natural/unnatural trope appeared to be central to discussions on black hair at large with the majority of literature on the topic focusing on the tensions these classifications have caused for women. However, over the course of my research it became apparent that this trope was problematic. By structuring discussions on the politics of black hair around a natural/unnatural binary, women and scholars were instead participating in a *politics of distraction* (Bowler 2014). Reduced to a simplistic – and often antagonistic – relationship between "natural" and "unnatural" hair, this dialogue hid the way in which black hair was tangled within deeper and more complex issues and structures such as class, gender, and identity.

Instead, this dialogue problematized the aesthetic choices needed to be made by black women who wished to successfully assimilate themselves into a corporate environment. Such surface conversations failed to address the core structures that upheld the grooming practices of the subjects of conversation (Bowler 2014). For black women, hair was not simply an aesthetic choice. This was due to the factors that influenced there choices, which rendered them all but involuntary. Socio-historical beauty standards, economic standing, decisions about health,

[3] According to numerous event attendees, this term refers to a movement in which black females take pride in their natural black hair

multiple forms of oppression, the role mothers played in early hairstyling practices, and product availability are just some factors that shaped decision making. Further it is necessary to recognize that the factors that support and endorse various notions of black hair are embedded in structures at both a local and global scale (Bowler 2014). The international circulation of commodity cultures, mass media and political discourses all impacted stylistic choice. In essence, discussions should not be simply about black hair, but about an entire system. Such complexities were evident at the Meet up.

Johannesburg Natural Hair Meet Up

Having never gone to an event like this I was unsure what to expect, however the venue for the Meet Up gave me some indication. Maboneng, a Sotho word meaning "place of light", was a fitting name for a precinct that had fast become a centre of creative energy for Johannesburg's urban artists and entrepreneurs. The area was a unique complex of developments that underpinned the city centre's gentrification. These developments – including commercial spaces, art galleries, a range of shops, and restaurants – fuelled an inner-city lifestyle with entrepreneurship and creativity at its core. By hosting in Maboneng, the Meet Up suggested that the dialogue on black hair called for creative and progressive thought. In addition, the space were the event took place reflected the ethic of the precinct. Located in the portentously named *Main Change Building*; the office that held the event was a communal workspace which provided professionals the opportunity to meet, network and collaborate with each other.

On exiting the elevator on the fourth floor, my first view was a production team setting up cameras and sound equipment. Assuming that the Meet Up was to be filmed, I walked up to the closest person and asked when the event was to start. Confused the man informed me that they were filming a scene for a local soapie, and if I was looking for the "group of women" I could find them in an office down the corridor. Upon entering the room, I was met by the sight of forty-plus people crammed into a very small space. Contributing to the cramped setting was the seating that occupied the middle of the room. Further space was taken by the counters pressed against three of the walls, in addition to a conference table at the head of the room. On the counters were an array of hair care products, pamphlets, and snacks. Interestingly, hair-related products were not the only items on display, as clothing and accessories were also on show.

Although the event was open to all interested in natural African hair, there was only one male in attendance – myself – as well as one white female. The rest of the attendees were black females who appeared to range from their early twenties to late forties. Despite the confined space there was plenty of movement as people shuffled from vendor to vendor, or floated between groups of conversation. The atmosphere in the room was jovial and relaxed, with everyone seemingly comfortable in each other's presence; everyone except me. Being the only male there I felt very much like in intruder, a feeling that was intensified by the occasional odd glances I was getting from the attendees. Those looks were not hostile, but rather suggested a curiosity as to my purpose there, and whether I was in the right place. I realized then that I had not considered whether black South African males faced similar issues as their female counterparts. It was an oversight I intended to correct. However, not knowing how males figured into the natural hair movement, I was unsure on how to approach that situation. Fortunately a woman noticed me frozen in place and, breaking away from a group of women, approached me.

Introducing herself as the emcee of the event, Faye asked whether I was lost and needed directions. After informing her of my purpose, she welcomed me and kindly offered to show me around. Beginning at the vendors, Faye pointed out that all the products presented were produced locally or in Africa, and were designed specifically for ethnic hair. "Most importantly" she stated "they are all made from 100% pure ingredients". Indeed, the names of the products confirmed her descriptions; with items such as *Nubian Nature*, *Afro Amour*, and *Africa Grace* all reflecting their commitment to African-made natural hair products. As Faye remarked, a major concern among the women present was the inability "to find hair products tailor-made for natural hair".

Unsure of what she meant, I pointed out that one could go to any supermarket and see multiple hair products developed by companies such as *Dark and Lovely* and *BLACK Like me*. She elaborated by claiming that such products often contain chemicals that were damaging to the user. "Because the hair care industry is unregulated" she said "there are many harmful chemicals [in] products". I was assured that all the products on display were organic and safe. Further, I got the impression that their allure came from the fact that they were made by people who best understood natural African hair: fellow Africans. Yet I was still unsure of what

"natural" actually meant. Asking Faye, she responded by stating that natural for her meant "the texture of the hair you were born with". Seeking clarification, I queried whether any person who wore their hair in its original state was considered a *Naturalista*? "No" she replied "being a *Naturalista* means you take pride in your natural hair. It gives you a sense of freedom and self-worth; it is part of your identity".

However as the event progressed and I spoke to more people, it became clear that there was no set definition for the term. For some "natural" meant not using chemicals to alter their hair, for others it meant foregoing the use of heat for styling. Some argued that one doesn't just "go" natural, and that it was the state of "returning to one's roots". Yet all seemed to concur with Faye's thoughts on being a *Naturalista;* it meant a relationship between hair texture and positive self-identification. As Faye and myself approach the last counter of our tour, she introduced me to the three women she had previously been talking to. After introductions were made, she left us to finish last-minute preparations before the start of the event.

Unsure of how to start the conversation, I made mention of all the product imagery, and how they all portrayed women. Once again struck by the complete absence of males, I asked the group whether black men had their own natural hair Meet Up with products designed for them. This seemed to amuse the women, with one remarking that "men don't worry about their hair enough to have their own event". This remark earned a snicker from the rest of the group. "Ja[4]", another chimed in "for them it's just wash-and-go". The flippant nature in which these women talked about men only served to fuel my interest in the relationship between black men and their hair. "But how do black men feel about *Naturalistas?*" I asked the one woman who had remained quiet. "A lot of guys say they like natural women, but I got approached by more guys when I used to relax my hair". The knowing nods from the rest of the women suggested that they too had experienced similar behaviour. Our conversation was halted when Faye announced over the speaker that the first demonstration was about to begin, and that we take our seats. Thanking the women, I took a seat at the back of the room, took out my notepad, and prepared to learn all about natural hair.

[4] Afrikaans for "yes"

Over the next two hours we were exposed to numerous tutorials on how to achieve and maintain various looks – including cornrows, locs, and TWAs. These tutorials emphasized the importance of looking after one's hair and scalp. Several speakers warned of the dangers of traction alopecia: a form of gradual hair loss that is caused by tension, stress, and pulling on the scalp and hair fibers. They noted how this condition was prevalent among black females who frequently relaxed their hair with chemicals; or who habitually pulled their hair back into braids, twists, locs, and weaves. In addition to style guides, there were speakers who discussed the importance of diet for the promotion of healthy hair as well as a healthy self. Despite the range of individuated definitions, over the course of the event it became evident that "natural" was not just associated with hair texture or hairstyle, but rather how *healthy* hair and style was for the wearer. There appeared to be a causal relationship between the health of one's hair and positive self-identification.

This concern over health reflected in the objections of some women over prolonged use of hair modifications i.e. weaves, extensions. Others however, noted how the occasional weave or straightening would cause little to no negative effects on the individual. Alternatively, a few panellists noted how untreated hairstyles could result in excessive damage to the wearer i.e. traction alopecia. In this light, the occasional weave could be considered natural, whereas an untreated braid worn every day that causes harm could be categorized as unnatural. This health approach seemed to extend beyond the Meet Up, as the 2014 Euromonitor report on black South African haircare trends detailed how the country was exhibiting a marked decrease in sales of damaging hair care products. The culmination of the event was a panel discussion that centred on the acceptability of hair in the workplace, and how natural black hair was considered unsuitable in most corporate environments.

Vignette: Joyce's faux pas

Until this session, the general mood and dialogue of the Meet had been light-hearted; however that changed the moment one of the panellists made some inflammatory remarks. Beginning innocuously enough, Joyce reminded us of the importance of wearing one's natural hair as opposed to fake alternatives such as weaves and braids. As she claimed: "natural hair reflects one's natural self". However her next assertion caused some murmurs in the crowd. Joyce claimed that black women's hair should be their main feature in their daily lives, but not so in

the workplace. At work, "women should use formal dress to demonstrate their professionalism, as well as to draw attention away from their hair". Yet it was Joyce's last statement that turned the murmurs into an outcry. Not only should black women downplay their hair in a corporate environment, they should "tidy [their] edges as much as possible".

Initially I was confused by the crowd's reaction, as the remarks did not seem inflammatory. I had always associated a neat appearance with the workplace, and suggesting that women keep their hair tidy seemed like reasonable advice. Indeed Joyce's own hair, cut short and uniform in length, presented a very neat image. Yet when the floor was opened for responses, it became apparent that Joyce had made multiple faux pas. While the brief of the event focused on natural hair, many women objected to the assertion that all hair integrations were "unnatural". Provided that integrations were made from real human hair and were well maintained, weaves and braids should be considered natural. Further, the audience took issue with someone telling them what hairstyle they *should* be wearing. As an audience member queried: "If a weave makes me feel good, how isn't that natural?" This statement was met with general approval.

Judging from those responses the notions of "neatness" and "tidiness" were not neutral, but were instead racially loaded terms constantly associated with the negative aspects of natural hair. When it came to black hair these terms were often exclusionary, with women expected to engage in larger amounts of grooming just to appear "presentable". What was interesting to note was the specific language used to query tidiness with words such as "untamed", "wild", and "kroes"[5] all frequently mentioned. Those words, unhesitantly used in the general discussion of unnatural hair, are culpable in the politics of distraction that this chapter attempts to publicize. While used to reflect the racial underpinnings of black hair's adverse image, the terms themselves are entangled within negative racial meaning. In addition to these responses, the overall discussion of workplace discrimination was reflective of another problem.

As Rosette and Dumas (2007) note, women in general encounter many obstacles to achieving their preferred professional image. Gender alone presents a bind for women who are making decisions about their appearance in the workplace. On one hand, the most valued characteristics

[5] An Afrikaans word that can roughly be translated as "curly" or "kinky".

in corporate settings –competitiveness, ambition, and competence – are typically associated with men. As such, women may not want to groom themselves in a manner that would highlight their femininity or attractiveness. On the other hand, conventionally attractive women fare better professionally than less attractive women, as attractive women tend to make more money and receive more job offers and promotions (Rosette and Dumas 2007). For black women, these decisions have an added dimension.

Such women face a double-bind when it comes to their image. In addition to managing the paradox of femininity and attractiveness, black women must also negotiate the presentation of their racial identities. They must also compensate for both their gender and race in attempting to present a professional image that will render them credible in a corporate environment (Rosette and Dumas 2007). Crafting this professional image entails managing perceptions through a variety of *specific* behaviours and grooming decisions. To better understand these decisions and the factors that influence them, it is necessary to situate my observations of the Meet Up within the broader body of literature on black women and their hair.

Volumizing Hair: a review of literature

Over the last fifty years black hair has received considerable attention in academic circles, especially among sociologists, philosophers, and anthropologists (Banks 2000). During this period, two important themes have emerged in scholarship on this issue; namely how hair is a significant site of meaning in societies with a history of racial discrimination, and how hair can be used to mediate the lingering effects of a racial legacy (Mercer 1987, Taylor 1999, Banks 2000). This substantial body of work has primarily emerged out of America, and has focused on the adversities African-American women face regarding their hair. Despite its Americo-centric focus, this literature has served as the basis for hair studies at large, including local works (see Erasmus 1997, Marco 2012). Central to such scholarship is the awareness that black hair and grooming practices reflect constructions of racialized aesthetics of the past; aesthetics that still play a significant role in the present.

Black hair and Black "Beauty": A racialized history

With the arrival of the first slaves in America, Taylor (1999) notes how white slave owners began the process of structuring and ranking human types along racial lines. Within this racialized hierarchy, 'blacks' were considered to be inherently inferior, and that 'blackness' was a condition to be despised (Taylor 1999, Byrd and Tharps 2001). Central to this ascription of black inferiority were bodily features, and the notion that the physical 'ugliness' of black people was an indicator of a deeper primitivism and depravity. Yet representations of black 'ugliness' did not gain its historical intransigence by being a mere idea. Mercer (1990) highlights how slave-holders established a 'pigmentocracy' on plantations where the division of labour was based on a racial hierarchy, and that one's socio-economic position was based on skin colour. For instance darker-skinned people worked the fields, far from sight, whereas lighter individuals worked in the farmhouse in plain view. While skin colour was considered the primary indicator of 'ethnicity', hair was the second most visible stigma of 'blackness' (Mercer 1987). An example of hair's devaluation during slave times was the "comb test", whereby if a black person could not pass a fine-toothed comb easily through their hair, they were denied membership to certain churches (Byrd and Tharps 2001: 22).

It is clear that this historical narrative shares similarities with South Africa's background, where Colonial rule and the Apartheid regime demarcated various racial categories through a prescriptive insistence on people to mind their nature (Erasmus 1997, Marco 2012, Nyamnjoh and Fuh 2014). During those inequitable years, hair was seen as a qualifying feature of one's race. Indeed, hair's significance came to the fore in 1950, when the Population Registration Act made it an official indicator of race (Posel 2001). While Apartheid ended with the coming of democracy in 1994, the racial categories that were deployed during that period remain a central feature of contemporary life within the country. According to Seekings (2008), South Africans continue to see themselves in the racial categories of the Apartheid era, in part because these categories have become the basis for post-apartheid redress, in part because they retain cultural meaning in everyday life. Similarly, hair continues to be significant site of meaning where themes such as race, gender, and identity play out. This was evident at the meet up were hair was intimately tied to black female *Naturalistas*.

There, many women noted the role the country's past played in how women of colour view their hair, and how they felt their hair was observed by others. While government and institutions no longer – conspicuously – rank people based on their features, many women at the Meet Up recounted everyday experiences that could be understood as discriminatory; experiences that often revolved around the workplace. An example was Joyce's assertion that black women should have the "right" hair in corporate environments. Her statement not only revealed the pressures black women continue to face in conforming to a perceived ideal, but also spoke to the indirect forms of institutional discrimination that could be read as a consequence of the country's racialized past. To understand the historically inflected pressures those women faced, I turn once again to America's rich body of work which documents indelible repercussions a racial legacy has left on black hair.

Black hair and Black Rage: the binaries of hair

This work began to flourish in the 1960's as academics began to debate the psychological aspects of the hair grooming practices of African-American women (Banks 2000). Specifically, this debate focused on the long-standing practice of "conking", the process where black people chemically straightened their hair in order to present a more 'fitting' image (Taylor 1999, Thompson 2009). This grooming practice was considered an act of subjection. Influential to this theme were psychiatrists Grier and Cobbs, who argued in their widely read book *Black Rage* (1968), that women who straightened their hair reproduced the workings of racism by conforming to 'white' ideals of beauty. Further, chemically treating hair was considered to be an act of self-hate on the part of black women, as they were physically harming themselves in order to 'look white' (Grier and Cobbs 1968). This criticism was not reserved only for "conking". In 1951 Christina Jenkins invented a weaving process that incorporated strains of hair onto one's scalp. The weave allowed for a semi-permanent – straight – hairstyle without resorting to chemical treatment or wigs. Despite this it was still seen as an attempt to emulate a white aesthetic. This sentiment was central to the scholarship of the day, and was influenced by the Black Nationalist movement that was sweeping across America during the 1960s. This literature made fervent arguments about the importance of natural hairstyles as a tool of rebellion; natural then meaning styles that *over*emphasized the texture of black hair. Styles such as large Afros and thick dreadlocks were considered the only forms of 'authentic' hair for black women (Taylor 1999, Tate 2007, Thompson 2009).

Yet some contemporary scholars – especially sociologists and anthropologists – have tried to move past the psychological, nationalist works of the late 60s and early 70s. Instead academics such as Banks (2000) and Tate (2007) tried to understand hair grooming's effect on individual African-American women and the management of their daily lives. Through studying the everyday experience of black women, modern scholarship attempts to move away from the notion that black hair grooming practices are, in one way or another, overt political statements. In these texts, hair-straightening and integrations do not have to be about imitating whiteness and being less black, but were simply a different means of expressing blackness (Erasmus 1997). This sentiment was echoed by Tate (2007) who argued that continuous cultural shifts made the authentic inevitably unauthentic and just another common hairstyle practice. However such thinking discounts the multiple factors that influence such choices – especially during woman's formative years – make grooming practice inescapably political.

When asked, all my interlocutors noted their grooming practices were fundamentally influenced by their mothers and grandmothers, whose ideas about hair were shaped by racial structures. Moreover South African schools continue to maintain regulatory rules that prohibit overtly natural hair (Pilane 2014). In claiming that the meanings of natural and unnatural are subject to ever-changing cultural shifts, these authors do not pay enough attention to the dominant cultures that impact the behaviours of others. In the context of the Meet Up for example, the discourse espoused there could be read as a cultural shift, where what distinguished the real/natural from the fake/unnatural was not hair *style*, but hair *health*. Yet beyond the confines of that event, women still had to contend with the pressures dominant ideologies – both cultural and institutional – placed on their hair.

Joyce's conduct, and the responses it inspired, proved just how conflicting it was to balance being a *Naturalista* and a working women. Despite not being damaging to one's body, natural hair as defined at the Meet Up remained potentially damaging to the self. The black aesthetic it created in the eyes of corporate culture had the potential to negatively affect those women's economic mobility (Thompson 2009). Such an aesthetic was counter to dominant standards of beauty and could not only affect a women's mobility, but her identity as well. As Faye testified, identifying as a *Naturalista* was a large part of her identity, it provided a sense of freedom and self-worth through making her feel beautiful in her own body. The standards of beauty

exemplified by a larger cultural script contested this identity. To understand why, it is necessary to review extant literature on black identity and Eurocentric notions of beauty.

Black hair and White beauty: hair as identity

Studies on black hair often deploy feminist positions (see Morrison 1970, hooks 1989, Rooks 1996), that stress the impact Eurocentric ideals of beauty have on formation of black identity. Within this narrative, "whiteness" is considered the benchmark of beauty, with straight European hair – smooth, shakeable, touchable – seen as representative of that ideal. Any attempt by a black woman to conform through unnatural hair grooming practices produced a corrupted self. This is best summed up in the words of Morrison (2010) who states that such practices "does to our racial identity what the chemicals in relaxers or the heat of pressing combs does to our hair – makes us seem whiter" (86). Here, human hair travels a similar path to human identity, where the suppression of black hair results in the suppression of black identity. Natural hair then serves as the mechanism to achieve an authentically black identity. However unlike the nationalist discourse of the 60s that promoted natural hair as a tool of rebellion, feminist scholars promote its liberatory nature. The fault I find with this thinking – both nationalist and feminist – is that it apprehends black identity as a homogeneous and singular category that can be captured in space and time.

The Problem of Politics

Common throughout such works is the notion that hair acts as a significant site of identity making (Thompson 2008, Nyamnjoh and Fuh 2014). While I do not dispute this, I contend that it is not identity of the individual that is being addressed, but that of the group – black women in the abstract. What is being alluded to is not identity, but rather identity *politics*. A laden phrase, identity politics has often come to signify a wide range of political theorizing founded in the shared experiences of marginalized social groups. Specifically, it is concerned with the liberation efforts of such groups, and how they challenge dominant oppressive characterizations with the greater goal of self-determination (Calhoun 1994, Heyes 2002). What has driven debates on hair towards this discourse is that, for a marginalized group of people, it can appear to be a powerful counter-narrative. Rather than promoting categories of denigration and subordination, the discourse attempts to invert historical categories of

oppression into categories of celebration. However, the main fault with identity politics is that it is a discourse prone to essentialism; the idea that that there exists some detectible, objective, and inherent core quality of particular groups (Spivak 2012). Groupings can be categorized according to these qualities of essence, which are based on such problematic criteria as gender, race, or identity.

The contradiction here is that, in turning black hair from a negative category into a positive one, literature merely turns the categories of "otherness" upside-down. In claiming the superiority of natural black hair, one still accepts the prejudices inherent in Eurocentric models of beauty – only with the values inverted. Since the same arbitrarily constructed categories that were previously formulated to justify oppression are still in play, a supposedly liberatory counter-narrative can never possibly question the validity of oppressive ideologies. Within such racial ideologies, the treatment of hair was based on the conceptual categorization of black people; all black people were the same, and their hair reflected this sameness (Banks 2000, Byrd and Tharps 2001). This notion remains in prevailing scholarship and real world debates, where natural hair is considered the normative hairstyle for black women *in general.* By remaining in such categories, any identity formation that natural hair allows does so in relation to the *group* self. In treating identity with a binary logic, it is impossible to rescue "blackness" from its deviant status as it is still entwined with "whiteness", against which its deviance is measured.

To be clear, I am not claiming that identity politics do not exist, nor am I stating that black women do not face collective difficulties. Rather I am questioning how the same structures that black hair and identity are subject to – imagined only from a different perspective – are used to frame its liberatory potential. Making such claims dissolves any self-awareness into pre-existing categories of significance. The promotion of an ideologically constructed group identity was evident at the Meet Up, where women identified with the group *Naturalista.* What drew this assembly together was the shared goal of celebrating natural hair through a discourse that exposed the positive aspects of natural hair: the sense of self-worth through embracing a distinct, healthy African beauty. Despite attaching natural to meanings of healthiness, the binary logic that underpinned such judgements remained fixed within broader, pre-set frameworks of race, gender, and normativity.

Essentializing otherness

Caught on the cusp between self and society, nature and culture; the malleability of black hair makes it a sensitive area of expression. The women of the Natural Hair Meet Up negotiated this area through a discourse of health, wrapping natural hair in an identity saturated in a positive African aesthetic. However, through a series of simplified and overdrawn contrasts, those discussions distracted from the way in which black hair was tangled in deeper and more complex issues and structures such as gender and identity. Such dialogue was consistent with prevailing literature on the subject, which maintained rigid binaries and essentialisms that were grounded in the racialized categories that they attempted to challenge. Conversations that remain entrenched within such categories (i.e. "natural" versus "unnatural", "right" versus "kroes") restrains any liberatory counter-narratives intended to challenge the validity of oppressive ideologies. How then do I approach the critical politics of hair in South Africa and expose the nuances that binary logic bleaches out? I propose that the use of commodity analysis is a critical lens through which to better understand the social topographies of black hair. Specifically I am concerned with the purchase of human Indian hair, and how its exchange and consumption are reflective of black hair's broader situation.

Chapter 2: The Politics of Consumption: Managing Difference

"Relaxing your hair is like being in prison. You're caged in. Your hair rules you. You didn't go running with Curt today because you don't want to sweat out this straightness. You're always battling to make your hair do what it wasn't meant to do".

– **Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie**, **Americanah**

The influx of Indian hair was due to its increased popularity among women of the black middle-class. Detailed later in this chapter, my discussions with these women reveal how Indian hair personifies a certain set of characteristics that renders it desirable as a commodity. This mode of analysis is motivated by the thoughts of Appadurai (1988) and Kopytoff (1986) who assert that exchange goods are entangled in a host of meanings that are framed by socio-political concerns. Commodities, Appadurai (1988) says, are not static objects whose worth lies simply in their exchange value, instead behind their material forms lies complex social and political mechanisms that regulate taste, trade, and desire. As such, Indian hair serves as material repositories that are symbolically charged by their sociality as well as by their links to hierarchy and power. Further, the purchase of Indian hair places South African women within international circuits of meaning (commodity cultures, political discourses etc...). Focusing on its exchange offers the prospect of disseminating how global circuits affect local representations of black hair.

Assigning value: the commodification of hair

For Appadurai (1988), commodities are far more complex than the rigid Marxian image of them as abstracted and disinterested markers of exchange value, wiped of the traces of their human investments. Instead he posits that commodities are lodged firmly in their diverse social, political, and cultural contexts. "Commodities" says Appadurai "are things with a particular type of social potential…they are distinguishable from 'products', 'objects', 'goods', 'artefacts' and other sorts of things – but only in certain respects and from a certain point of view" (1988: 6). It is this social potential – which is exposed in a situation of "exchangeability…for some other thing" – that makes the commodity a carrier of culture, a sign and an actor (Appadurai 1988: 6). As culturally inflected, commodities are always contested and subject to change in valuation by their human handlers. Appadurai's work highlights the significance of not focusing solely on the production of commodities, and examining how dynamic processes shape meanings at the consumption end of exchange flows.

This is a significant departure as Douglas and Isherwood (1979) note how consumptive practices make sense of the inchoate flux of events; they are "the very arena in which culture

is fought over and licked into shape" (65). By accentuating aspects of consumption, Appadurai recasts an analysis of consumption and production and the way objects gain meanings in terms of a 'politics of value.' Starting from Simmel's idea that exchange is the source of value and not vice versa, Appadurai demonstrates how commodities – previously understood as objects of economic value – are instead socio-culturally generated through the way value is constructed politically. What is political about this process is the constant tension between the existing frameworks (of price, bargaining, and so forth) and the tendency of commodities to breach these frameworks. This tension has its source in the fact that not all parties share the same interests in any specific regime of value, nor are the interests of any two parties in a given exchange identical (Appadurai 1988).

Theoretical and methodological relevance

Appadurai provides a useful heuristic for this paper as he examines the intricate ways in which humans invest value in things. In applying his framework to the consumption of Indian hair by black South African women, I am able to assess what values these women project onto this commodity. In doing so I can identify how such values reflect women's understandings of their own hair, and the politics that drive such judgements. Further, since commoditization lies at the complex intersection of temporal, cultural, social, and economic factors, an understanding of the commodity naturally reveals these elements thereby making larger cultural processes visible. In short, Indian hair has the potential to uncover the complexities that underlie discussions on the state of black hair in South Africa. Further, as stated in the previous chapter, debates on this topic position black hair in the racialized aesthetics of the past without exploring how such representations continue to manifest in everyday contexts. The commodity situation heuristic situates hair in relation to racial categories and racialized ideologies in contemporary South Africa and abroad, as well as demonstrating how women navigate such issues through the purchase of Indian hair.

Theoretically then, Appadurai demonstrates how things have human-ascribed values. However, from a methodological point of view, he notes how it is the "things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context" (Appadurai 1988: 5). To understand *how* commodities are invested with value, one must to follow the trajectory of the things themselves through space and time – that is, to follow their "biographies". Following Kopytoff's (1986)

work, Appadurai (1988: 3) argues that "commodities, like persons, have social lives" where the object might be in a commodity state in one situation, yet be in a non-commodity state in another. Thus the meanings of objects – whether commodity or not – are inscribed in their shifting forms and uses. Tracing the object's movements in to and out of its different social contexts allows one to properly understand how they are enlivened.

Commodity situation

Central to such a methodology is the understanding that a commodity is not one kind of thing, but rather "one phase in the life of some things" (Appadurai 1988: 17). Put differently, the commodity-phase is simply a certain social relationship with a thing. To understand the conditions and processes that engenders such a relationship, Appadurai suggests focusing on an object's "commodity situation" in which its "exchangeability (past, present, or future) for some other thing is its socially relevant feature" (1988: 13). In order to enter into a commodity situation, an object – in this case Indian hair – must historically be in a "commodity phase", must be a potential "commodity candidate," and it must be in a viable "commodity context". The commodity phase of a thing's social life carries the idea "that things can move in *and* out of the commodity state" (Appadurai 1988:13-14). Candidacy of a thing refers to "the standards and criteria . . . that define the exchangeability of things in any particular social and historical context". Lastly the commodity context is the "social arenas within or between *cultural* units that link the commodity candidacy of a thing to the commodity phase of its career" (Appadurai 1988: 15). In what follows, I discuss each of these issues in turn and their relevance to the subject of this paper.

Path, diversions, and singularization

Key to understanding the situation of commodities is the knowledge that they flow along "socially regulated paths" – set forth by a culture's dominant framework for exchange – and that they may be shifted from their paths by "competitively inspired diversions" (Appadurai 1988:17). These diversions can occur at any time when an object enters a different regime of value. This process, known as "singularization", follows the personalisation of an object and how it is withdrawn from its public situation to the consumer's private situation, taking on meanings from the user (Kopytoff 1986, Appadurai 1988). For example an heirloom is diverted

from capitalist exchange when it is kept in the family and made inalienable, however it may re-enter its original exchange sphere, its customary path as a commodity, when it is sold to alleviate debt. What is significant here is that paths are inherently shaky, and that diversions from culturally preordained pathways reveal a set of values embedded in, and directed by, a *specific* set of social relationships. What then is Indian hair's customary path? How does it diverge? And what does its situation reveal about back hair in contemporary South Africa?

Commodity phase: the potential of hair in South Africa

The social potential of hair was exposed in its situation of exchangeability, in other words, its involvement in the marketplace. The hair market is divided into two categories: Dry Hair (weaves, wigs and extensions) and Wet Hair (shampoos, conditioners, relaxers). As mentioned earlier, the 2014 Euromonitor report on hair care trends South Africa revealed that the black hair care market – which tailors to the 'ethnic' community – had demonstrated a decline in Wet products and an increase in Dry. However, since a large part of the Dry market was traded in the informal sector; reliable statistics as to the size of the market are hard to come by. However Garron Reynolds, managing director of FR!KA Hair – a company dedicated to supplying hair integrations to South African women – estimated the country's dry hair market was worth around R3 billion (Snow 2014).

Driving this trend were women from an emergent black middle-class. With their aspirations for a better standard of living and a demand for superior products, these women encouraged the influx of high-quality Dry products into the country (Euromonitor 2014). Yet those women did not demand any hair, but rather of a particular type: Indian. The demand for such hair was reflected in the growing interest major Indian haircare companies showed in the country. Case in point was Godrej Consumer Products who have to date acquired three of the country's fastest-growing Dry hair care companies FR!KA, Rapidol and Kinky. To understand the reasons behind this consumptive habit, I attended the places where Indian hair was consumed: salons.

Over the course of four months I frequented two high-end salons located in the suburbs of Johannesburg, South Africa: Lizzy's Hair Bar and Afristyle salon. The motives behind these

selections were middle-class women's proclivity for premium Indian hair, and how hair of that quality could only be found in high-end salons. As such it was more likely that I would encounter my intended demographic at sites such as those. The possibility of engaging with black women was increased even further as both Lizzy's and Afristyle catered primarily for "ethnic" clientele. Between April and July 2015 I spoke to numerous women as they had their hair styled or waited for their scheduled sessions. Conversations ranged from cursory chats that yielded little information, to repeated in-depth encounters that proved valuable to this research. It was those extended discussions that I recount here, specifically from six clients from both salons and the two owners.

Afristyle salon

Nestled in a shopping complex in the exclusive suburb of Illovo, Afristyle salon boasted an elite list of clientele. This was made clear to me during my first encounter with its owner, Nokuthula Vilakazi, when I was trying to secure the salon as a field site. Noku, as she preferred to be called, noted how "all the celebs come here because we provide an exclusive experience with the best [hair] technicians and the best products". Looking around I certainly could believe her as Afristyle had an air of grandeur that was fitting for eminent patrons. A gleaming black and white tiled floor, ceiling-length mirrors, and leather chairs occupied a space that was well lit by three mini chandeliers. Complementing this setting were the "technicians" who busied themselves with preparations for the day ahead. Dressed in all black uniforms, they set up their work stations with practiced efficiency; lining up their tools with surgical precision and making sure their creams and lotions were replenished from the impressive display of haircare products lining the entire back wall of the reception area. Commending Noku on the appearance of the place, I informed her of my purpose and why I considered her salon as an ideal site for research. "I don't know" she responded "people like to be relaxed when they come here, I don't want you disturbing them and messing up business". Assuring her that pestering her clients was not my goal and that consent was a main priority, Noku reluctantly gave me permission to do a set of test interviews. Thus the following day I found myself back at Afristyle talking to Pamela (30), an intern who worked for the South African government.

Pamela had scheduled an appointment to receive a new weave, a process that I discovered to be remarkably arduous and, based off her expressions at times, painful. The stylist's first step

was to braid Pamela's existing hair into thin horizontal cornrows along the middle of her scalp. These provided the base on which curtains of foreign hair – known as wefts or tracks – were hand sewn into. Once enough wefts were added to cover her whole head, Pamela's hair was then cut and styled to her desire. In total the entire process took four hours. During that period I was able to ask why she was prepared to sit through what I perceived to be an ordeal. "I started wearing weaves for a change" she replied "I got tired of combing my [natural] hair and I didn't want braids. A weave is low maintenance". Pamela enjoyed the efficiency of weaves so much that she got a new one fitted every four months with regular maintenance in-between. Because of hair regrowth, wefts need to be re-tightened to retain the weave's seamless appearance on the user; Pamela receives a "touch up" every month.

Due to regularity in which she frequented the salon, I was able to talk to her several times over a few months. During those interviews I was not only able to find out why she preferred Indian hair – "It's thick and looks like my own hair" – but also get her opinion on the natural vs. unnatural debate. When questioned whether she believed her weave was unnatural, Pamela responded in the negative, claiming that it was "made from human hair…so how can it be unnatural?" In promoting the use of real hair for integrations, we see the self-evident assumption that natural is defined as non-synthetic. However it was not just the human aspect of the hair that justified its use for Pamela, but also how similar it looked to her own locks. Indeed, the perceived similarity of Indian hair was an attractive feature for other clients as well. Case in point was Mary (38), who had come to have her existing weave washed, cut, and restyled – itself a two hour procedure.

Once again asked why she favoured Indian weaves over her natural hair, Mary claimed that "I just prefer my hair looking like this, it gives my hair volume that I can't get with relaxers and a curling iron." In using the phrase 'my hair', she revealed not only how integrated her weave was to her own hair, but also how assimilated it was to her person. Moreover, Mary's statement exposed the paradox that surrounded the preference for Indian hair my interlocutors displayed at large: it provided features that were difficult to attain with their natural hair ("a volume that I just can't get"), while simultaneously giving the appearance that it grew naturally ("it's like my own hair"). A final example of this was Zandile (22), whose inclination towards Indian hair stemmed from its flexibility. "I like to change my hair often. I like [Indian hair] because you

can do everything with it: dye, curls, style it however you want. My [natural] hair would be finished if I tried to do all that stuff to it."

However, when I discussed these findings with Noku, she felt that I was reading too much into it and "like any hairstyle, these women buy hair to make themselves feel beautiful…it's a choice they make for themselves." If Noku was correct in her assumptions, then the strong, seamless, and beautiful appearance that Indian hair provided those women was its socially relevant feature. That desired aesthetic moved Indian hair from its status as an ordinary "thing" into its commodity phase, an item to be exchange for something else: a specific image.

The cosmetic rhetoric

Hair is an interesting commodity to untangle as what drives its exchange differs from other commodified body parts. Transforming body parts from a human category into objects of economic desire makes their commodification a contentious issue. This reticence stems from the moral controversy societies place on the commercial transactions of certain "sacred" objects associated with the living human form (Sharp 2000, Berry 2008). To counter this, a certain rhetoric is used to mystify their objectification. The exchange of vital tissues (organs etc.…) for example is enveloped in a discourse of gifting; despite having a quantifiable economic value in terms of procurement, preparation, transportation, and surgical replacement. In contrast, hair is represented as more ethically consumable within the capitalist arena. Once shorn from the head, processed, and packaged, it is perceived as "lifeless" (Berry 2008: 75). Further, since its consumption is associated with the enhancement of beauty, its exchange is framed as nonvital. Yet as has been shown in this paper so far, for certain people, hair is very vital indeed. Despite its apparent nonvital status, hair is subject to the same objectification and mystification as other body parts. Where medicalized commodities are concealed under the guise of gifting, the objectification of hair is hidden under a discourse of cosmetics. When unpacked, this discourse reveals the racial distinctions that underpin the flow of hair in capital exchanges.

On the surface, the cosmetic appeal of Indian hair for my interlocutors was its volume, texture, and appearance. However what those characteristics are representative of is situated within a broader system of meaning. Despite South Africa's emergence as a serious procurer of Indian

hair, the global hair market has its attentions firmly placed on its most profitable consumers: African-American women. Since the socially relevant feature of purchased hair for them is that it measured against white standards of beauty, the general market was tailored to that contrived form of feminine beauty (Sharp 2000). Indian hair maintained a distinct position within Western conceptions and hierarchies of beauty as it offers a "crossover appeal" (Miller 1998: 262). It combines the valorized 'European' texture – smooth, shakeable, touchable – with a 'soft' blackness – thick but not course, curly but not kinky (Miller 1998, Berry 2008). Thus while it may appear that South African women were purchasing Indian hair for its cosmetic features, those features are drawn along racial lines. Apart from race, the cosmetic path that hair travels is also buttressed by other social distinctions such as gender, identity, and class.

As Sharp (2000) correctly highlights, women consistently emerge as specialized targets of commodification. Because commodification insists upon objectification and fragmentation in some form, the female body is highly susceptible to its process. It has been pointed out by Bartky (1990) and Bordo (1993) that women are identified and associated more closely with their bodies than men, and are disproportionately valued for how they look. In order to gain social acceptability, women are under constant pressure to correct their bodies in order to conform to the ideals of feminine appearance of the time. Objectification results from this preoccupation. Cosmetics facilitates this process by offering women an "acceptable" means of aligning their appearance closer to an aesthetic ideal through superficial, non-threatening measures i.e. the simple purchase of Indian hair. This cosmetic promise, and the objectification it engenders, was constantly visible in my encounters with interlocutors, especially among Lizzy's Hair Bar regulars, Omphile and Naledi.

Lizzy's Hair bar

Situated in a mall in the upmarket area of Randburg, Lizzy's Hair Bar was the brainchild of Analiswa Kanyane who started her business to "create a salon that delivers world-class haircare services and products for authentically beautiful women". Having been to a few salons before, I had come to realise that the design of the place was reflective of the owner's conception of beauty. With Afristyle for example, the minimalist black and white décor reflected Noku's association of beauty with refined elegance. Conversely, what constituted Analiswa's notion

of the "authentically beautiful woman" was a vibrant dynamism. There, white counters offset the multitude of bright colours that adorned the walls, creating a vivid environment that seemed tailor-made for the vivacious female. Omphile (49) was one such woman. A self-proclaimed "black diamond", Omphile liked to get a new weave "every month or so". When asked why, she slyly claimed that "I like the way it looks and feels. I enjoy the way people look at me when I get my weave done – especially my husband". Here we can see how her response was very much centred on the way she was viewed by others, and their opinions on her cosmetically-modified appearance. While her husband's approval was her primary goal in changing her look, the opinions of others was also a significant motivation for Omphile.

However the objectification of women by others was most noticeable in the response of Naledi (25), a candidate attorney, and her recollections of previous jobs. "I remember when I was a student and used to do promotional work for clubs and concerts, they were always looking for black girls with long hair." She believed this was due to the areas in which she operated in, and the demographic the work catered for. "We used to work in clubs in Edenvale and Germiston – predominantly white suburbs – and those guys like long hair and lots of skin". In both these cases hair was isolated, or fragmented, as a key feature of attractiveness. As a result it had been made an object that encompassed a set of ideals *about* women that overshadowed the women themselves. Further both these women used cosmetic practices to realize that ideal. Yet it would be specious to assume the objectification of all women based of the accounts of two women.

Instead I am assuming the objectification of women based off their collective *actions*: the inordinate amount of effort these women were putting into their appearance in salons. They went to great lengths in order to achieve a particular effect through cosmetic intervention. Beyond the time spent seeking these interventions, women were exposing themselves to the perils that such "cosmetic" practices involve. Behind Lizzy's jovial atmosphere, was the cloying smell of burning hair – both natural and foreign – mixed with the astringent scent of chemicals used for manicures. Moreover, in-between friendly conversations, women would occasionally grimace as their hair was twisted too tightly or a hair iron made contact with their scalp. In effect, the promise that cosmetics holds – that it can result in a crowd-pleasing aesthetic – acts as a disciplinary force that prompted specific practices. Further in disciplining

women to view themselves from the outside as objects to be gazed at and decorated, cosmetics resulted in them being the objectifier as well as the objectified. Yet how does the disciplinary power of cosmetics suppress individual choice, and who or what is responsible for its formation?

Disciplinary power

According to Bartky (1990, 74) "the disciplinary power that inscribes femininity in the female body is everywhere and it is nowhere; the disciplinarian is everyone and yet no one in particular". The message that women should look more feminine is everywhere: it is reinforced by parents, teachers, and patriarchal discourse. However a key source in the distribution of the female image has been consumer capitalism which drives women to be increasingly concerned with a romanticized appearance (Bartky 1990, Bordo 1993, Sarkar 2014). Another shaping force are institutional structures such as the workplace, as was made clear by Naledi. When questioned whether her hair was a significant factor at her job she responded with a quick "oh yes". She mentioned how her law firm was a predominantly white space and that, "you have to be neat, you can't have *kroes hare*[6]... [and] get taken seriously." Due to the pervasiveness of this power that inscribes femininity, women's constant preoccupation with appearance has come to be regarded as something natural and voluntary; it is something that women have internalised. Indeed, expressions of free choice were evident in the motivating factors for my interlocutors who used phrases such "I choose", "I prefer", and "I don't like" to express their desires for Indian hair. Beyond the words of my respondents, the cosmetic narrative also promotes a language of autonomy with regards to aesthetic practices.

The fallacy of autonomy

Cosmetic practices are often positioned as elective, relying on the language of autonomy and free choice. As Sharp (2000) argues however, such rhetoric in fact mystifies the commodification of bodies – often female ones. This is most apparent in forms of cosmetic surgery where the female self is willingly and radically transformed through the remapping of the body. Yet hair is also subject to this form of thinking. Women are told they can achieve an ideal appearance, and gain the benefits thereof, through the simple purchase of Indian hair for

[6] An Afrikaans phrase that can roughly be translated as "kinky hair"

example. Further their choice to partake in such measures are at their discretion. However this is a false promise. Under feminist thought[7], such conditions obscure how patients are victims of oppressive, idealized standards of beauty, where physical appearance drives definitions of self and social worth. As such, cosmetic practices are forms of "coerced voluntariness" that are driven by a technological imperative to conform (Morgan 1991 in Sharp 2000). Cosmetic commodities serve as the technologies that make such practices possible.

Undermining personal choice also has an effect on the individual and their self-perception. While autonomy is not exhaustive of identity, it constitutes a fundamental aspect out of which a conceptions of self emerges. Meyers (2000) argues that the authentic self emerges when a person exercises their agentic skills, namely the critical reflection required for autonomy such as introspection and imagination. However such self-regarding attitudes are hindered when individuals are exposed to oppressive or disciplinary practices (Meyers 2000). When viewed as such, Analiswa's earlier claim about the service her salon provided takes on new meaning. Instead of delivering "products for authentically beautiful women", in truth what her salon offered were products *necessary* for the authentically beautiful women.

However it is not my intention to frame these women as powerless victims enslaved to a system beyond their control. Rather I intend to show how, despite adopting practices enforced by oppressive circumstances, women utilize Indian hair – consciously or not – as a resource for individual gain. Like any commodity, hair has the potential to diverge from its socially regulated path by entering a different regime of value through its intimate association with a particular individual or social group. Within its customary path, hair's socially relevant feature was that it could be exchanged for a particular aesthetic ideal. However as I will show with my interlocutors, hair was diverted from this path when it was exchanged for another "thing": capital. For those women, what was valuable was not solely the aesthetic that hair provided, but how that aesthetic could be converted into social and symbolic capital for their benefit.

[7] Turner T. 1994. Bodies and anti-bodies: flesh and fetish in contemporary social theory. And Basalmo A. 1992. On the cutting edge: cosmetic surgery and the technological production of the gendered body. *Camera Obscura* 258:207–38.

Keratin Kapital: the singularization of hair

For Bourdieu (1985), capital is the socially valued goods we all desire and strive to attain, such as money or status. The most common example is economic capital which consists of financially based goods such as money, property, and possessions (Stych 2010). However the forms I am concerned with here are social and symbolic capital. Social capital refers to the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures (Bourdieu 1985). To possess such capital, a person must be related to others, and it is those others not the individual, who are the actual source of his or her advantage (Portes 1995, Stych 2010). How then does this apply here? Indian hair maintains a distinct position within dominant structures of beauty, where its features are congruent with an internationally acknowledged aesthetic. The use of this hair grants black women access – or "membership" – to those structures, conferring upon them the associated benefits. These women then attempt to convert this social capital into economic capital.

As mentioned by my interlocutors – both in this chapter and prior – the corporate environment in South Africa preferenced a specific type of appearance in women, one that is analogous with the description above. While none of my respondents have claimed that they have been blatantly prejudiced by business establishments, they have all felt that their economic mobility is affected by how their hair is presented. These fears are not groundless as Rosette and Dumas (2007) confirm that black women with straight hair have a better chance of finding a well-paying job or gaining promotion. Thus women like Naledi felt the need to purchase Indian weaves in order to "get taken more seriously" in the workplace. In an effort to further her career, she leveraged her social capital. Through her purchase, Naledi has not only reaped the benefits from its social capital, but from the symbolic capital it provided as well.

Symbolic capital refers to the means in which a person creates their physical and social reality or presents their prestige, and serves as value that one holds within a culture or group (Bourdieu 1985, Stych 2010). For example, symbolic capital can be found in the implementation of strategy, such as wearing particular brand names in order to create a prestigious appearance. Thus if a certain representation of 'ideal' hair was collectively recognized among black middle-class South African women, then members who possessed that form of hair would have a greater amount of social capital within the group. Since all the women I have spoken to have

held Indian hair in high regard, it can be inferred that those who possess it, like Naledi, have an elevated status among the group. However, while converting hair into social and symbolic capital has proven to be beneficial, not all women have the option of that conversion.

Despite embodying a set of values that are applicable to black women at large, high-quality Indian hair is only available to a select few: the economically well-off. Due to its inflated price, for purchase as well as maintenance, this commodity is inaccessible to most South African women. For example, the installation of a full weave at Afristyle could cost anywhere from R3500-6000, while Lizzy's would charge between R4000-R8000. Although lower grades of hair are available – and readily used – a majority of South African women still rely on chemical relaxers to achieve "that look". Most just do not have the means to acquire premium Indian hair, regardless of the possible benefits it may provide. What Indian hair does then, is reaffirm the distance between the black middle (and upper) class and the lower.

Commodity Candidacy: hair's journey towards commodification

As Bourdieu (1985: 242) notes, "the distribution of different types and subtypes of capital at a given moment in time represents the immanent structure of the social world, i.e., the set of constraints, inscribed in the very reality of that world, which govern its functioning in a durable way, determining the chances of success for practices". This statement is not only applicable to the capital women used to gain benefits, but also to the commodity that enabled those forms of capital. Following Appadurai's framework, certain conditions need to be in effect for hair to properly move in to its commodity situation. Before entering its commodity phase hair must be culturally labelled *as* a commodity; as such it must first be considered a viable candidate. Candidacy refers to the social and historical setting in which an object acquires the potential for commodification. Thus the question becomes: When and how did hair acquire the potential to become a commodity in South Africa, especially for black women?

I contend that the idea of hair as a possible commodity emerged in the country during the early 20th century with the formation "black modern girl". Thomas (2006) describes this figure as a

black female who was identified by her cosmopolitan look, an image that was achieved through the use of specific commodities. The development of the 'modern girl' was a result of the attempts by black women to earn respectability during a period of racial discrimination that stigmatized the phenotypic dimensions of the black body. In an effort to claim positive recognition, women turned to the use of cosmetics – skin lighters, relaxers etc. – in the hopes that they would transform their appearance in a larger public. These ideas were encouraged by broader structures, as Thomas (2006) notes how the rise of the 'modern girl' was intimately tied to the circulation of films, advertisements, magazines, and newspapers.

Indeed is was Thomas' analysis of the black newspaper *Bantu World* that allowed her to estimate the emergence of the 'modern girl' by the early 1930s. The mass media of the day not only disseminated the image of the "refined" black women, but also reified the idea that respectability could be bought in the form of certain commodities. While the preferred commodity at that time was chemical relaxers, the 'modern girl' set the precedent for Indian hair to become the commodity that, when purchased, would align future black women closer to a specific aesthetic standard. Yet how does the historical setting of hair's commodification impact its modern day exchange? To understand this connection one has to concentrate on hair's commodity context.

Commodity Context: connecting hair's potential

The commodity context is the "social arenas within or between cultural units that link the commodity candidacy of a thing to the commodity phase of its career" (Appadurai 1988: 15). In this case then, the context would be the environment that allowed for hair to move from its candidacy, the *conceptual* idea that its purchase could provide a certain image, to its commodity phase, where its *physical* exchange could satisfy such an idea. That environment was the global hair trade. As stated earlier, this market was tailored toward a contrived form of feminine beauty that reaffirmed difference. Further, through a specific narrative, it promoted the idea that the use of its wares could curtail such difference and align female bodies closer to an aesthetic ideal. Central to this market was Indian hair as it maintained a distinct position within conceptions and hierarchies of beauty. Indeed, the success of the global market was on

(literal) display at Lizzy's in the form of the "Weave Bar" that caught your eye as you walked in the door. A large display cabinet, the Bar exhibited the various lengths and styles of hair on offer, each strand in a separate back-lit compartment. As the focal point of the salon, the Bar signified the worth Indian hair had for those women. However the value attributed to this type of hair is best summed up in the words of Noku: "we can't buy the stuff quick enough."

Economy of Otherness

At first glance, it appeared that Indian hair's social potential – what moved it into its commodity phase – was its physical features, its beauty. In reality however, this commodity's customary path was shaped by a cosmetic narrative that reaffirmed difference. Due to Indian hair's distinct position within broader hierarchies of beauty, its exchangeability was drawn along racial lines. Further, the narrative that drove its exchange fragmented the female body, reducing gender to a set of abstract aesthetic ideals. Additionally the processes that commodified hair transformed it into a disciplinary force that undermined the autonomy of its wearers. While it may appear that women who purchased Indian hair were willingly engaging in its consumption, their behaviours – like the commodity they consumed – were constrained by a specific politics of value generated by the marketplace.

Overall, standing behind this economy of visible transactions was an "economy of otherness", where the consumption of Indian hair served to reinforce racial and gendered hierarchies. The disciplinary powers that drove the commodification of hair also made women contributors to their own "othering". By compelling them to view themselves from the outside as objects to be gazed at and decorated, it resulted in them being the objectifier as well as the objectified. Despite these pressures, certain women manipulated this economy to their advantage by converting hair into other forms of capital. They were able to do so through the status the commodity provided them. To understand how that prestige was generated, it is necessary to analyse Indian hair's production.

Chapter 3: The Politics of Production: Manufacturing "Otherness"

"It was black-black, so thick it drank two containers of relaxer at the salon, so full it took hours under the hooded dryer, and, when finally released from pink plastic rollers, sprang free and full, flowing down her back like a celebration. Her father called it a crown of glory."

– **Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie**, **Americanah**

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Appadurai breaks significantly from the production-dominated Marxian view of the commodity, arguing instead that value emerges in moments of exchange during the entire social life of a thing. Despite the concern over the total trajectory of objects, the focus on exchange exaggerates the demand-side of commoditization. While Marx's model is erroneous in assuming that value originates solely from the production end of commodity chains, his work does have some relevance here. Specifically that producers are alienated from their wares (Marx 1967). The global hair trade is a consumer-focused and producer-blind system, where the production stage (dominated by Indian women) is profoundly disconnected from the consumption stage (dominated by black women). This disconnection occurs through the exoticized discourse used to delineate Indian hair from hair of other types. In short, it is the language used to make this commodity alluring.

All in the name: the allure of Indian hair

During my conversations in salons I began to notice a trend in the way those women spoke about Indian hair. This was best exemplified by Mary when asked what type of hair she preferred using. Wincing slightly as a section of her weave was retightened she replied, "Oh, I always get Virgin Indian [hair]". Having heard this term before, I followed up by asking what made it 'Virgin'. Knowingly, Mary responded that "Indian hair is pure and it comes from a temple". Zama, Mary's regular stylist, chimed in by proudly stating that the salon only used premium "Remy Virgin Temple hair" for its weaves and extensions. This phrase was a recurring theme throughout my fieldwork, and over time it became clear that it was key to understanding what drove so many black South African women towards Indian hair. To understand why, it is necessary to divide this type of hair into its constituent terms of Remy, Virgin, and Temple.

Remy

The name Remy refers to the features of the hair and the method it which it was processed. Remy hair is characterized by its unilateral cuticle direction, meaning the follicles all go in one direction – from root to tip. This can be achieved by cutting the hair from the donor while keeping it in its original alignment i.e. holding the hair in a ponytail and cutting. However, since it requires more than one bundle of hair for integrations – three to four according to Zama

– it is more common for labourers to gather groups of hair of the same length from different individuals and realign the strands. Due to this labour intensive process, Remy hair is scarce. The majority of human hair sold today is non-Remy, yet since the method of collection does not concern itself with alignment, cuticles tend to be in all different directions. In order to compensate for this, the hair will go through an acid bath to remove the cuticles. This process is damaging, with the acid leading to duller and more brittle hair that will tangle and matte more easily. Conversely, since the integrity of the hair is maintained, Remy hair stays stronger, shinier for longer and does not tangle as easily.

As Byrd and Tharps (2001: 470) note, Indian Virgin Remy is considered the "gold standard" of human hair – a standard that comes with a golden price. While I did not ask Mary how much her weave was worth, I was familiar enough with Noku's price chart to know that her 20 inch weave cost around R4 500. Later that day I asked Noku why women like Mary were prepared to pay such sums for this type of hair. "It's strong…a weave [made from Remy hair] lasts up to six months" she explained as she began the process of closing up shop, "because the hair goes from root to tip it looks natural…like your own hair". Noku's assessment was consistent with the way in which Remy hair was promoted at large, with multiple websites endorsing its strength and the "seamless" appearance it provided the wearer. For example, internationally renowned hair extension brand *Indique* claims about their product:

> "Indique's remy hair extensions are unparalleled because the virgin hair used only has cuticle layers facing the same direction from root to end. This ensures that the extensions behave exactly like your own hair and guarantees natural wave, fullness, luster and remarkable usability. Our hair is light in weight and supple which gives it natural flow and movement. Chemically free, our hair will enhance the length, color and texture of your natural hair leaving you with a flawless and refined weave or hair extension style. Our hair can be reused up to a year. It can be washed, blow dried, curled, flat ironed, colored and permed while still maintaining its original beauty and vitality[8]."

[8] https://www.indiquehair.com/about/ourhair.html

Here we can see how Remy is endorsed for its strength and the natural appearance it provides the wearer, benefits all achieved due to its alignment. Further, the web statement notes how the virginity of their hair contributes to its quality. Despite often being used together or even interchangeably, Virgin and Remy are not synonymous and have different characteristics that make them valuable.

Virgin

Like Remy, Virgin hair is characterized by its features and the way in which it is processed. The key quality of such hair is that it is unprocessed and that no chemicals have been used to alter the structure of the hair i.e. bleaching or acid baths. Apart from the washing process to sterilize the hair, Virgin tresses remain "untouched". It is esteemed because it is considered the epitome of natural hair; "natural" in this case meaning the hair's structure is the same as when it was on the head of a living person. Where Remy is valued because it perceived to *look* as natural as is possible, Virgin is prized because perceived to *be* as natural as is possible. When worn in combination, Virgin Remy hair confers upon the wearer an authenticity as the purchased hair on their head appears to be a natural extension of their own body. However, while Virgin signifies unrefined quality and Remy denotes genuine appearance, each of these terms are implicitly constructed along racial lines. In claiming that Virgin Remy Indian hair is indistinguishable in appearance, there is the implication that an affinity is shared between black and Indian hair in their natural states.

In truth however, the free-flowing Indian tresses are closer in texture to Caucasian hair and share little affinity with the coiled and tightly woven hair the majority of black women are born with. In this way, Virgin Remy Indian hair does not look like natural black hair, but rather natural *relaxed* black hair (Nadège Compaoré 2011). Further, in naming such hair "virgin", there is the implicit suggestion that its characteristics are pure and legitimate – the standard for what beauty look like. By wearing such hair and imitating this aesthetic, black women are reinforcing such ideals and consequently showing that their hair is impure and illegitimate. They are inadvertently exposing their "otherness". Not only were black women unintentionally othering themselves but, through actively participating in the global hair trade, were complicit in other forms of othering. In privileging Virgin Remy *Temple* hair, these women are perpetuating the eroticization of Indian hair and the people who it once belonged too.

Temple

Hindu temples play a very active role in the sourcing of human hair, none more so than the Tirumala Sri Venkateswara Temple in the Chittoor district of Andhra Pradesh. It is here that thousands of pilgrims have their heads tonsured – or shaven - as a symbolic gesture to Lord Venkateswara, an incarnation of Vishnu, the Hindu God of Preservation (Aiyangar 1939, Berry 2008). Considered to be one of the most beautiful parts of the body in Hindu culture, hair is offered to Vishnu in exchange for blessings or given in thanks for past good fortune. I have mentioned "producers" and "production" throughout this paper, this is due to Mohanty's (1997) argument that hair in this case may be considered a form of 'invisible labour'. Because hair is offered to a deity, pilgrims take special care in growing and primping their hair and, as such, these grooming practices can be read as a forms of labour. In peak seasons Maheswari (2013) records that the Tirumala temple sees, on average, 20, 000 to 40, 000 people tonsuring the hair *per day*; as such the temple is able to collect up to 2000 tonnes of hair every year. Due to this volume, Tirumala is the premier contributor for human hair in the global market. Once tonsured, hair is gathered, washed, and sorted by length; all in preparation for auction. Yet it is not just hair that is distributed worldwide from these auctions, but also the *idea* that such hair comes from an Indian temple.

Exoticism is based on the dichotomic and hierarchical opposition between us/here and others/elsewhere. In simpler terms, it is a generic form of othering (Debarbieux *et al* 2012). On the one hand exoticism is characterized by the geographical distance and the existence of a symbolic gap, and on the other by an enhanced value of otherness which is seen as charming and attractive. Indian hair is marked as exotic by its association with Hindu temples, a (dis)association that adds a unique value – a mysticism – that other forms of human hair lack. However "the exotic" is not the characteristic of an object, a place, or a human being, but the characteristic of a glance and a discourse (Gauthier 2008, Staszak 2008 in Debarbieux *et al* 2012). Hair is not special because it comes from Indian temples, it is special because it is *imagined* to come from Indian temples.

This imagined distance is once again reflected in the web statements of prominent extension companies. On their site, *Weave Good Hair* notes how they:

> "Provide 100% Virgin Indian Remy hair extensions for your retail and wholesale needs. We know **We'ave** [sic] the finest quality human hair

> around, because *we hand-pick it ourselves from credible Indian temples*, so that you can experience the joy of ethically sourced, natural hair extensions today![9]" (emphasis my own)

Similarly *Indique* serves to remind us that:

> "Once the raw hair is sourced from the Temples of India and *private suppliers* in South East Asia, it is thoroughly inspected, cleaned and manufactured into our trademark collections of products. Once the hair completes the long journey to our production and fulfillment [sic] facilities in the United States, the quality assurance process continues with a complete washing and inspection to identify any imperfections. This *full control* of the production process allows us to create *unique products* that you won't find anywhere else" (emphasis my own)

These statements not only confirm, but disseminate the textual separation of Indian hair from Indian body by giving meaning and coherence to hair by tying it place and not person. They also accomplish this by suggesting that their companies are responsible for the "production" of hair and not the people who actually grew it. This is akin to what Spivak calls 'consumption as tourism' (Sharp and Spivak 2003). Spivak's formulation here implies the ability to travel though the variegated terrain of the "other", picking and choosing as one goes (Sharp and Spivak 2003). Such a discourse selectively chooses the mystical elements of Indian hair while erasing others less desirable elements, such as its previous owners.

Consumer blind

The distance between producer and product translated into a distance between producer and consumer. This was evident in Mary's earlier statement that "Indian hair…comes from temples". She did not make the self-evident assumption that such hair comes from Indian people. It is unfortunate that South African consumers are generally unaware of Indian producers as I suggest that the knowledge of why Indian women make the sacrifices they do has the potential to transform purchased hair into sites of celebration. Instead of objects saturated in racial significance, the weaves black women wear could be representative of the positive attributes Indian culture confers upon hair: as the most beautiful aspect of the body

[9] http://www.weavegoodhair.com/

and a gift worthy to offer a God. I came to this assertion several months after I interviewed the women at the salon after I visited India and spoke to the alienated producers themselves: the women who offered their hair at temples.

Visiting the source: Sri Venkateswara Temple

During the month of December I journeyed to the south of India, specifically to the state of Andhra Pradesh, where I visited the largest sourcing point of hair in the world, the Sri Venkateswara Temple. Settled atop the seventh peak of the Seshachalam Hills was the pilgrimage town of Tirumala. A combination of two Tamil words, "Tiru" meaning holy and "Mala" meaning hill, the town was home to Sri Venkateswara, a Hindu temple dedicated to Lord Venkateswara, an avatar of the God Vishnu (Rao 1982). Spread over an area of 26 square kilometres, the temple hosts pilgrims from all around India and the world who journey to perform acts of worship and sacrifice. Maheswari (2013) records that at peak season the temple sees on average 50, 000 pilgrims per day, and will eventually play host to two million visitors per year. Such volumes make the Sri Venkateswara the most visited religious institution in the world.

As legend has it, Vishnu – the protector of the world and restorer of moral order – took out a loan in order to pay for his wedding. However his loan was so large that it would take him thousands of years to pay it off. Devout Hindus help pay off this debt through offering their wealth, and in return, Vishnu fulfils their prayers (Aiyangar 1939, Rao 1982). While this wealth may be in the form of money, jewellery, or foodstuffs, many pilgrims offer the only riches available to them: their hair. For Hindus, hair is something to take great pride in as it is considered one of the most beautiful aspects of the body. Thus to sacrifice it is considered a means of surrendering one's ego. As such, thousands of men and women have their heads shaven – or tonsured – as a symbolic gesture to Vishnu.

Arriving at the temple

While the temple offered substantial accommodation on grounds, its popularity meant that reservations were hard to come by. Thus many pilgrims found lodging in the neighbouring city

of Tirupati and made the 27km commute to the temple. I chose this form of recourse and called Tirupati my home for the duration of one week, preferring to make the 45 minute journey daily. As this was my first ethnographic foray into a foreign country, there was naturally a degree of naiveté in my methods. Language for one, was a larger barrier than I expected it to be. With English being the primary language for government, business and education in India, I had expected to encounter a fair number of pilgrims who were proficient in the language. Despite meeting such individuals, they were few and far between. As a site of pilgrimage, the temple was a crucible of multiple Indian languages, with Hindi and Telugu being the most prominent. My second miscalculation was made clear to me when I first arrived at the temple; I had grossly underestimated the temple's scope, complexity, and my inability to process all the *activity* I witnessed. While noting the temple's tens of thousands of daily visitors in literature was once fascinating to me, seeing that volume of people gathered in one place for the first time was disorienting. As a result I did not accomplish much on my first day at Sri Venkateswara.

Fortunately I was saved from my ignorance when I happened across a chaperon: my taxi driver. Pramod was a Tirupati-native, Hindi and Telugu speaker, and a driver for the hotel where I was staying. As a driver he frequently made the trip to the temple meaning he was very familiar with its layout and operating procedures. Hearing about my poor first experience on the journey back to the hotel, Pramod kindly offered his assistance to be my regular driver, translator, and tour guide for the duration of my stay – for a substantially larger tip and the promise of a regular lunch. Feeling more confident the next day, I was able to begin my ethnography in earnest.

Due to the high volume of visitors, gaining access to the temple and its facilities was a highly regimented process. Beginning at the base of the Tirumala hills, I had to stop at the check station, pay for my *darshan* – a ticket to gain access to see a holy site – and surrender my shoes and any electronics as they were forbidden within temple grounds. From there Pramod drove the 11km up the Ghat road to the temple itself. Even this journey was regulated as the trip *had* to take 15 minutes from the time stamped on my ticket. Pramod noted that this measure was implemented to enforce a speed limit on the narrow and twisting road, a speed limit he duly broke as we had to wait by the side of the road for five minutes to avoid receiving a fine.

Finally arriving at our destination, Pramod and myself excited the car, wrapped our cloth Dhotis[10] around our waist, and began walking to the temple complex situated in the middle of the town. Immediately visible were the three *gopuram* or temple towers that lead to the innermost sanctum or *Garbhagriha* where the idol of Vishnu resides. Constructed in the Dravidian architectural style, these towers provided access through the series of compound walls that surrounded the *Garbhagriha.* The first *gopuram* was a white five story tower topped with several *kalasams* – ornamental structures in the shape of inverted pots – which allowed entrance through the outermost wall. Proceeding this was the second tower known as the "silver entrance", a three storied structure that permitted pilgrims entry through the inner wall. The third and last *gopuram* was the most eye-catching. With its gilded roof, the appropriately named "golden entrance" was another three story tower that led directly into the sanctum sanctorum. While striking, the *gopurams* and *Garbhagriha* were not my topics of concern thus, taking one last look the temple, I went in search of hair.

I did not have to walk far. Five hundred meters west of the main temple was the *KalyanaKatta* – or tonsure – building, a four story construction that was home to the two largest tonsure halls in Tirumala. Apart from its size, the building was distinguished by the steady stream of freshly shaved pilgrims that exited its doors. Apart from that building, there were sixteen smaller *KalyanaKattas* spread across the town to deal with the large volume of devotees. In total the temple employed 650 barbers to deal with the 20, 000 pilgrims who offered the hair daily. Standing outside the main *KalyanaKatta* it quickly became clear that I would struggle to meet people to talk to. Because entrance to the hall was regulated by a pre-order ticket system designed to stagger appointment times, there was a short waiting line. People arrived at their appointed time, walked in, received tonsure, and left. This process provided little time to talk to people in depth.

As such I visited various smaller *KalyanaKattas* that operated on a first come, first serve basis for those who could not get tickets for the main hall. These smaller halls had longer lines, *much* longer lines. On average it took myself and Pramod two and a half hours to reach the entrance

[10] A dhoti is a rectangular piece of unstitched cloth, usually around five metres long, that is wrapped around the waist and the legs and knotted at the waist. It is a traditional garment for men in religious contexts i.e. offerings and services.

of these halls, however this gave us plenty of time to talk to the women around us. With the grudging help of Pramod – he quickly began to tire of constantly standing in lines – I managed to have substantial conversations with four women over the course of the week. Karan, a student from Bangalore; Lakshmi and Indra, friends from Chennai; and Meghna, a mother of two from Rajahmundry.

As with all devotees, these women came to the temple to pay their respects to Vishnu, however they each had different motives for offering their hair. Karan, who I managed to talk to without the aid of Pramod, was offering her hair in appreciation for her good fortune as she had recently returned from studying overseas. "I gave a donation to the *hundi* (donation pot)" she said "but I wanted to give something more personal". While Karan was making her pilgrimage alone, Meghna was with her two daughters, Padma and Rajama. For her, this pilgrimage was a family tradition and she fondly recalled her temple visit with her mother and grandmother. Despite her daughters looking thoroughly uninterested – we had been in the line for an hour at this point – Meghna assured me that this memory would remain with them forever. Also journeying together was Lakshmi and Indra. Lifetime friends, these two came to offer their hair in the hopes of Vishnu's blessing. As Pramod paraphrased, "they came here to ask for a favour, but they don't want to tell you what it is". Not wanting to press the point, I continued with my observations.

Another benefit of the mini *KalyanaKattas* was the construction of the buildings themselves. Since the upper half of the walls were spaced metal bars, you could clearly see into the hall and observe the hair cutting process. This was important as I was not allowed into the halls since I was not tonsuring my hair, however the fact that the lines were adjacent to the building meant I had ample time to observe the barbers at work. What struck me initially during my first visit to the halls was the soundtrack accompanying the process: the pervasive cries of children and infants who were also getting their hair shaved. Meghna explained that this was a ceremony called *mundan*, "[in Hinduism] the hair you are born comes from your past life". Thus shaving it off signifies freedom from the past and moving into the future.

However, the most arresting feature of the tonsuring process was the speed at which it occurred. Women knelt down in front of barbers who – with practiced efficiency – tied their hair into a ponytail, washed it with a mix of water and antiseptics, and used a straight razor to shear it in quick confident strokes. The entire process took less than a minute. Once completed the barber swept the hair into channels in the floor where water carried it away, after which he applied a mixture of sandalwood (*chandan*) and turmeric powder (*haldi*) to the scalp. *Chandan* provided a cooling effect and *haldi* acted as an antiseptic for the freshly shaved. Once the process was complete all the pilgrims – barring the children – had the same reaction, their hands immediately went up to feel their head, followed by a smile or laugh. None however, payed any attention to the thick, dark clumps of hair floating away to a destination unknown. For them, they had made their offering and that was the end of it. However the hair drifting away was just beginning its journey, a voyage that would take it across the world.

Auction

According to a temple official, hair from the *KalyanaKattas* is collected once every six hours by a team of sixty members and is stored in large sealed containers. The tresses are then segregated into five categories of length and weighed in the presence of an official. Since barbers wet the hair before they shave off, the hair strands are sundried under polycarbonate sheets 1.5 tonnes at a time, and once dry, is once again stored in containers. All of this is in preparation for the annual auction that the temple hosted in the month of March or April. This auction constituted a significant stream of income for the temple, with the 2014 auction providing $32 million of the temple's $330 million annual revenue (Vijaylakshmi 2014). The auction is supervised by the Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams (TTD), an independent trust that manages the temple and who are also responsible for expenditure. Yet hair's sale was not the end of its journey, merely another step in its social life.

After auction – processing

I had planned to visit a distribution centre in Chennai to see how hair was processed, however due to the sudden floods that inundated the city during that period those plans had to be abandoned. However one can get a sense of the process through the words of Mayoor Balsara, chief executive of India's largest exporter of human hair SDTC exports. SDTC processes 50

metric tons of hair per year, "to put that in perspective" says Balsara "a ton represents [the hair of] 3,000 women" (Smellie 2012) After purchases are made at the auction, hair is washed again and dried in the sun, after which it is scrutinized and regrouped into various grades of lengths and colour as per the company's standards. Once completed, the labour intensive process of "hackling" begins. To maintain the integrity of the hair no machinery is used in its processing, instead labourers – often women – brush small handfuls of hair through hackles, comb-like mechanisms that removes short and imperfect threads (Smellie 2012). Hair is hackled several times to ensure that it is uniform in length and quality, and once completed, is collected into "strands" or bundles of 200 hairs and exported. The most expensive hair is over 31 inches long and is sold anywhere from $300 to $450 per kilogram, sometimes as much as $800. Even the shortest of hair is sold, mostly to companies in China who strip it of L-Cystein amino acids, a protein that is used as raw material in baby foods, doughnuts, cookies and other bakery items (Maheswari 2013).

Production-blind

Earlier I noted the gap in the knowledge read into the production of Indian hair, specifically how the Indian person was alienated from their wares. However as I found out when I spoke to the pilgrims about the auction, there was also an absence in the knowledge read into the consumption of hair. Indian women were unaware that their hair *was* being consumed. To be clear I am not claiming that they were ignorant of the sale – the temple does not hide this fact and auctions are widely advertised – rather that most were unaware that their hair was being worn globally. Karan was the only person I met who knew about the hair trade, while Meghna knew about the auction only; Lakshmi and Indra knew nothing about either.

I was very careful about my line of inquiry around this topic as I was afraid that I might reveal potentially troublesome information. My fear was rooted in possibility that certain questions might upset a significant power structure: the trust a devotee has towards their religious institution. Was is not exploitative for the temple to profit from the sacrifices of its members without providing remuneration? Thus I only questioned whether they knew what happened to the hair after tonsure and, apart from Karan, I did not press the issue further for fear of offending them. Indeed there has been much speculation on the unequal power relations between temple and devotee (see Sharp 2000, Berry 2008, and Compaore 2011). Such work problematizes the

economic disparity between temple and devotee, questioning why those at the core of production do not share a portion of the $9 billion global hair industry that they sustain.

There were two other women who also knew about the auction, Poonam and Sanjana. I met these women at the most populated area of Tirumala, the Laddu counter outside the main temple. Laddus are sweets made from Gram flour, nuts, spices, ghee, sugar, and raisins and are given as *prasadam* to pilgrims after visiting the temple. *Prasadam* was a religious food offering given to devotees by the temple that was considered to have a deity's blessing residing within it. For that reason, and the fact that Tirumala's Laddus are famous in India (and delicious!), people were more receptive to talk. Sweets in hand, Poonam mentioned how she knew about the auction through an article she read in The Hindu, India's national newspaper. Sanjana on the other hand, knew about the auction – and the hair trade – through her aunt who worked at a hair processing factory in Bangalore.

Despite their knowledge, the women showed no antagonism towards the temple's sale of their hair. Poonam did not feel as if the temple was exploiting her, rather it was using her hair to help maintain the complex. As she explained, "Tirumala is big…[it] costs a lot of money". Indeed, the temple does use the money gained from hair sales for positive endeavours with the TTD using the funds for the temple's upkeep as well as for charitable purposes. The building of schools, hospitals, as well as the distribution of free meals are just some of the charitable undertakings that are financed with the money hair makes. To ensure honest spending, The TTD has anti-corruption measures in place in the form of an oversight committee, which ensures that funds make their way to the devotees and local communities. However I believe it was Karan who explained the devotee's attitude towards the auction most eloquently: "giving your hair is gesture of giving up your ego and giving thanks, worrying about the price of hair contradicts that".

What is clear from the words of my temple interlocutors was that it was inaccurate to assume a simplistic representation of the poor Indian women who receive nothing from their offerings. Although these women did not receive any financial recompense, they did earn significant rewards. While I do not deny that there may be an element of exploitation in the production of

Indian hair, the women I spoke to did not seem to share that opinion. Most of them showed little concern about the sale of their hair, nor in being producers for a global trade. In reality, those most exploited by the supply mechanisms of hair were the consumers.

For instance, SDTC exports have purchased hair from the auction for as little as 30 US cents. An international distributor will then buy that same strand from SDTC for $1.50. For the general consumer, a strand can cost anywhere from $9 to US$14 depending on the length and quality. This represents an average 4 000 % mark-up from the trade's raw product to its consumer retail price. Moreover, beauty salons in the United States generally charge between US$1,500 and $3,000 for a weave despite that it requires only requires 2-3 strands (Berry 2008, Smellie 2012). Despite this incredulous – and abusive – mark-up, it was shown in the previous chapter that the women who purchase Indian hair convert it into social and symbolic capital to be used for their own gain. These outcomes can be read as compensation for the exorbitant price paid for Indian hair. It is interesting to note however, that when Indian hair began its social life, started off *as* social and symbolic capital.

Tethered by hair: the connections between South African and Indian women

Social capital refers to the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures. While South African women such as Naledi leveraged social capital in the workplace, devout Hindus such as Lakshmi and Indra used their hair to receive a boon from Vishnu. Symbolic capital refers to the means in which a person creates their physical and social reality or presents their prestige, and serves as value that one holds within a culture or group. For my African interlocutors the group in question was the black middle-class, and they used the capital hair provided to increase their status within it. Conversely, Indian women *offered* their prestige – hair being the most beautiful part of their body – to elevate their standing within their religious community.

Despite the distance between producer and consumer that was created through hair's exchange, a closer inspection of the production process revealed a connection between South African and Indian women. Not only did both utilize hair as a form of capital for their benefit, they were both subject to the processes of objectification and fragmentation that upheld the global hair

trade. In each case, hair was isolated – or fragmented – as a key feature of attractiveness, and been made an object that encompassed a set of ideals *about* women that overshadowed the women themselves. In South Africa, women were objectified by a pervasive idea of what beauty was meant to be. Indian women were objectified through a discourse that exoticized their hair to a degree that rendered them all but invisible to the eyes of the world. Further, like the cosmetic narrative seen in the consumption stage of hair, this exotic discourse served to mystify the objectification of women during the production of hair.

Authentic otherness

What the preference for Indian Remy Virgin Temple hair does then, is promote the construction of "authentic otherness" (Berry 2006). What is evident in this chapter is that a discourse grounded in the promotion of the "exotic other" was used to make Indian hair alluring. Framing hair as Indian *Temple,* constructed this commodity as a coherent category that was associated with a place. In doing so, it marked Indian temples as hyper-visible, subsequently rendering the people who frequent such institutions invisible. In short, it alienated producers from their wares. Further, the dependence on Indian temples for hair's mythology and morphology resulted in a distance between consumer and producer, exacerbating the otherness of Indian women. The separation of Indian people from Indian hair also served another purpose, it allowed hair to be remapped with new meaning. This remapping is central to hair's distribution phase, as will be shown next.

Chapter 4: The Politics of Distribution: Marketing "Blackness"

"But race is not biology; race is sociology. Race is not genotype; race is phenotype. It's about the shade of your skin and the shape of your nose and the kink of your hair. Booker"

— Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Americanah

The discourse surrounding the production of Indian hair was intended to encourage its sale to a particular demographic, black women. It achieved this in two ways. In reducing hair into a raceless, classless, and genderless image, this discourse shaped it into an exotic object of desire. Further by rendering hair featureless, it left hair open to be remade from a particularized angle. Stripping hair of certain aspects of its "Indianess" allowed it to be reinscribed with distinct categories of race, class, and gender that further encouraged its consumption within the black community. Such a process occurred during the distribution and marketing of hair, and was dependent on the circulation of images – both mental and iconographical – that constructed a particular representation of "blackness" (Debarbieux *et al* 2012). It is as Nadège Compaoré (2011) claims, Indian hair has become the preference of black women because it has been made so through marketing.

What is blackness and how is it marketed?

Blackness refers to the myriad ways of making a claim on black cultural identity. Hall (1993) notes that it has come to signify the various communities that keep black traditions, historical experiences, aesthetics, and counter-narratives. Here, I am concerned with the South African black middle-class community, and how advertising speaks to their traditions (grooming practices), the racial legacy which has influenced their aesthetic ideals (white and straight), and their counter-narratives (natural vs. unnatural). Marketing blackness involved advertising and other promotional strategies that attributed black representations onto hair in the form of signs. Such signs included images and text of black people or other symbolic and material artefacts of black cultural life (i.e. speech and phonetic conventions, folklore, music, fashion, music, or the physical form itself). These images were used to deliver promises about a product's benefits in order to encourage sales (Crockett 2008).

On the surface these images – and the representations they reflect – appear to be deployed to simply target a specific demographic, instead they conceal cultivated assumptions about a perceived blackness. These assumptions are often fixed in dominant racial ideologies that not only paint blackness in an unfavourable light but frames it, and thus all black people, as a homogenous group. More problematically, as black people are consuming the *content* of advertisements as well as the product promoted, adverts are not only creating an imagined blackness, but reifying it as well. They reveal these assumptions through the combined use of

primary and secondary discourse that makes assertions about the presumed reader (O'Barr, 1994).

Primary discourse refers to ideas advertisers articulate explicitly, often by emphasizing themes of similarity. Conversely, secondary discourse refers to implicit ideas about society and culture that are usually expressed through themes of difference (O'Barr, 1994). Central to both discourses however are the claims that advertisers make about their product as a cultural resource. While there are many strategies the advertiser uses to make these claims, I focus on the three as set out by Crockett (2008), as the blackness representations they rely on align most closely to the subjects of this paper. Accompanying Crockett's concepts are a set of advertisements directed at the mass market that illustrates (in all senses of the word) his schema.

Similarity and Difference: advertising strategies

Casting for equality

Casting emphasizes the viewer's similarity to blackness representations, but without making any claims about the product or viewer that are reliant on black cultural identity. Here, blackness is revealed to symbolize broad social goals such as racial equality which are "attainable" through the mass market. This is often achieved by images that situate black people equally within multiracial ensembles i.e. of similar status. Such a strategy is visible in the below advert for Great Lengths, a world-leading company in the human hair market:



Not only does this opulent image emphasize the glamour that long flowing hair provides for women, it demonstrates how such hair is equally glamorous for both black and white. Most importantly, the image implies that such an equality is attainable through the purchase of its product. However the problem here is that what places these women on par *is* their hair, or rather hair of a particular type. While making no direct claims to black cultural identity, the promise this image infers operates within, and is dependent on, a particular aesthetic paradigm.

In their analysis of adverts directed at black and white women, Joseph and Lewis (1981) note how the concept of female beauty for both women were based on overarching white patriarchal standards. hooks (1992) confirms the prevalence of this problem, noting how images of the black body continue to be defined by dominant white societal discourse. Lastly this paper has demonstrated how prevailing this issue continues to be. With this in mind, the name of the company who produced this advert can be read two ways: beauty is associated with (white) hair of "great lengths", and that certain (black) women have to go to "great lengths" to achieve that standard.

Building Cultural Capital

This advertising strategy emphasizes the viewer's difference from blackness while also making claims about the product that are reliant on blackness. In this strategy, blackness is central to such claims because it is dissociative rather than aspirational. *Building Cultural Capital* uses blackness as a foil against which they provide an object lesson in building status through product consumption. Bourdieu (1984) identifies cultural capital as a status-generating asset that takes three primary forms: embodied (status-marking tastes, skills, and practices), objectified (status-marking objects such as homes or autos), and institutionalized (formal status-markers such as education or occupation). It is the embodied form of cultural capital that advertisers most often use to promote hair products as it leverages the well-established hair grooming practices of black women.

Such methods rely on the benefits that such practices provide (prestige, acceptance, and so forth), and how their product can aid such endeavours (Bourdieu 1984). Key to this strategy is the use of celebrity endorsers who evoke a set of established culturally-valued attributes such

as success, wealth, and beauty. The symbolic congruence between the endorser image and the brand image resonates with the reader, inspiring beliefs that a parallel can be achieved through consumption of their product. This was the approach used by Ms Beauty and the celebrity endorsement of American fashion designer and reality television star, Angela Simmons:



It does not require much interpretation to understand the message this company was trying to convey: long flowing locks are the "source of beauty". Further, the nudity suggests that *all* you need to be beautiful is the right kind of hair, the hair that Angela Simmons has and you do not. However erasing this difference is easily rectified: it only requires the integration of three strands of hair. Following this simple step one can achieve a celebrity look, and the potential status associated with it. Apart from highlighting the difference between celebrity and the individual, this advert is reflective of the strategy used by the hair trade to encourage performances by women at large. The idea that beauty has its foundation in hair positions grooming practices as critical acts necessary to meet socially acceptable standards of appearance. This strategy is particular effective with black women as their beauty has been challenged for centuries.

Consuming the Other

Consuming the Other is an approach where advertisers once again emphasize the viewer's difference from blackness, while simultaneously making products claims that are heavily reliant on blackness. However this strategy marks variance by idealizing and essentializing blackness to a degree that other strategies do not. As Spivak (1999) notes, essentializing involves defining a subject in terms of a relatively fixed set of traits that claim to mark authenticity in the category, inevitably privileging some traits while marginalizing others. *Consuming the Other* makes systematic attempts to leverage the cultural value of blackness by depicting it as an exotic "other", transferring that value to the brand and delivering it to the mass market. It is a promise that viewers can symbolically appropriate desirable cultural traits through product consumption. Along these lines, this approach positions blackness as aspirational rather than dissociative, as is the case with Senationnel Style's "African Collection":



Here we see a range of hair depicted as being the "essence of African beauty", and it is clear to see that such 'Africaness' is embedded within the well-defined shape of the Afro. Senationnel's claim on black cultural identity lies in the counter-narratives of the natural/unnatural debate that was explicated in the first chapter of this work. To be beautiful and African requires that the appearance of natural styles be maintained and celebrated. However this advert is endorsing a specific representation of natural hair, one where African women cannot achieve by simply growing out their own hair. As the text suggests, a truly African style involves having an afro that is "tangle free", "easy brushing", and "easy separating". The conflict here is that natural hair – especially in larger styles – is inherently

difficult to manage in that way as it tangles easily and is testing to brush. However, Senationnel's product has these characteristics because it uses foreign hair that is textured and styled in a particular way. Thus the only way to achieve an 'authentically' African image is through the purchase of their product.

Despite approaching blackness in different ways, these three marketing strategies all serve to dominate and suppress the heterogeneity of blackness and the communities it represents. They do so through texts and images that act as a homogenizing discourse that constructs hair – both black and white – as coherent categories. White hair is collectively seen as a grade that is considered to be universally valued, whereas black hair is categorized by its deficiency of whiteness. Like the cosmetic narrative outlined in chapter two, such a discourse empowers adverts and advertisers to become a disciplinary force on the black body. Indeed, it may be argued that adverts have a greater disciplinary potential as they use the blackness of the communities themselves as mechanisms to encourage certain behaviours. This said, people still manage to make their own meanings and to construct their own behaviours within, and sometimes against, that which the industry provides them (Fiske 1987).

Despite adverts offering a crafted set of images designed to encourage consumption, how consumers interpret and take meaning from such images are contingent on multiple frames of reference. Despite media's efforts, blackness is not a singular category, and as such, a person may accept or reject the content and the product presented. Such interpretive frames of reference are essential in understanding what consumers "do" with advertisements. To understand such frames I turn once again to my interlocutors from the salon, who interpreted the selected images I showed them. Before I transcribe their responses however, it is important to understand that consumers' relationships to non-advertising forms of mass media are an essential aspect of the perceived meanings they derive from adverts. This is because mass media act as vehicles that sort reality into meaningful social categories that provide a frame of reference from which consumers interpret their daily lives (Nadège Compaoré 2011). Thus, before I can recount *how* my interlocutors felt about those images, I must first explain the reasons *why* they responded the way they did.

Broadcasting Blackness: marketing and mass media

Adverts appropriate desirable mass media images, styles, and cultural icons to its promotional purposes. They do so because the media – television, cinema, popular press, and etcetera – constructs a structure around when people assess and organize their everyday lives (Hirschman and Thompson 1997). Through the routine exposure of idealized images, plot lines, and character portrayals, the media immerses consumers in an ideological system that provides – an often unrealistic – frame of reference for how things should be consumed (Fiske 1989, Bordo 1990). As such the media may engender a sense of displeasure in consumers with their current personal appearance, lifestyle, and possessions. Adverts then fill the emotional void by generating their own set of idealized images that, when read in context of the broader media universe, implicitly promise that the promoted product can move the consumer toward the desired ideal state (Fiske 1989, Hirschman and Thompson 1997, Crockett 2008).

The relationship between advertising and media is effective is due to the consistency in which this ideological system is reproduced. In an effort to ensure market success, producers of mass media vehicles often incorporate character types, plot lines, and social images that have proven successful in previous ventures (McCracken 1989). Hence, the media landscape presents a *recombinant culture* in which new media vehicles reproduce aspects of the ideological system that were previously embraced by consumers (McCracken 1989, Hirschman and Thompson 1997). The phenomenon of recombinant culture is manifested explicitly in advertising, which borrows freely from other mass media forms when formulating its particular message and affective tone. An example of this is the consistent use of celebrity endorsers who evoke a set of media-established meanings, as was seen with the earlier image of Angela Simmons.

Cultural code

The reason why consumers so readily embrace a recombinant culture is that the themes they reproduce are consistent with their cultural code. The cultural code is a shared understanding of how consumers read the symbolic meanings and expectations embedded in mass media images, and is what informs their strategies of interpretation (Hall 1980). From early childhood, individuals are socialized into a deep knowledge of what meanings specific products embody. This process is instigated by parental figures and formative social networks. However, since

media vehicles and advertisers are situated within the cultural code, their producers can – and often do – manipulate it to entice consumers to form certain types of interpretations and coerce specific consumptive practices. Once again celebrities serve as a good example as they represent a historical construction of the "star" who embodies specific cultural meanings i.e. they appear to have ideal looks, meet standards of success, or defy the aging process (McCracken 1989). What this analysis suggests then, is that the interpretation of advertorial and media images is not subjective. It is read against a cultural code that is used, and informed by, media vehicles to entice consumers to engage in pre-set and ongoing cycle of consumption. What does this mean for my interlocutors and their grooming "decisions"?

Although many of women articulated a personal desire for straight hair, it is important to acknowledge the larger cultural script at play which dictated their practices as a norm. Hair alteration amongst Black women is – in general – an expectation, and it is difficult to find a Black woman living in South Africa who has never altered her hair before (I have yet to meet one). It is as Banks (2000) claims: hair alteration has become such an integral part of the black female identity that it is done automatically, without much thought put into it. As a Black woman, to alter one's hair is to follow the group standard. Dominant standards of beauty are so thoroughly internalized that most feel like the option to leave their hair natural does not even exist (Banks, 2000). Messages from the media, the normalcy of the practice, and the hair valuations of others (mothers in particular) helped reinforce the concept that hair alteration was the only acceptable hair practice. Instead of self-hate, hair alteration come to embody a mode of adherence to a strict and powerful cultural norm.

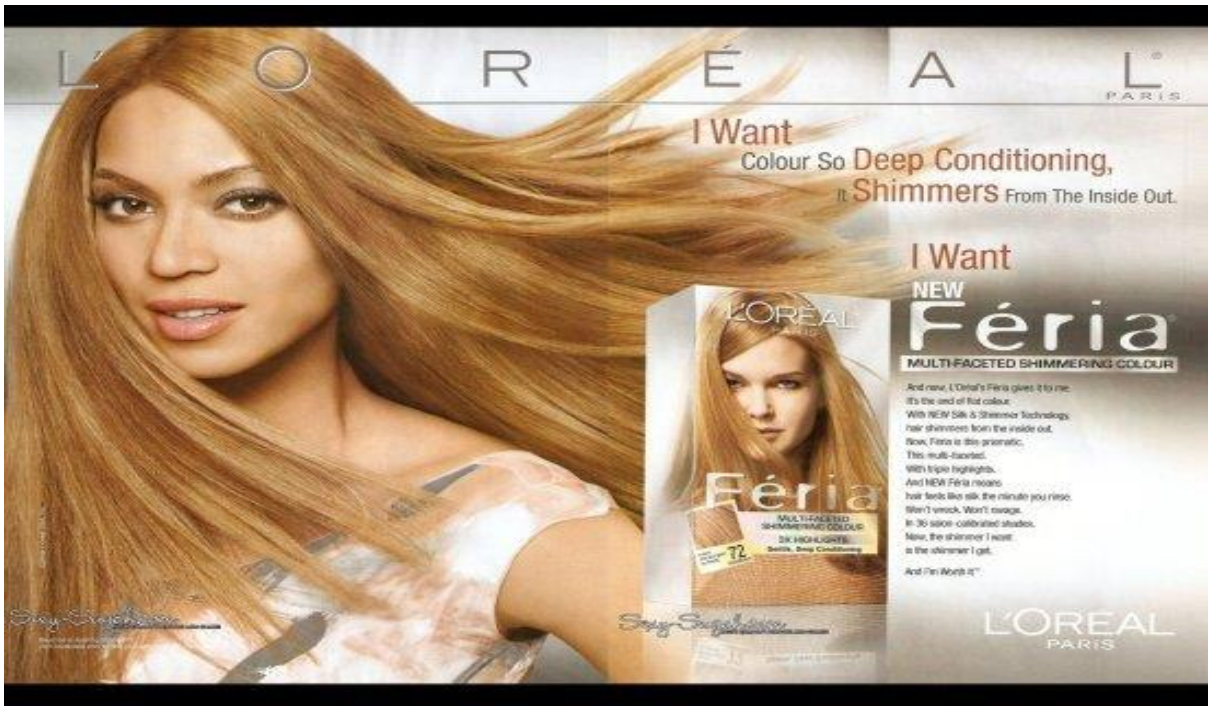
Since the readings of media and advertisements are not subjective, the interpretations of consumers are not idiosyncratic, but rather follow a discernible cultural logic – albeit in a way that is often tailored to their personal interests. To follow this logic in the interpretations of my interlocutors, I assessed their responses against three consumer-interpretive strategies as formulated by Hirschman and Thompson (1997). As will be shown, those women's responses constituted a complex array of personal meanings, self-perceptions, and cultural beliefs that allowed mass media images to become relevant to their everyday lives.

Reading Blackness: consumer interpretation and strategies

Motivational Interpretations: Inspiring and Aspiring

The first mode of consumer-media relationship that Hirschman and Thompson (1997) identify are motivational interpretations. In such a strategy, people interpret images that represent an ideal self that they can aspire too. Images of prominent celebrities are typically used to represent the ideals that the consumer chooses to work toward. The fact that such an ideal is usually unattainable is not experienced as a source of frustration, instead it is seen as the source of attraction. That is, the ideal is read as a goal toward which one can continuously strive along some personally important dimension.

Consumers who use an *aspiring and inspiring* strategy interpret media images as worthwhile goals and motivating examples. The relationship is one of emulation, in which the images provide motivation for the investment of personal time, effort, and self-sacrifice to attain a certain body type or lifestyle. The existence of celebrity icons who at least appear to have certain looks, meet standards of success, or defy the aging process, affirms that such goals are humanly attainable and that the consumer's efforts will ultimately provide personal reward. This strategy was apparent when I showed a picture of pop icon Beyoncé to Zandile.



“Bey is my girl!” she exclaimed when I placed the photo in front of her. “I love her style and that she’s so fierce, you know? Like, how many black women do you know that’s done what she’s done?” After informing her that I did not know many, I asked what she like about her specifically. “Oh you probably wanna [sic] know about hair stuff, right? She’s one of the celebs that *really* knows how to pull off a weave.” Following this thread, I questioned if she has tried to emulate her favourite star. “Of course, who wouldn’t? My last weave looked just like hers, not this picture, but when she had ombrè hair.” After finding out what ombrè meant – it is the gradual blending of one colour hue to another – I asked if Zandile received many compliments for that style. “Oh yeah, the boys loved that one” she answered plainly.

Critical Interpretations: Deconstructing and Rejecting

Hirschman and Thompson’s (1997) second interpretive strategy is in direct opposition to the aforementioned, and involves a critical reading of promotional images and texts. In this strategy, termed *Deconstructing and Rejecting*, the consumers' relationship with the mass media is expressed through overt criticism of the artificial and unrealistic quality of the image depicted. For example when I showed the image of Beyoncé to Mary, she immediately called out the colour of her hair and how it so closely Beyoncé’s image mirrored that of the white women on the box. “[The women] all look the same on products, straight hair and light skin. Look at her [Beyoncé], she looks just like that white girl, she tries too hard”. Mary was not the only one who saw a manipulative agent lurking beneath the surface of the media images, trying to force consumers to conform to arbitrary aesthetic standards. Speaking to Omphile as she was getting her braids fitted, I discovered her dislike for most media imagery when I displayed a poster for haircare company, Black Like me:



"I hate Black Like me, my mother used to use it on me as a child, it's so greasy." Dislike of the product aside, I asked her what she thought about the text. "The text? What does 'real women don't fake it mean'? I hate how adverts always try to play you, always trying to get you to buy their stuff". Did that mean that she does not get influenced by images? "No I still buy stuff, I don't have to like it though". That last statement was a telling one. The rejection of certain images does not necessarily mean that they are not still consumed. Indeed, images are usually not interpreted in a polarized fashion where it is *either* accepted *or* dismissed, it is often a combination of the two. Such a combination is the basis for the last interpretive strategy.

Personalizing Interpretations: Identifying and Individualizing

Identifying and individualizing describes distinct ways by which consumers negotiate their self-perceptions and personal goals in relation to the idealized images presented in the mass media (Hirschman and Thompson 1997). Like the previous strategies, *identifying* deals with the relationship between the idealized media image and the consumer's identification with, and desire of, its value or meaning. *Individualizing* however, represents the consumers' efforts to manage a fundamental paradox of contemporary society, namely how they construct a unique

self-image or sense of individuality while still conforming to the cultural code presented in the mass media and embodied in tangible products. This strategy exposes the empathetic and personalized relationship between the consumer and the media image. In this case, media vehicles are interpreted in relation to consumers' sense of personal history, their sense of how others in their social network perceived them, and specific beliefs about their own range of identity possibilities (Gilchrest and Thompson 2012).

Here, people decontextualize images they observe in a variety of media contexts and recontextualize them in ways suitable for their own lives. In forming these self-referential relationships, consumers often adopt an analytic orientation toward media ideals. Rather than "buying" the image *in toto*, they focus on specific aspects that seem plausible within their own life situations, self-conceptions, and the social constraints posed by their everyday lives. Though consumers' identifying activities are often directed at altering their current self-perception or image, the changes are seldom intended as radical breaks from their personal history and established social networks. Rather, consumers' efforts to incorporate media images are typically subtle transformations that form a coherent pattern within the context of their current life situations. This was evident in Naledi's analysis of the below advert:



While the text is intended to denote how the product's effects are comparable with professional-grade haircare products, I contend that it is also appropriate for the way in which hair is perceived in the workplace. In other words, the professional way is richer, fuller, and

straighter hair. As has been made clear throughout this work, within the corporate aesthetic, blackness acts as an obstacle to mobility (Rosette and Dumas 2007, Crockett 2008).

I choose to recount Naledi's responses to this image as I felt her to be the most career-driven amongst my interlocutors. When presented with this image she remarked: "She's pretty. I like that style though, I was thinking of getting a bob next time [I come to the hairdresser], my friend says it's much easier to maintain. I haven't had short hair in a while." Moreover, Naledi seemed to concur with my thoughts on the image's text once I asked her whether she would consider this look for the workplace. "I would probably get a few stares and someone people asking to touch it, but I can see myself getting compliments at work with that look." Naledi's interpretive strategy identified with the image's meaning that straight and fuller hair was superior, while simultaneously drawing an individualised opinion that seemed plausible within her life situation. The possibility of short – but still straight – hair would not constitute a radical break from her current state of affairs which were constrained by her workplace.

As seen above these interpretive strategies reveal the thought processes behind women's appraisal of hair adverts, and the subsequent consumption of their products. Further it demonstrated how media vehicles served as powerful sources of knowledge, as well as acted as agents that influenced women's styling and hair care mechanisms. Through the use of celebrity endorsers, adverts may provide an ideal image that women choose to aspire towards. Yet women may see media imagery as a manipulative force that is unrealistic and artificial, however their deconstruction of imagery does not necessarily result in them rejecting the product. Lastly women may choose to identify with and personalize ad content, choosing to appropriate the ad's content and product for their own current life situations, albeit in a subtle manner. Despite the array of seemly personal choices, the way in which women interpret and act on media images are done so in relation to a broader set of cultural meanings and codes. Because such images tap into and make use of such codes, the autonomy of the reader is moderated. Despite this, the exposure of these interpretive strategies gives some insight into the reasons why women consume hair the way they do. Some choose to purchase hair for the cosmetic/aesthetic qualities they provide (inspiring and aspiring), while others choose to subtly appropriate hair for their own benefits i.e. social capital (identifying and individualizing).

Homogenizing Blackness

Like the production stage that preceded it and the consumption stage that followed, the distribution of hair was dependent upon a process of "othering". Marketing strategies dominated and suppressed the heterogeneity of blackness and the communities it supposedly represented. They did so through images and text that acted as a homogenizing discourse that constructed blackness as a coherent category. This allowed for blackness to be easily incorporated into a message that could be used to make claims on the reader that marked them as fundamentally similar or different to what was depicted. Yet whether it was similarity or difference promoted, the message remained the same: you could align yourself – or align yourself further – with a specific representation through the purchase a particular product. Further, the use of a recombinant culture as a marketing strategy exacerbated the process of homogenization, as it problematically apprehended black women as a singular category that could be captured in – a racially governed – space and time. As was evident from the responses given by my interlocutors, such strategies remained effective. Despite the different ways in which women interpreted advertorial images, their continued purchase of Indian hair revealed that they were also consuming the content of advertisements. In other words, not only were they buying the product, but were also buying *into* the message behind it.

Conclusion: The Significance of Indian Hair

As set forth in the introduction, this work sought to understand the developments in South African haircare trends, and how they pertained to the state of black hair in the country. Was the decrease in damaging haircare products, and the increase in imported hair reflective of a change in attitude among black middle-class women? Or were those trends suggestive of new strategies to manage the oppressive structures that held their natural hair as inferior? On the surface, the answer was both. From my observations at the Johannesburg Hair Meet up as well as multiple discussions, it was evident that women were moving away from the harmful effects of chemically relaxing their hair to achieve a specific appearance. Instead many chose to wear their hair either in its natural state, or made use of less damaging hair integrations. However as has been shown, the subject of black hair cannot be reduced to such simplistic interpretation.

To recognize the relevance of those patterns and how they were indicative of black hair's situation in the country, this work focused on the privileging and purchase of Indian hair. Following the methodological proposal of Appadurai, this research investigated the politics of value behind the movement of hair and its diversions to, and from, its commodity state. In doing so, the commodity status of hair was not approached as an ontological property of the object, but as a transient state in its social life. Stressing the situational aspect of hair through its total trajectory from production, to exchange, to consumption, provided a richer framework to understand how hair's exchange was entangled in a host of meanings that were framed by socio-political concerns – both locally and globally. What was clear was that the politics of value that animated hair's commodification involved a dynamic and tensional balance that resulted from the efforts of agents and culture in general to moderate the clash between two forces: homogenization promoted by economic forces, the agent of the global hair trade, and singularization promoted by the individual. The process of homogenization was manifest at every stage of the commodity chain, and operated to isolate both Indian and black hair, as well as apprehend black women into a singular category

Within the production stage, Indian hair was made more alluring to the consumer through merchant's use of a specific language that positioned such hair as unrivalled in quality and appearance. By designating hair as "Remy Virgin *Temple*", it constructed this commodity as a coherent category that was associated with place and not person. Consequently the Indian individual was relegated to the position of "exotic other", valued only for their "mystic"

practices and luscious locks. This conceptual separation between producer and product resulted in a tangible distance in consumer knowledge. South African women's preference for Indian hair was grounded in the *idea* that its qualities were attributable to its place of origin only. However what was most telling about the homogenization of Indian hair was that its imagined qualities were also indicative of the deficiencies black women perceived to be intrinsic to their own hair. The professed virginity and authenticity that Indian hair "embodied" – what made it so desirable – necessarily exposed the seeming impurity and illegitimacy of black hair. Yet the subordination of black hair also extended towards black women as well. This was especially clear during the distribution phase of hair's circulation.

To further encourage consumption, the distribution of hair relied on marketing strategies that dominated and suppressed the heterogeneity of blackness, and the women it represented. This was achieved through advertorial images and texts that acted as a homogenizing discourse, constructing blackness as a cohesive set of contrived assumptions. Because these assumptions were fixed within dominant racial ideologies, they not only painted blackness in an unfavourable light, but black women as well. What is significant here was the way in which women interpreted and reacted to such a discourse. Despite the multiple ways in which women construed the various images in adverts, their continued purchase of hair revealed that they were inevitably consuming the message behind it. By buying into the message that blackness was universal, women were inadvertently reinforcing the notion that all black hair was not only the same, but of a lower grade. Further, since women's readings of media and adverts followed a discernible cultural logic, hair's distribution phase exposed just how entrenched racial ideologies were within a South African context.

Apart from the racial ideologies that buttressed the circulation of hair, the consumption phase of this commodity also revealed how its exchangeability was drawn along gendered lines. During this phase it was evident that women were explicitly targeted due to them being disproportionately valued for how they look. In order to gain social acceptability, women were under constant pressure to correct their bodies in order to conform to the ideals of feminine appearance. This was achievable through the cosmetic alteration which offered them an "acceptable" means of aligning their appearance closer to an aesthetic ideal through superficial and non-threatening measures i.e. the simple purchase of Indian hair. However this cosmetic

promise engendered the homogenization and objectification of women. Not only were they reduced to a set of abstract aesthetic characteristics, but their hair was isolated – or fragmented – as emblematic of those characteristics, encompassing set of ideals *about* women that overshadowed the women themselves. More problematically however, was how the cosmetic rhetoric made women culpable in their own objectification. By compelling women to view themselves from the outside as objects to be gazed at and decorated, it resulted in them being the objectifier as well as the objectified.

Indeed women's participation in their own homogenization was evident in the way they discussed their own hair and grooming practices. Through the use of an essentializing discourse, women maintained rigid binaries that reduced their hair – and themselves – into homogeneous entities that were either authentic or not, oppressed or not. Further conversations remained grounded within the racialized categories that they attempted to challenge i.e. natural versus unnatural. Since the same arbitrarily constructed categories that were formulated to justify hair's oppression were still in play, any liberatory counter-narrative intended to question the validity of such ideologies were moderated. Moreover an essentializing discourse concealed the homogenizing practices that were pervasive throughout the exchange of hair, and drew attention away from the politics that motivated its circulation. Overall, it distracted from the economy of otherness, where the production, distribution, and consumption of Indian hair served to reinforce racial and gendered hierarchies. Despite the efforts by agents of the global hair market to homogenize women and their hair into easily appropriable categories, women used their "membership" to this network to secure benefits for their own gain. They did so through appropriating – or singularizing – Indian hair into forms of social and symbolic capital. Utilizing the contrived features that such hair possessed, women elevated their social status and/or increased their prospect of upward mobility.

The decrease in harmful haircare products and the increase in imported hair exposed the tensions that black South African women had to contend with in regards to their hair. However, the source of such tensions lay not only with the country's racialized past, but were also generated through contemporary consumer capitalism. In focusing on the international circulation of hair, this paper disseminated hair's multiple narratives and in doing so, exposed the critical politics (temporal, geographical, and social) that informed them. By positioning hair

as a commodity within networks that split and shed across various trade nodes from the sacred to the salon, it was shown how the various meanings were ascribed to hair. Such meanings were not only racially charged, but were also tangled within more complex issues such as class, gender, and identity. Ultimately women's choices were a product of these representations. Purchasing Indian hair revealed how black women continued to endure an environment that pressured them to conform to a particular aesthetic. Such an environment was established by the politics of the past, but advanced by the politics of the present. While no longer prepared to subject themselves to the harmful effects of chemical straighteners, women's use of foreign hair integrations continued to serve as a strategy that helped them navigate repressive structures. Despite integrating South African women in an economy of otherness, Indian hair also provided them with the capital to participate within it.

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