

The Examination of Modern Day Influences of  
Beauty and  
Body Image Standards and Expectations  
among

A THESIS  
Submitted to the faculty  
In partial fulfillment for the requirements  
For the degree, of  
MASTER OF FINE ARTS  
In Studio Art  
At Moore College of Art and Design  
Philadelphia, PA  
August 2017

## **Table of Contents**

<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Damaging Effects.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Pride and Politics.....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Influence through Pop-Culture.....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Confidence or lack of?.....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Bibliography.....</b>	<b>30</b>

## **Abstract**

Ideals of beauty for most African American women are primarily formed by pressure from the negative attitudes of family and friends, as well as media representations that insist on Europeanized beauty standards such as light eyes, long-straight hair, and an hourglass body figure. Those standards and influences have and continue to have a negative impact on African American women's self-esteem, self-acceptance and confidence. In my thesis work, I have taken my personal experience and knowledge of beauty and body image expectations and questioned it in relation to historical context and current events. To gain a better understanding of what beauty is defined as for individual African American women as well as myself; my thesis work explores and compares past and present beauty standards and ritualistic routines and procedures widely used by African American females. Specifically, it addresses the following themes: chemical hair alterations, hair politics and symbolism, body image, influence of relatives, and the influence of pop culture and media representations. To address these themes, I compare my personal experiences and embodied knowledge as an African American woman with the historical context of Black hair and beauty in America, as well as in other countries. To support my thesis, I reference various artists as well as global current events that relate directly or correspond with my thesis and research. My work pushes back on the negative connotations that have come along with an experience or comment that was made toward me, that many African American women face daily.

Throughout my research, I learned that women have various reasons and beliefs as to why they wear their hair a certain way, or idealize certain body images. Overall, my research concluded that many women struggle with a lack of self-esteem, self-acceptance, and overall confidence about their natural appearance and depend on various beauty alterations to assure themselves of their own worth. From family members to media representations and social media it is hard to escape the consistent pressure to alter one's natural appearance. Because the negative connotations, attitudes and consistent representations in media are not going away, it is important to make sure that our youth understand and accept their own natural appearance before they are taught to alter it. Art is one of the many important factors that helps start conversations that challenge social norms. In my current installation, I hope to expose my audience to the ugly truths of modern day beauty standards and rituals such as surgical cosmetic procedures. More conversations need to be held among African American women of all ages, so that we do not continue the trend of passing down negative connotations and attitudes about our own image, as well as confront the miseducation between generations of what beauty and body image is to them versus society standards.

## Introduction

African American women have been ridiculed for their appearance for centuries; consistently being influenced to alter their hair, skin and body image to meet society standards. The main influences in an African American woman's life are family, friends and media representation that consistently suggest Europeanized beauty standards such as light eyes, long-straight hair and an hourglass body figure. Today those various standards and influences continue to have a negative impact on African American women's ideas and definitions of beauty; and art is one of many important factors that challenges such social norms and provokes conversations that promote acceptance of one's natural beauty.

Many artists such as Lorna Simpson and Sonya Clark, aim to shine light on the importance of the African American women's appearance in relation to self-acceptance and self-esteem. Similarly, I have explored the beauty ideals and standards among African American women. I have taken my personal experience and knowledge of beauty and body image and have questioned it in relation to historical context and current events; all in hope of having a better understanding of what beauty means to me as an individual as well as other African American women. My work as an artist is based off experiences that I have had and ideas / concepts that I have encountered that deal with comments made from family and friends about my hair and/or body. I take those experiences and ideas and I dissect them and reinterpret them. My work is a visual response or statement to certain beauty standards and ideas that are influenced by family and/or pop-culture and social media representations. With my current work, I hope to expose my audience to the ugly truth of the various modern day beauty standards and rituals such as various cosmetic procedures. My overall goal is to help women realize how much their ideas of beauty have been influenced. I want people to realize that the same past negative attitudes and connotations about black hair and body image still exist and that there is still a lack of communication and education among African American women in terms of self-definition, and self-acceptance. These various negative attitudes and connotations not only influence and impact generations of African American women, but women of color from all over the world. Over the past year, I have embarked on my own journey of self-acceptance and self-esteem in terms of my hair and body. After going through multiple style changes, I decided to "lock" my own hair. This commitment led me to learn more about African American hair and body image in my current work. There is a continued conversation among African American women in terms of the miseducation and re-education of black hair and beauty. Many women have been fixated on altering their hair and appearance for years, yet many lack the knowledge and ability to teach their youth how to care for

and maintain their own natural kinky hair as well as how to take pride in their overall appearance. I explore these continued conversations as they relate to my own work as well as global current events. I also address how art has and continues to serve as an important factor in not only addressing the topic but opening viewer's eyes to the reality behind African American women's idea and definition of beauty and body image.



### **Damaging Effects**

Growing up my father always made sure I went to the hairdresser every two weeks and got a chemical perm treatment once a month. My father strongly believed that for my hair to be appealing and healthy, I needed to go to the hairdressers routinely. I personally have never had anyone teach me how to care for and maintain my own natural hair. All I have known is that I need to get my hair “done”, and I needed to go to someone professionally and get my hair chemically treated, straightened and styled. I still remember my first chemical treatment; it was the worst feeling ever. I was nervous because I was unsure what the process was, but once they greased up my scalp and told me I had to just sit for a few moments I was fine. Yet as the minutes passed my scalp began to feel like it was on fire but I was always told “just a few more minutes; a little longer so the chemical can do its job”. I was taught to neglect the pain all for the sake of beauty. Growing up around consistent rejection from both in and outside of the

household; being pressured to meet certain European beauty standards, leaves many African American women like myself struggling to develop their own ideas of beauty and self-acceptance.

Chemical hair alterations started back in the 1800's when African American women were desperate to find a product that could straighten out their hair[1]. Originally tools such as the "hot comb" [2] were being used to straighten out hair; however, the effect did not last long and over time caused the hair to break off. It did not take until the later mid 1800's for African American women to start using chemical products to straighten their hair.[3] By this time, Madam C.J. Walker had begun to promote her hair altering products to the black community; this was the first-time African Americans not only had a long-lasting, hair altering product, but one that was created and sold by an African American woman.[4] Despite the popularity of the hair altering products, the products contained very damaging chemicals such as lye, which if left on the scalp for a long period of time could cause permanent damaging effects to the hair and scalp.[5] Today such harmful chemicals continue to be used amongst the African American community. According to Harvette Grey in her 2002 essay, "The Media, Marilyn and Me", "hair has been a major issue for women of African descent. Hair grooming, hot combing, in particular, made many little black girls cry because Black hair is naturally curly, nappy, kinky and does not conform to the westernized norm of straight hair".(Grey 2002, pg 54)[6]. The very practice of getting a young's girls hair straightened is a sort of "rites of passage" to becoming young women. From a very young age, African American girls are told by family or friends that their hair is "nappy" [7] or "needs to be done". Most African American Parents believe that by straightening a young girl's hair, it will make the hair easier to maintain and style. Older generations thereby, have been unknowingly brainwashing their youth to believe that straight hair is good hair; imposing their beliefs based on the struggles they faced years ago, due to their appearance in their youth. Though many hair products today claim to be lye free, the products are still dangerous and cause long term damage to the hair and scalp. For example, most perm products for kids are said to be less harmful, yet if the product is left in too long or if it is not maintained every six to eight weeks it can still cause itchiness, burning, and permanent damage. With this, a child may view the hairdresser experience as a terrifying one. For example, artist Pepon Osorio and his 1994 mixed media installation, "No crying in the Barbershop." The installation is based on his first experience going to the barbershop when he was younger and the barber did not know what to do with his kinky hair. The installation was an exaggerated recreation of that day. It consisted of a barber's chair that was decorated with the Puerto Rican Flag and other objects that referred to his Hispanic background as well as various images of famous Puerto Rican men with different hair styles. Pepon stated, "'No Crying Allowed in the Barber Shop'...it's about recreating my memory. When I was five years old my father took me to

get my first haircut right around the neighborhood. And what was meant to be a celebration became a disastrous event. I was crying a lot, I was scared...What traumatized me wasn't so much the haircut itself but the way that this barber dealt with my kind of hair...That experience was a combination of race and a rite of passage into becoming a little man"[8]. This relates to the idea of the perm for African American females whose parents decided that they are at the appropriate age to start getting their hair treated for its kinkyess[9]. The perm has become a rite of passage into womanhood for many African American females and continues to be a monthly routine for most.

The general idea of the perm is to make nappy hair more manageable. Woman who maintain long straight hair are known to having "good hair" and those who choose to where their hair as is grows from their scalp, are said to have "bad hair". Basically, if your hair is not straight and long you have bad hair and are often advised by family and friends to take care of it or do something about it, as if it is a sin. The conversation of good hair vs bad hair has been an ongoing, controversial topic for centuries and has been a reoccurring theme in the work of various African American artists. Take for example, the work of Sonya Clark and her 2009 – present "Comb Series". The series employs a material cultural perspective of the politics behind the associated notions of "good hair" vs "bad hair". With the use of plastic combs, Clark creates various patterns set to evoke the legacy of hair culture among African Americans; showcasing how for centuries women have been influenced in various ways to tame or alter their hair.[10] In relation to the work of Sonya Clark, in Jennifer Richardson-Stovall's case study, "Image Slavery and Mass-Media Pollution," she interviews multiple groups of African American woman of different ages and asked them about the development of their ideas of beauty. Many of the women, whom were in their twenties described encounters they had with their family and/or friends about their hair. For example, one participant named Kelly described how her family always talked about beauty and made comments and remarks that rejected the idea that her natural hair was okay or appealing. Kelly described comments being made such as, "A relaxer would make your hair more manageable", or "you' need your hair did" [11]. These however, are just a few of many comments and remarks made amongst African American women both young and old; unknowingly brainwashing one another to believe that their natural hair is not good hair and needs to be treated.[12]

Another example would be the work of Lorna Simpson, whose work also comments on the idea of hair and beauty. In her 1994 portfolio entitled "Wigs", Simpson used a variety of wigs and small text on felt to depict the various hairstyles as specimens. The portfolio consisted of hairstyles such as the Afro, braids and twist, to blonde locks and extensions. This portfolio like most of her work, seeks to investigate

the history of African American hair and conventions of beauty.[13] It is artist like Lorna Simpson who helps open our eyes to how society views hair like specimens that consistently need to be treated and altered. However, it was not always this way, there was a period when African Americans took a pride in their hair; it just didn't last long.

### **Pride and Politics**

Like most women my age, my parents grew up during the late 1960's and 70's when how you wore your hair was more about whatever was popular at the time. Whether it is a permed head of hair or a tall afro, it was about being fashionable and keeping up with the latest trends. During that time many historical events took place, however one of the most memorable is The Black Power Movement. During the Black Power movement and throughout the 60's in general more and more African Americans began to allow their natural hair to grow out and be styled without alterations. African Americans began to follow in the footsteps of celebrities and civil rights activist such as Angela Davis, and take pride in their own natural hair and beauty.[14] The more that representations of natural styles of African American women became prominent in the media, the more African Americans took pride in their own natural appearance; thus, the Afro becoming a popular style where ones only concern may have been how neat and tall their afro was. This is not to say that African Americans did not still use chemicals on their hair. Many would use chemical hair treatment products to achieve the Afro look that would curl the hair a certain way rather than straighten it; all in hope to achieve the perfect Afro. Not all African Americans hair grows the same or holds the same texture. Therefore, many only seemed to achieve the perfect Afro style that their favorite celebrities such as Tamara Dobson were wearing. My father told me that he and my mother use to drive from Philadelphia to Delaware to maintain their Afros; getting it chemical perm to have a perfect curly afro. I personally thought it was just my parent's natural hair that they took pride in. I was surprised to find out that they went to a stylist to have their hair chemically treated to achieve the curly afro look.

Though the Afro started off as a part of a prideful movement, during that same time various other movements and organizations fighting for the civil rights of African Americans caused the symbolism of the Afro to shift. Organizations such as The Black Panthers emerged in the 1960's as a group of African Americans against police brutality.[15] The Black Panthers became known for their appearance; tall, big Afros and all black outfits, as well as the fact that all members carried a firearm or another type of weapon. The Black Panthers were seen as a threat to white Americans and because of that, the Afro became a political symbol of rejection against white Americans and their culture. Soon all African Americans wearing their hair in a natural state became seen as a threat.[16] Ayana Bryd and Lori Tharps, authors of Hair Story, quoted the founder of the first Black Hair show, Bernice Calvin when she stated, "The Afro was a big, wild,



striking thing. It frightened mainstream America because it was so much more radical than what they had been used to. It was the while thought that [blacks] were quite for so long and suddenly they got demanding". (Bryd, Tharps 2002, pg 60)[17] Throughout the late 1960's and 70's the Afro was both a symbol of pride and a political stance against white supremacy; but the style soon faded and became less of a threat and more of a fashion fad.

As the years pasted, African Americans were yet again being discriminated against for their hair and appearance. By the 1990's weaves, wigs, and a host of other styles began become popular amongst African American women looking to alter their hair or simply hide the kinkyyness of their hair. For example, "By the middle of the 1990's, more than two decades after Black Pride had appeared, Black people were overwhelmingly taking the liberty of wearing their hair however they wanted and basically hoping that their employers didn't complain" (Byrd and Tharps 2002, 131)[18]. The Afro had become a faded fashion trend and was more so recognized as a political symbol. Many African American women followed the popular styles of their favorite celebrities; wearing long weaves or braids extensions. Though many women preferred to continue to perm and alter their hair in attempt to achieve the European look, others were still practicing natural styles such as dreadlocks and braids. "Beauty ideals remained firmly entrenched in a Eurocentric image of long, swinging hair" (Bryd and Tharps 2002, 123)[19]. For example, R&B singer Lauren Hill was known for her natural look during the 90's, yet many African American females, were more heavily influenced by the straight long weaves being worn by celebrities such as Beyoncé, or even the styles they see their parents wearing. In fact, many African American females during this time were heavily influenced by what their parents allowed them to wear or not wear. Some accepted the idea of natural styles, while others felt that the only way a young girl's hair could be neat and appealing was to take her to the hairdresser to have her hair permed, straightened and styled.

If a girl or young women preferred to wear her hair natural or not the ultimate decision is not always hers to make. This brings us to the consistent re-education or lack thereof, of self-determination of what beauty is or means. African American parents will do what they wish with their child's hair, because they are paying for it. If the parent feels that straight hair is more manageable or presentable, then that is what the child will have done to her hair. For example, in Jennifer Richardson-Stovalls case study," Image Slavery and Mass-Media: Popular Media, Beauty," and the Lives of Black Women; she interviews a small group of African American women about conversations of beauty they may have had in their households growing up. One of the participants described the various comments her aunts would make about her hair and appearance such as, "you just look better that way" or "you look prettier in the winter when your skin

is lighter”[20]. I have experienced this because as I stated before, my father started taking me to the hair salon every two weeks all the way until high school. I was always taught to go to the salon or have someone braid my hair, I never had a real say in how I wanted my hair styled. Even at the hair salon they would suggest styles that they think would be best for my hair or looked better on me, my opinion did not matter, because I was not the one paying, nor did I know anything about hair care at all. Today this same miseducation of black hair care still exists, with women having to discover the history and maintenance of black hair on their own through research and practice.

Even today young African American females are still being told that their hair is nappy and un-kept; not only by parents but by their schools. For example, in October of 2016, Butler High School of Louisville Kentucky made headlines for a new controversial policy they made for students. The policy banned hairstyles that are often worn by African American students such as, cornrows, twist and locks; the school however did eventually amend the policy.[21] Similarly, a policy was passed at Pretoria Girls High School in South Africa. There students were told by teachers that their hairstyles were inappropriate and that they were not permitted on school grounds unless they straightened their hair. It is enough that African American parents push their negative attitudes and beliefs about black hair on young girls, but even worst that the youth must face the same negative push back from their schools and other outsiders.[22]

These various current events relate to a performance piece I did in 2016 that focused on media representations of African American women particularly focusing on cosmetic magazines. The performance consisted of me sitting in front of a mirror and flipping through various beauty magazines such as Teen Magazine and Cosmopolitan. As I flipped through the magazine I held a distressed expression on my face; disappointed there was nothing in the magazines that showed or referenced “the everyday black women” such as myself. I then referred to my tablet to search for styles and textures that looked like my hair. The performance finished by me styling my hair into a traditional African tribal style. The overall purpose being, that even today there is little to no representations of the everyday black women with any make-up or beauty alterations.

How can an African American girl decide for herself what she defines as beautiful, when she is surrounded by an older generation of family members who consistently disapprove of natural hair styles? This is when, we began to take a closer look at just how a young African American female may develop her ideas of beauty and it often starts by looking at the things they encounter daily such as, toys like Barbie, and various media representations of African American woman.

### **Influence through Pop-culture**

I can still recall moments when I was younger when a family member would comment on my weight. I was always a little chubbier compared to many of my cousins and as we got older and our bodies were all beginning to develop, I noticed I was filling out in a lot more places than they were. I remember a few times I would go to visit my cousins at my grandmother's house, and my cousin would come down the stairs and greet me and proceed to say things such as "have you put on some weight?". I never knew quite how to feel knowing there was nothing I could do about my body and the fact I was a little taller and thicker than most. However, what made it worst was the numerous times my own grandmother would comment on how she thought I was chubby and ate too much. I had begun to believe I was fat and that I wasn't as pretty or attractive as my cousins. I distinctly remember feeling ashamed of my body and always wishing that I was shorter, thinner and more like my cousins or the girls I saw in music videos all the time; I always wanted to be Beyoncé, or whoever was the main girl in a R&B music video.

Just as parents of young African American females have an influence on their child's idea of beauty and body image, so do the various toys and media representations they allow their child to encounter daily. For example, Barbie; the classic doll for girls. Barbie has been around for centuries and though the doll has evolved over the years, she has and continues to be a representation of European standards of beauty. With her light blue eyes, thin waist and long blonde hair the doll represents a certain unrealistic body image of what a woman should look like. The same standards that have been inflicted on women of color for years and have become a play toy for their daughters, not realizing how much of an impact it may have on their child's idea of beauty and body image. Bryd and Tarps claim, "Since the beauty standards in this country are set to a white aesthetic- from Miss America to the Barbie doll- black women are left with precious few places to turn to find an image of beauty that showcases un-straightened, tresses and natural hairstyles" (Bryd and Tharps 2002, pg 154)[23]. It was only until recently in 2016 when more Barbie began to appear in various skin tones, different body images and un-straightened hair[24]. However, this is not to say that this is the first-time Barbie's of color appeared on the market. The first Barbie of color appeared in the 1980's and although it had a dark skin tone it still had long straight hair and overall appealed to the same European standards as the Caucasian Barbie. [25] In Chinyere G. Okafors 2007 case study, "Barbie in Nigerian Agbogoho-Mmuo Mask" context; she compares the idea of Barbie to traditional ceremonial mask. Okafors states "The unwritten message in privileging Barbie-like femininity is that girls and women should change themselves and spend money to acquire the 'ideal' forms and traits. Some women can recognize the so-called ideal as false but it complicates the self-image problems of many women who respond accordingly by coloring their hair, dieting to slim down (not for health reasons), as well

as having cosmetic plastic surgery.” (Okafors 2007,pg47) This so called un-written message that Oakfors refers to not only appears in the context of Barbie but pop culture as well. From models to hip-hop and R&B singers, a small waist, large breast, big butt and long hair is idealized and can be seen in multiple promotional ads, music videos and on social media. African American girls who see these various representations may begin to believe that those traits are what being beautiful and successful mean. Okafor also makes a point when she states, “For example, the producers of African American Hip hop music videos tend to prefer light-complexioned women of color and those with long straight hair. Those attributes bring them closer to the Barbie image and therefore do not relate to the appearance of most black women in terms of body image and hair texture.” [26]

When I was younger I never had a Barbie doll that looked like me. The dolls I did have that looked like me had long straight hair, light eyes and light skin. Most of my dolls were either the traditional Caucasian Barbie or Disney princess Barbie; and of course, when I was younger there were not as many colored princesses. The outcome was that growing up I thought and believed that light skin and long hair meant that you were beautiful.

Comparatively, in my 2015 “Bottle Doll Series”, I explored the context of Barbie compared to traditional tribal dolls. Most traditional dolls such as the West African Ashanti doll; represent various spiritual beliefs of different groups of people. For my bottle doll series; I created my own dolls from recycled bottles and other found materials. The goal was to evoke the history of the doll and to ask my audience; how such a spiritual object became a materialistic and over sexualized toy.

Similarly, in my current body of work I seek to continue and start conversations about why it is we as African American women influence each other to uphold certain looks. Today, more and more women of color can be seen in the media and pop culture wearing all types of hair extensions, getting butt implants, and even tattooed eyebrows. European standards have been inflicted on women of color for centuries and though more women attempt to teach their children that their hair and skin is beautiful, they don't realize the tone they set when they, themselves wear wigs and dye their hair and allow the child to watch various hip hop music videos that may be too explicit for them to be exposed to. Many continue to fail to realize just how many our children are watching us. I for one have been able to watch and listen to all types of music that I now realize was too provocative for my age. I could watch all types of music videos and was exposed to all sorts of media representations; all primarily images and representations of half-naked women with light skin, eyes and long straight hair. Within my installation, I hope to expose my audience to the ugly truths of the various modern day beauty

standards and rituals. I hope to help them realize how much their idea of beauty and body has been negatively influenced.

These challenges were historical during the 19th century women were shamed for their bodies. African American women were put on display for their bodies to be viewed and studied by Europeans[27]. The most famous being Sarah Baartman, who's large breast and behind baffled scientist; she was like nothing they ever seen before. Her body did not resemble a white women's body, and her skin tone was much darker than any typical African they had seen before. She was forced to dance naked for entertainment and sex; not even twenty-five years of age at the time she had become the face of body image expectations for African American women[28]. Though Sarah Baartman was mocked, ridiculed and used for her body for years, today women have taken that negative connotation and use it as a means of being attractive and sexy to the opposite sex. Women today more than ever promote the idea of having large breast and behind; influencing youth of all colors that it is their body that will allow them to succeed in life and attract the opposite sex.

A great example of this would be modern day, hip-hop icon Nicki Minaj. When Minaj first came onto the music scene she quickly became known for her Barbie persona. With bright colored wigs, clothing, make up and even talking and performing in a high-pitched voice, Nicki Minaj identified herself and her fans as perfect Barbie's. As stated Before, Barbie has been known as being an unrealistic representation of European beauty standards. The Barbie persona of Nicki Minaj further exaggerates the same negative connotations the doll has represented for years. Per, California Polytechnic State University, senior Camillia Sarmadi in her 2012 feminist critique of Minaj's persona; "Nicki Minaj contradicts her message of female empowerment by using the sexualized Barbie persona and encouraging her female audience to use their bodies to gain attention and power"[29]. In Sarmadi's critique she compares the context and negative connotations associated with Barbie to Nicki Minaj's attempt to use the persona to empower her female audience. Therefore, cosmetic surgery has become somewhat of a pop culture fad, which continues to influence women of color of all ages.

### **Confidence or lack of?**

With influences and negative connotations from family and pop-culture, African American women continue to struggle with developing their own ideas of beauty. It was not until a year ago that I decided to explore my own ideas of beauty and rebel against the many standards I was taught growing up, or was impacted by; mainly those of family and friends.



In October of 2016, I decided to lock my hair. After wearing synthetic[30] braid extensions on and off for years I decided to commit to learning more about how to care for my own natural hair. However, this decision did not take over easy with my father. My father has always believed and taught me that a young lady should get her hair done routinely at the hair salon and that presentable styles required a permed head of hair. So, when I locked my hair he shunned me for it immediately claiming that I messed up my hair and that he can't believe he wasted so much time and money to have my hair be beautiful all for me to mess it up. I remember regretting my decision and feeling the most insecure and vulnerable I have ever felt. The fact that after all these years I felt that I still needed my father approval on how I should maintain and style my hair goes to show how much an impact a family member's opinion has on a girl or young woman's idea of beauty and her understanding of self-acceptance. Those same negative attitudes and connotations still linger in most households, though today it has become more subliminal than blunt.

We are in an era now where how a woman maintains and styles her hair is more of an expression of herself. It is not so much how you wear it but the confidence you wear with it. Refer to Harvette Grey in her essay "Images of Beauty: The Media, Marilyn and Me", where she argues, "Standards of beauty are indications of what an individual

or group of individuals consider pleasing” (Grey 2002, pg 52).[31] Today one can walk down the street and see various hairstyles of all colors and textures on men and women. Today more women, primarily women of color are exploring the nature of their own hair; how to maintain and style it. Although many still resort to wearing wigs and weaves, arguing that hair is more about expression of self and less of what society thinks; that it’s not about what you wear but how you wear it.

Compared to women’s reasoning for how they wear their hair, back in 1865 when slavery was abolished things were completely. Mainly free slaves struggled to make a decent living for themselves; consistently being rejected from jobs due to the texture and appearance of their hair and the tone of their skin.[32] Today many African American women still use and resort to such alterations, but not for the same reasons. Today, products such as skin lighteners, wigs and weaves of any style you could imagine, including natural hair styles are accessible everywhere; the same type of products that our ancestors were forced to resort to, are now being promoted and idealized as beauty enhancers. Nowadays, there are products and procedures for everything from permanent make up to at-home butt implants. There are even wearable products for those who cannot afford the surgical procedures; things such as tape that you can put on the back of your neck to help raise saggy skin. However, it’s just as Bertram D Ashe quoted in his 2001 essay “Hair Drama on the Cover of Vibe Magazine”, “But let’s face reality: black folk can’t alter but so much about themselves. Forget about lighting creams or sleeping with clothes-pins on noses: for most of us, skin is black; noses are flat. Contemporary black women occasionally have cosmetic surgery or buy colored contact lenses, but hair style choice, including permanents, hair weaves extensions, and Jheri curls, remains the most popular way to play the beauty game” (Ashe 2001, pg67).[33]

Although today many will argue that it is not about how you wear your hair but the confidence you wear with it, there are some who will argue that it is a self-esteem issue. Christopher A.D. Charles examines this idea in his 2003 journal “Skin Bleaching, Self-Hate, and Black Identity in Jamaica”, “Self-hate or low self-esteem is often posited as the explanation for the bleaching phenomenon. Slavery was a traumatizing experience for the enslaved Africans. They were brainwashed to hate themselves by the elevation of British values over African ones. The descendants of enslaved Africans through socialization have internalized the negative attitudes about themselves” (Charles 2003, pg 712)[34]. During slavery, African Americans were consistently taught to reject their natural appearance and that the only acceptable appearance was light skin and eyes, with long straight hair; the idea which was beaten into slaves and became a way of life. Due to that, those negative attitudes and standards have been passed down through generations of African American families. One generation after

the next, teaching their youth to reject their natural appearance and surrounding them in consistent images in representations from pop culture that influence them that beauty is anything but their natural appearance. However, this is not something that only takes place among African Americans, but also in countries all over the world.

An example of this would be, the December of 2016 a short documentary was created focusing on the rise of skin bleaching in Jamaica. Many men women admitted they think dark skin is ugly and less appealing. Proving, that even after all these years there are still people of color, both men and women who believe and are taught that dark skin is unappealing. Throughout the documentary, the interviewer asks the various men and women questions such as: Why do you bleach your skin? What do you find attractive? And how does it make you feel? Many of the participants admitted that skin bleaching makes them feel clean, young, pretty and wealthy. A majority of these negative attitudes that the men and women presented about dark skin derived from representations seen in the media and pop culture; however, a majority of the participants admitted they bleach to become more appealing to the opposite sex.[35]

Along with the negative attitudes about kinky hair and skin tone that were passed down through generations of African American females, so was the knowledge and ability to maintain and style natural kinky hair without processed products. Most African American women do not even know how to take care of their own natural hair. During enslavement, Africans were stripped of the necessary tools and products they used to care for, maintain and style their hair.[36] Due to this, their hair grew woolly, knotted and un-manageable. Because of this many slaves resorted to covering their hair in cloth to protect it as best as they can.[37] Overtime generations of Africans Americans never even had the knowledge to care and maintain their hair, because their elders never learned. Therefore, the only thing they knew to pass along to their youth was how to alter the hair in a way that makes it more presentable and manageable.[38]

I did not learn anything about natural hair until a year or two ago; after college when I truly became the one responsible for getting my own hair done. As I mentioned before, growing up no one ever taught me how to simply care for my own natural curly hair; I learned on my own through research and experience. All I ever knew was that I needed to go to someone professionally to have my hair maintained and styled. In most of those cases I did not have a choice in how I wore my hair because I was not the one paying for it. In college, I mostly wore braid extensions, because it was an easy way for me to be away from home for months at a time with -out having to get my hair done every two weeks. Though it was my choice for the braid extensions, it was pretty much the only choice my father gave me being he was paying for it and I was just a jobless college student who needed my hair done. Even on my graduation day, it was decided



that I would wear a long straight weave instead of braids, though I really wanted to just wear my braid extensions my dad thought it would be more appealing. At the time, I just knew the long straight hair looked more appealing and would more likely be approved by my family and friends as an appropriate look for graduation day.

What many women do not realize is that hair care for African Americans has been an important ritualistic process since before slavery. African tribes use to spend hours per day tending to and styling each other's hair; it was a community effort that they took pride in daily. Prior to slavery African hair represented an individual's status in the community, the tribe they were from, their marital status and age (refer to image below). Valerie Boyd of the "African American View", said it best in her 1993 article "The Ritual" where she states, "For centuries women have communed together while scratching secrets from each other's head; black women, in Africa and throughout the diaspora, have a long history of greasing, combing, twisting and braiding each other's locks while contemplating and sometimes solving the problems of the world, both big and small" (Boyd 1993, pg 43).[39] However, today women either gather in pairs or at the salon to maintain their weaves, wigs and perms; making what was once an open communal activity a private ritual behind doors. Because maintaining and styling the hair was such a huge part of the community knowledge of hair maintenance was easily learned and passed down through generations. With hair grooming becoming more of a private act, it leaves little to no room of women learning how to care for their own hair without having to spend money and go to a salon to have their hair straightened and chemically treated. This therefore has created a gap, a lack of knowledge and skill to be passed through generations.



Figure 3 Himba Women of West Africa, red clay is used to protect the hair from the damaging sun rays

Due to this educational gap between generations of African American women, many have become brainwashed to believing that for their hair to remain maintained and presentable they must straighten it and hide it under wigs, weaves and extensions. Our parents grew up in an era where hair styles were changing all the time to whatever was popular at the time; they too had no knowledge of how to care for and maintain their natural hair. Today that same attitude still exists, with all the various types of natural styled wigs and weaves such as lock extensions; women do not find a need to learn about their own kinky hair anymore. Why go through all the time and effort of locking your own natural kinky hair when you now have the option to just go to the store and by a synthetic lock version of the style (refer to image below)? Between natural hair styles, and body enhancement products, it is more accessible than ever for women of all ages to alter their bodies. There is no need to go to any professional when you can go to your local beauty supply or drug store for all your beauty needs. However, women don't realize how much of an influence that ritual has on younger generations who see their parents doing all these things to be beautiful not realizing the message they are teaching them. They are showing the youth that to be beautiful you must alter

yourself; it has gone from bluntly telling our youth to alter their appearance to subliminally showing them daily representations.

Of course, we can go back to the argument of women choosing to wear their hair how they want because it makes them feel confident or the argument that women have generations of self-esteem issues installed in them. Yet, despite how an African American woman decides to wear her hair, the fact that most do not know how to care for their own hair or are too lazy, cannot be ignored. Women look for the easiest way to be able to change up their hair styles and over all look as easily as they can their Bitmoji.[40] However, I do hope to open the eyes, and expand the minds of my viewers in realizing that with these easy ways to enhance one's beauty, the knowledge and ability to accept one's own natural beauty gets lost; the history of black hair and body image gets lost.

It was not until I started doing my own research on black hair that I discovered its rich past. I never realized how much I did not know on the topic. It was not until I began my own hair journey, that I began to question everything I was ever taught or learned. No one ever told me that, black hair takes better to natural products such as coconut or castor oil, or that African Americans are the only people who have natural, thick, curly hair that comes in all different types of curl patterns and textures.[41] (Refer to image below of the different types of hair patterns in black hair)

Between the negative attitudes toward black hair and body images that has been passed down through generations and continues to be represented throughout pop culture and social media it is hard for African American women to truly accept their own beauty and body image. Removing negative mindsets and media outlets would not improve the stigma around beauty and body perspectives. However, women of color need to learn more about the lineage of black hair and body image in America. Black women must be willing to pass along knowledge down to future generations to come. It is acceptable that women change their hair to express themselves in various ways so that we do not express ourselves to appear cliché and stereotypical. Currently more women have taken on the initiative to convert to overall natural styles such as ceasing the use of harsh chemicals and beauty enhancers. Although the times and mindsets continue to change and beauty products become more accessible to women of all ages and ethnicities the negative connotations and views from the past remain. The process for women of all colors and society to accept themselves and their own natural appearance will take longer.

## Conclusion

As previously stated, as an artist my goal is not to change the minds of my audience or influence whether their decisions regarding their hair and body perspective are negative or positive. My work and research is based on my own personal experiences that I question and compare to both historical context and current events. There are so many ways for women to express themselves these days, whether it's with their hair or how they dress. I find it important to educate our youth to accept their natural appearance to convey self-acceptance. This topic is important to discuss because history is repeating itself and woman of color are becoming more focused on altering themselves instead of accepting their natural appearance. It is important that they know that without the make-up, chemical alterations or body enhancement products and procedures they are beautiful just the way they are.

This overall conversation is typically avoided in many African American households. Too few people are educated on what it really means to be self-accepting of one's own appearance. My goal is to open the eyes of my audience to seeing, realizing and understanding the reality of the various beauty and body images they idealize and promote to one another. I hope to help my audience see just how many standards are being pushed on women of color every day from all different angles. From family members to media representations and social media it is hard to escape the consistent pressure to alter yourself. Therefore, more conversations need to be held with our youth to ensure they do not continue the trend of miss-educating each other and implanting negative views about their self-appearance. With my current work, my goal is to create an overwhelming, uncomfortable art experience that focuses on the ugly reality of modern day beauty trends. By creating a room that resembles a doctor's home based office and using an arrangement of various disturbing images and objects, I create an experience that displays just how easy it is these days to obtain popular looks from society. From butt injections to permanent make up and tattooed eyebrows, achieving a celebrity look is easier and cheaper than ever; and it does not help that we continue to misinform our youth about self-acceptance and standards of beauty and body image. Being that the negative connotations, attitudes and consistent misrepresentations in media are not disappearing anytime soon, it is important to make ensure that our youth understands and accepts their own natural appearance before they are encouraged to alter it.

Being in an era where cosmetic enhancements are easily accessible, conversations of the various risks and history of beauty and body image is fading. Contemporary art is important in this context because it helps bridge the gap of past and present beauty and body image standards among African American women. Art helps provoke many conversations that often fade or are ignored and helps audiences ease into new or continue conversations of the various standards both past and

present. In my opinion as an artist, art helps to expand their mind and perspectives of standards they encounter daily. The goal of my work is to create experiences that counter acts as a push back to current modern day beauty and body expectations among women of color. With so many influences and expectations surrounding women of color, art has and continues to help remind women of the hidden truths of the many body and beauty products and treatments that are consistently being pushed on women through family, friends and pop culture.

## Bibliography

- Adams, Lauren, "Butler high School amends controversial policy on hair styles", WLKY.com, <http://www.wlky.com/article/butler-high-school-amends-controversial-policy-on-hair-style-s-1/3769137>, accessed 10-23-2016
- Ashe, Bertrams D. "'Hair Drama' on the Cover of 'Vibe' Magazine." *Race, Gender & Class* 8, no. 4 (2001): 64-77. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41674995>.
- Boyd, Valerie. "The Ritual." *African American Review* 27, no. 1 (1993): 43-45. doi:10.2307/3042040
- Byrd, Ayana, Tharps, Lori, "Hair Story Untangling the roots of Black hair in America", New York, First St. Martins Griffin Edition, 2002
- Christopher A. D. Charles. "Skin Bleaching, Self-Hate, and Black Identity in Jamaica." *Journal of Black Studies* 33, no. 6 (2003): 711-28. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3180843>.
- Davis, Kathy. "Good Hair Days." *The Women's Review of Books* 21, no. 9 (2004): 14-15.
- De Walt, Patricks. S. "In Search of an Authentic African American And/or Black Identity: Perspectives of First Generation U.S.-Born Africans Attending a Predominantly White Institution." *Journal of Black Studies* 42, no. 3 (2011): 479-503. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41151353>.
- Driscoll, Catherine. "CHAPTER FOURTEEN: Girl-Doll: Barbie as Puberty Manual." *Counterpoints* 245 (2005): 224-41. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42978702>.
- Eggleston, Tiffany A., and Antoinette Halsell Miranda. "Black Girls' Voices: Exploring Their Lived Experiences in a Predominately White High School." *Race/Ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global Contexts* 2, no. 2 (2009): 259-85. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25595015>.
- GIMLIN, DEBRA L. "'TOO GOOD TO BE REAL': The Obviously Augmented Breast in Women's Narratives of Cosmetic Surgery." *Gender and Society* 27, no. 6 (2013): 913-34. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43669843>
- Grey, Harvette. "Images of Beauty: The Media, Marilyn, and Me." *Counterpoints* 169 (2002): 51-64. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42977472>. <http://www.cosmopolitan.com/style-beauty/beauty/a8466303/mushiya-tshikuka-my-natural-doll-interview/>, accessed (January 30,2017) [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JmY0\\_l6BNPc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JmY0_l6BNPc), accessed February 26, 2017
- Lindsey, Treva B. "'One Time for My Girls': African-American Girlhood, Empowerment, and Popular Visual Culture." *Journal of African American Studies* 17, no. 1 (2013): 22-34. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41819273>.
- Lorna Simpson, [https://www.moma.org/learn/moma\\_learning/lorna-simpson-wigs-1994](https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/lorna-simpson-wigs-1994), accessed (January 29,2017).

MCANDREW, MALIA. "A Twentieth-Century Triangle Trade: Selling Black Beauty at Home and Abroad, 1945—1965." *Enterprise & Society* 11, no. 4 (2010): 786-812. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23701248>

McCreary, Micah L., and Richard C. Wright. "The Effects of Negative Stereotypes on African American Male and Female Relationships." *Journal of African American Men* 2, no. 4 (1997): 25-46. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41819314>.

McPherson, Lionel K., and Shelby Tommie. "Blackness and Blood: Interpreting African American Identity." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 32, no. 2 (2004): 171-92. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3557949>.

Okafor, Chinyere G. "Global Encounters: 'Barbie' in Nigerian Agbogho-Mmuo Mask Context." *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 19, no. 1 (2007): 37-54. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25473377>.

Patton, Tracey Owens. "Hey Girl, Am I More than My Hair?: African American Women and Their Struggles with Beauty, Body Image, and Hair." *NWSA Journal* 18, no. 2 (2006): 24-51. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4317206>.

Pepon Osorio, <http://www.art21.org/images/pep%C3%B3n-osorio/en-la-barbaria-no-se-llora-no-crying-allowed-in-the-babershop-detail-1994> , accessed February 25, 2017

Richardson-Stovall, Jennifer. "Image Slavery and Mass-Media Pollution: Popular Media, Beauty, and the Lives of Black Women." *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 56 (2012): 73-100. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23345262>.

Sarmadi, Camellia. "All Girls Are Barbies". Master's thesis, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, 2012. <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1111&context=comssp>

Sonya Clark, <http://sonyaclark.com/concept/combs/>, accessed February 26, 2017

Thompson, Maxine S., and Verna M. Keith. "The Blacker the Berry: Gender, Skin Tone, Self-Esteem, and Self-Efficacy." *Gender and Society* 15, no. 3 (2001): 336-57. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3081888>

Thompson, Vetta L. Sanders. "African American Body Image: Identity and Physical Self-Acceptance." *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* 30, no. 2 (2006): 44-67. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23263216>.

Vilakazi Thabile, "South African students protest against school's alleged racist hair policy", CNN.com, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/08/31/africa/south-africa-school-racism/index.html?sr=fbCNN090116south-africa-school-racism1015AMVODtopVideo&linkId=28280926>, accessed 10-23-2016

WALKER, SUSANNAH. "Black Is Profitable: The Commodification of the Afro, 1960—1975." *Enterprise & Society* 1, no. 3 (2000): 536-64. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23699596>.

Webb, Tammy T., E. Joan Looby, and Regina Fults-McMurtery. "African American Men's Perceptions of Body Figure Attractiveness: An Acculturation Study." *Journal of Black Studies* 34, no. 3 (2004): 370-85. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3180942>.

Yip, Tiffany, Sellers Robert M., and Seaton Eleanor K. "African American Racial Identity across the Lifespan: Identity Status, Identity Content, and Depressive Symptoms." *Child Development* 77, no. 5 (2006): 1504-517. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3878448>.

[1] Bryd, Ayana, Tharps, Lori, *Hair Story*, New York, First St. Martins Griffin Edition, 2002

[2] An iron comb that would be heated over a stove and combed through hair to straighten it out

[3] Bryd, Ayana, Tharps, Lori, *Hair Story*: New York, First St. Martins Griffin Edition, 2002, Chp 3

[4] Bryd, Ayana, Tharps, Lori, *Hair Story*: New York, First St. Martins Griffin Edition, 2002, Chp 3

[5] Bryd, Ayana, Tharps, Lori, *Hair Story*: New York, First St. Martins Griffin Edition, 2002, Chp 3

[6] Grey, Harvette. "Images of Beauty: The Media, Marilyn, and Me." *Counterpoints* 169 (2002): 51-64.

[7] Un-kept, unmanageable

[8]

<http://www.art21.org/images/pep%C3%B3n-osorio/en-la-barbaria-no-se-llora-no-crying-allowed-in-the-babershop-detail-1994> , accessed February 25, 2017

[9] Natural curly-ness

[10] <http://sonyaclark.com/concept/combs/>, accessed February 26, 2017

[11] Richardson-Stovall, Jennifer, *Image Slavery and Mass-Media Pollution: Popular Media, Beauty and the Lives of Black Women*, *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 56 (2012): 73-100

[12] Richardson-Stovall, Jennifer, *Image Slavery and Mass-Media Pollution* (2012): 73-100

[13] [https://www.moma.org/learn/moma\\_learning/lorna-simpson-wigs-1994](https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/lorna-simpson-wigs-1994), accessed February 25, 2017

[14] Bryd, Ayana, Tharps, Lori, *Hair Story*: New York, First St. Martins Griffin Edition, 2002

[15] Bryd, Ayana, Tharps, Lori, *Hair Story*: New York, First St. Martins Griffin Edition, 2002

[16] Bryd, Ayana, Tharps, Lori, *Hair Story*: New York, First St. Martins Griffin Edition, 2002

[17] Bryd, Ayana, Tharps, Lori, *Hair Story*: New York, First St. Martins Griffin Edition, 2002, pg 60

[18] Bryd, Ayana, Tharps, Lori, *Hair Story*: New York, First St. Martins Griffin Edition, 2002

[19] Bryd, Ayana, Tharps, Lori, *Hair Story*: New York, First St. Martins Griffin Edition, 2002

[20] Richardson-Stovall, Jennifer, *Image Slavery and Mass-Media Pollution* (2012): 73-100



- [21] Adams, Lauren, "Butler high School amends controversial policy on hair styles", WLKY.com,  
<http://www.wlky.com/article/butler-high-school-amends-controversial-policy-on-hair-styles-1/3769137>, accessed 10-23-2016
- [22] Vilakazi Thabile, "South African students protest against school's alleged racist hair policy", CNN.com,  
<http://www.cnn.com/2016/08/31/africa/south-africa-school-racism/index.html?sr=fbCNN090116south-africa-school-racism1015AMVODtopVideo&linkId=28280926>, accessed 10-23-2016
- [23] Bryd,Ayana,Tharps,Lori, Hair Story: New York, First St. Martins Griffin Edition,2002
- [24]  
<http://www.cosmopolitan.com/style-beauty/beauty/a8466303/mushiya-tshikuka-my-natural-doll-interview/>
- [25] Bryd,Ayana,Tharps,Lori, Hair Story: New York, First St. Martins Griffin Edition,2002
- [26] Okafor,Chinyere g. Global Encounters: Barbie in Nigerian Agbogho-mmuo Mask Context, Journal of African Cultural Studies 19, no.1(2007):34-54
- [27] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WDcSXQ8QjsA>, Accessed February 28, 2017
- [28] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WDcSXQ8QjsA>, Accessed February 28, 2017
- [29] Sarmadi, Camellia "All Girls are Barbies": A Feminist Critique of Micki Minaj's Barbie Persona, Master's Thesis, California Polytechnic State University,San Luis Obisp,2012,pg 5
- [30] Fake, mass-produced hair
- [31] Grey, Harvette. "Images of Beauty: The Media, Marilyn, and Me." Counterpoints 169 (2002): 51-64.
- [32] Bryd,Ayana,Tharps,Lori, Hair Story: New York, First St. Martins Griffin Edition,2002
- [33] Ashe,Bertrams D. Hair Drama on the Cover of Vibe Magazine. Race, Gender and Class 8,no.4 (2001):64-77
- [34] Christopher A. D. Charles. "Skin Bleaching, Self-Hate, and Black Identity in Jamaica." Journal of Black Studies 33, no. 6 (2003): 711-28.
- [35] [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JmY0\\_l6BNPc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JmY0_l6BNPc), accessed February 26, 2017
- [36] Bryd,Ayana,Tharps,Lori, Hair StoryNew York, First St. Martins Griffin Edition,2002
- [37] Bryd,Ayana,Tharps,Lori, Hair StoryNew York, First St. Martins Griffin Edition,2002
- [38] Bryd,Ayana,Tharps,Lori, Hair StoryNew York, First St. Martins Griffin Edition,2002
- [39] Boyd, Valerie. "The Ritual." African American Review 27, no. 1 (1993): 43-45.
- [40] is your own personal emoji; an expressive cartoon avatar featuring you
- [41] Bryd,Ayana,Tharps,Lori, Hair Story New York, First St. Martins Griffin Edition,2002