

“Don’t Touch My Hair”: Problematizing Representations of Black Women in Canada

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*They don't understand
What it means to me
Where we chose to go
Where we've been to know – Solange, Don't Touch My Hair*

If you want to know about a woman, a black woman, that is. Touch her hair. 'Cause our hair carries our journey, 'Cause that's where we carry all our hopes, all our dreams, our hurt, our disappointments, they're all in our hair. – Trey Anthony, 'Da Kink in my Hair

Abstract

Should I wear my Afro to my predominantly white workplace? Is one of the many questions Black Canadian women ask themselves due to the persisting anti-Black racist ideals that impede their livelihoods. This paper expands on Althea Prince's foundational book *The Politics of Black Women's Hair* (2009) by continuing discussions held with Black and mixed raced Canadian women about the societal perceptions of Black hair. The discriminatory practices demonstrated through case studies involving respectability politics in the workforce contradict Canadian values of multiculturalism. By highlighting Canadian contributions to the Natural Hair Movement, this paper identifies Black women's self-led initiatives that challenge negative ideas surrounding their hair while encouraging Black women to claim space and exercise their right to be. Their complex views thus force a reconsideration of Canadian notions of Black presence. The Black women studied articulate this reassessment according to their own terms while concretizing their positions as valued Canadian citizens.

Shaunasea BROWN is a PhD candidate in the Humanities program at York University who self-identifies as a Jamaican-Canadian woman of African descent. Her research utilizes an aesthetical approach to shed light on anti-Black racist beliefs and practices that persist within Canadian society. She frames her work on Black women's hair as battleground to advocate for the recognition of the beauty in diversity. By placing Black women at the center of her research, her work extends critiques of Canadian multiculturalism by using expressions of Black women's subjectivity to redefine the limits of "Canadianness." Through capturing the nuanced experiences of be(long)ing, her research emphasizes the importance of body positivity, self-love, agency and anti-racist education in articulating Black/African diasporic experiences.

Introduction

The artistic creations of singer/songwriter Solange (2016) and playwright Trey Anthony (2005) uniquely articulate the importance of hair to Black women. As self-identified Black women, their ideas contribute to ongoing discourses that outline the meanings attached to the kinks and curls associated with Black women's hair. The hopes, dreams, journeys, that they do not understand alludes to the (mis)reading of Black women's hair and styles. The internalization of these ideas facilitates complex relationships between Black Canadian women and their hair. The analysis of these complexities within a North American context predominately reflects United States based experiences (Banks 2000; Byrd & Tharps 2001; Rooks 2001; Walker 2007). This paper therefore expands on the sole full-length book sharing Canadian perspectives: Althea Prince's *The Politics of Black Women's Hair* (2009). The expansion of Prince's (2009) foundation will consist of research findings from fieldwork conducted in 2016 with twenty self-identified Black and mixed race Canadian women, two case studies relating Black hair to respectability politics in the workforce and lastly highlight Canadian contributions to the development of the Natural Hair Movement.

Black Canadian women's online engagement with the virtual spaces comprised as the Natural Hair Movement and the embodiment of the image of the Naturalista reveal the nuanced ways that Black women publicly relate to each other and their hair. A Naturalista is a Black woman who is passionate and knowledgeable in natural Black hair care. This image also requires a sense of pride and the unapologetic public display of the kinks and curls of her hair. The image of the Naturalista operates within the imagined yet highly political space of the Natural Hair Movement (NHM) that circulates within the social media sites of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube. Established in the early 2000s, the NHM redefines broader understandings of African diasporic aesthetics through self-defined perceptions of Black beauty in relation to Black communities.

The NHM is also outlined as a movement that creates bonds through sharing hair secrets and styles while using Black hair to further promote the personal acceptance of oneself and others (Madison, 2015, para. 7). This promotion of acceptance is also understood through the context of cyber activism that, from the perspective of the NHM, facilitates the promotion of self-love, beauty and Black presence. Cyber activism is defined as a process that uses the Internet to facilitate place-independent virtual organization (Cheta, 2004, p. 188). These online developments also translate into the concretization of safe spaces for Black women offline. These mechanisms for place making are imperative to challenge the existing anti-Black structures within dominant Canadian society.

Framing Black Presence in Canada

This study of hair shares similar notions to Paul Dash (2006) who situates Black experiences within the wider context of the African diaspora (p. 36). This diasporic position is used in a figurative sense that allows for the possibility to "...make inventive demands on existing political, institutional, and epistemological constraints" (Chariandy, 2006, The Legacies of Diaspora section, para. 8). Nevertheless, the complexity of the overlapping histories of Black presence in Canada requires an acknowledgement of the constraints that arise when either term, Black or African, is solely prescribed. Wisdom Tettey and Korbla Puplampu (2005)

illustrate the complexities of defining this group due to the heavy contestation of African origins within this country. They also demonstrate that unpacking this term disrupts assumptions of a consensually implied meaning and other concepts of homogeneity that are typically reinforced (Tetty & Puplampu, 2005, p. 6).

The participants of this research reflect the realities of the more recent additions to the Black Canadian population who emigrated from various countries within the African continent and the Caribbean after the 1960s. The Black and mixed race Canadian women studied self-identified using a variety of terms in conjunction with their Canadian identities. These labels included other national (located in the Caribbean, the United States of America and the continent of Africa) and racialized (Indian, Indigenous, mixed raced, and 'Negro') categories. Their experiences are comprised of both first and second-generation Canadian perspectives, 5% and 95% respectively. Aged between 19-46 and located in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), more than half of the participating women have a Bachelors degree as their highest completed level of education. Their thoughts are joined with perspectives from women who are graduates from both college and high school (Focus Group, 2016). To include their experiences within a broader context of Black Canada, they must also be tied to a long history of prior Black presence. With that said, Black Canadian populations also consist of Canadian born descendants of enslaved Africans, African American immigrants from the Civil War and Black Refugees (Mensah, 2010, p. 3-4).

This African diasporic perspective being framed within the category of Black follows Dash's (2006) view that being of African descent while living outside the continent facilitates an automatic labeling that forces concepts of race to become synonymous with political connotations (p. 28-29). Due to the ways in which stereotypes function in Canadian society, the question of agency becomes crucial to investigate the extent to which Black women's hairstyle choices translate into political forms of expression that are representational of race. Thus, the perspectives identified in this study as Blacks represent only the views of the Canadian women who choose to self-identify in this way. In addition, the study is careful to specify mixed raced perspectives as an alternative way to reflect on Black experiences as being multi-racial and intersectional (Crenshaw, 1991).

The paper acknowledges, then, that a utilization and acceptance of Black Canadian women's various identities promote resistance against colonial violence while creating further social and political alliances. These connections are founded on a heterogeneous collectivity rather than rigid, racist homogeneous constructs (Timothy, 2007, p. 173). The creation of reactionary identities and hybrid spaces such as the Naturalista and the NHM are examples of this resistance. They are a result of the designating processes that push Black women's bodies to inhabit spaces of marginality in Canadian society. This paper uses Black feminist theories to explore the relationship between these positions of marginality and existing notions of belonging and citizenship in Canada.

Theoretical Approaches

This analysis of hair-centred representations firstly considers how Black women identify with Canada as a space and place. This follows the perspective that space and place allows us to conceptualize meaning for Black lives in areas of which incorrectly construct Black

geographies as ungeographic or undeveloped (McKittrick, 2006, p. xiii). With that said, the outlined experiences of Black women within the space/place framework concretizes their presence as valued Canadian citizens. Using Black women's hair to outline the presence of anti-Blackness within Canadian society simultaneously refutes the frequent construction of Canada as a multicultural and therefore inclusionary space/place. Furthermore, these tensions show how the prevalence of anti-Black racism continues to negatively impact Black women and girls.

The theorization of this impact subscribes to the key components of Black feminist thought as outlined by Patricia Hill-Collins (2000). As a Black, Jamaican-Canadian woman of African descent, I am cognizant of how informing this research through my own lived experiences can potentially undermine its credibility. The integrity of this study is maintained through my positioning as both a participant and observer. Like Hill-Collins (2000), embodying the position of a participant and observer is a crucial strategy to inspire and equip Black women to resist oppression (p.19). Hill-Collins' (2000) belief that empowerment lies within a woman's ability to think and speak about and for herself (p. 3) further supports Black feminist initiatives that articulate Black women's experiences while aiming to better them (Hill-Collins 2000, p. 31).

The politics of Black Canadian women's hair considers how the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality and ability are simultaneously implicated in the various oppressions experienced by Black Canadian women. This intersectional approach also incorporates views from Bathsheba Opini and Njoki Wane (2007) who associate the very struggles that define Black women's experiences in Canada with broader societal structures (p. 178). The case studies and research findings both outline how these social structures operate as multifaceted systems of oppression that not only impact Black women's self-esteem, but also limit their employment opportunities. Hill-Collins (2005) discusses the causes and implications of these gender-specific burdens by revealing the hierarchies even within feminist discourses that further alienate the perspectives of Black women in academia. This results in a furthered masking of their existence and representation beyond the academic sphere. Providing evidence of this through her explanation of normative (white) femininity, Hill-Collins describes this normality as an ideology that assumes that middle-class, heterosexual, white femininity is the standard female perspective (2005, p. 193).

The politics of Black women's hair is positioned within this perspective of subordinated femininity that designates Black women at the bottom of the gender hierarchy, below not only men, but white women, sexual outlaws, unmarried women and girls (Hill-Collins, 2005, p. 193). Hegemonic white femininity is, therefore, depicted as a yardstick by which all femininities are judged (Hill-Collins, 2005, p. 193). Prince (2009) similarly makes note of a yardstick of beauty that Black women use to position themselves in the wider world (p. 16). She also shared that the attachment of Black women's hair to feelings of undesirability becomes more apparent through the use of the yardstick of beauty to determine Black women's value (Prince, 2009, p. 20). This occurs because Black women in North America seek their sense of value from an already subordinated position in relation to the society at large. Together, the yardsticks of Hill-Collins (2005) and Prince (2009) provide a strong framework to analyze how negative views toward Black hair are created and deployed in similar ways across the United States and Canada. These theories combined deconstruct the normative Canadian assumption of hyper-valued whiteness as well as the normative

assumption of hegemonic African American Blackness.

Why Hair?

The positioning of Black hair as being representative of notions of Blackness and Black peoples stems from a longer history concerning Western constructions of race. The concept of race follows explanations delineated by Francis Henry and Carol Tator (2009) that acknowledges its function as a signifier that Canadian society and its systems are largely dependent on (p. 54). Constructions of race were historically supported through “factual” disciplines underpinned by scientific racism. These perspectives have identified hair as a criterion of racial difference in addition to other characteristics such as skin colour, language and skull size (Du Bois, 1897, p. 6). The classification of these differences within a hierarchical sense facilitated the grounds necessary to deem the tightly coiled hair of Black/African peoples in a negative fashion. This is exemplified in the early nineteenth century ideas that perpetuated the combinations of Black skin and wooly hair as symbols of inferiority whereas characteristics of whiteness were constructed as the opposite (Eze 1997; Gobineau 1966; Hannaford 1996).

Outlined as the hegemonic perceptions of Black hair, this analysis of the hairstyles of Black Canadian women are positioned to critique the persisting negative sentiments associated with Black hair. A research participant elaborates on these negative opinions by revealing an existing Canadian societal premise that considers Black hair as not nice (Focus Group, 2015). This unfavorable idea was elaborated by sharing how her hair is understood at her workplace: “I work with a lot of older white women... They think that black hair is gross... it’s upsetting that they’re not accepting. It’s one thing to not like it. And it’s another thing to verbally disagree with it in such a harsh way” (Focus Group, 2015). Deeming a Black woman’s hair as gross is unacceptable and creates an oppressive work environment for Black women. This woman’s awareness that her hair is being used as a channel for the discrimination against her Blackness also makes her feel painfully marginalized and othered.

It is for these reasons why this research aims to advocate for positive representations through a valued recognition of difference. To do so, requires an interrogation of why Black hair in being a symbol of Black presence in Canada continues be challenged. The practice of gathering various meanings from Black women’s hair is facilitated through a process of reading. For the purposes of this research, the aforementioned inability for other people to understand how representations of Black women’s hair are perceived and how they are experienced subjectively will be outlined as a process of (mis)reading.

(Mis)Reading our Hair

Prince (2009) elaborates on the (mis)reading of hairstyles by sharing that for many Black Canadian women, hair is just hair:

The choices they make are connected to convenience and ease—not to their politics or sexual preference. Nonetheless, they can still be judged with a social or political interpretation of who they are, based solely on their hairstyle (p. 16).

Recognizing Black women’s hair as a signifier, regardless of whether or not it intends to be,

speaks to Tate's (2009) view of Black beauty as performative. Tate (2009) describes these performances as a disruption of the beauty normalizations often taken for granted (p. 7). The idea that Black women's hair is trapped within a state of performance is what facilitates sentiments of self-consciousness and make Black women feel like they are constantly being watched or judged. Rather than projecting preconceived judgments on to the women being discussed, this research considers the personal intention of the hair choices Black women make. This provides appropriate insight into the cases where a broader message is embedded in their style choice.

Even though Prince (2009) notes that for many Black women hair is just hair, this does not diminish the overall complexity of Black hair politics. Noliwe Rooks (2001) shares that "...there have long been consequences both within and outside of African American communities for wearing one's race wrong and that hairstyles are often the means others use to determine whether we are wearing a right, or wrong, racial identity" (p. 280). Rooks (2001) also revealed a direct link between one's hairstyle choice and concepts of authentic Blackness. This concept is defined as a set of cultural ideals and expectations that constitute what it means to "be Black" (Nguyen and Anthony 2014, p. 770).

Martin Japtok and Jerri Rafiki Jenkins (2011) frame Black authenticity as ideas that are derived from larger historical contexts that changes continuously as a reflection of ideational shifts through time and space (p. 40). The debate of what is or is not authentically Black is embedded within power struggles that attempt to politically demarcate differences between Blacks and other racialized groups. Japtok and Jenkins (2011) acknowledge the issues with this kind of categorization by rejecting the assumption that racial authenticity can equate to a sense of rootedness and meaning in any specific culture (p. 44-45). Nguyen and Anthony connect the inability to solidify Black authenticity to the unspecified relationship between cultural and individual authentication. They also mark this lack of explicitness as a contributing factor to the masking of the multiplicities of Black identities (2014, 770). While supporting the acknowledgement of the legitimate motives framing ideas of authenticity (Japtok & Jenkins, 2011, p. 45), this study remains critical of how authentic categories may monolithically construct Black Canadian experiences.

The question of authenticity forces us to revisit the idea of whether or not it is possible for Black women's hair to just be hair in a Canadian context. Prince states that, "[f]or most people, natural hair is just another outfit – a way to change yourself – even though you were born with it" (2009, p. 63). Considering something that you were born with as just another outfit provides an interesting perspective on conceptualizing authentic Blackness. It problematizes this idea that natural Black hair can be understood as a real/genuine representation of Blackness since outfits are temporary and interchangeable. This paper will continue by using the hairstyles of Dreadlocks and the Afro that are often used as symbols of Black authenticity to further explore how ideas of real Blackness impact views on Black Canadian women's hair.

Challenging Authentic Blackness: Afros and Dreads

Black women's hairstyle choices, including the 'socially radical' styles such as Dreadlocks and Afros, play a factor in their public life (Prince, 2009, p. 143). This is due to them always being interpreted through cultural terms (Rooks, 2001, p. 285). Dreadlocks, also labeled as

the Afro's creole cousin, often symbolize Rastafarian beliefs and are linked to discourses of Black pride and empowerment as the Afro is to the Black Power (Mercer, 1994, p. 107). Both hairstyles have been constructed as signs of a natural aesthetic to be performed in opposition to the valorization of Eurocentric beauty standards. Mercer, however, indicates that, "Both these hairstyles were never just natural, waiting to be found: they were stylistically cultivated and politically constructed in a particular historical moment as part of a strategic contestation of white dominance and the cultural power of whiteness (1994, p. 108). These stylistically cultivated and politically constructed styles further problematize notions of authentic Blackness.

Mercer has described Dreadlocks (see fig. 1) as a style that one put on to signify a more authentically black hairstyle while embodying an ideological stance of being pro Black (1994, p. 98-99). This is also displayed in Arac de Nyeko's (2002) description of dreadlocks having historical, cultural, political, ideological and fashionable significance. Those who wear dreadlocks have also been described as individuals who have an intense awareness and sensitivity to their roots and culture (Arac de Nyeko, 2002, p. 34). hooks provides further detail of the perception of Black women with dreadlocks by naming them as a signification of "...someone out on the fringe, an undesirable" (2001, p. 115).



Fig. 1: A Photograph of my mother's dreadlocks.

Despite the common assumption that those who wear Dreadlocks consider them to be a symbol of ethnic pride, Mercer is skeptical of this widespread belief that Dreadlocks are a marker of the rupture of white dominance (1994, p. 104). He links this (mis)reading of Dreadlocks to its being depoliticized through increased popularity as a hairstyle (1994, p. 104-105). Mercer (1994) also holds the same opinion of the Afro, which is a unisex style translated differently due to gender dynamics. The Afro hairstyle (see fig. 2) is assumed to be a marker of self-redefinition, a representation of a commitment to Black Nationalism and an aesthetic counter narrative to white beauty standards (Tulloch, 2008, p. 126).



Fig. 2: A photograph of a twist-out Afro hairstyle

Elizabeth Johnson (2013) reflects similar ideas, defining the Afro as the super-curly hair of people of African descent. Her definition also includes the idea of going against dominant beauty standards; however, the Afro was the dominant symbol of natural beauty within the Black Power Movement in the United States and the Caribbean (Johnson, 2013, p. 8). This popular fashion trend, which was embedded with sentiments of resistance during the sixties and seventies, is what lent the Afro a presumed criminalized undertone. These hints of criminality were a result of this particular hairstyle being habitually situated within the context of the African American civil rights struggles. The popularization of the Afro as a hairstyle for women can be attributed to the involvement of political activists such as Angela Davis, who had ties to the Black Power Movement. The Afro as a growing symbol of crime and deviance was also a result of the ongoing battles between the movement and the police in the United States (Ongiri, 2010, p. 75, 198).

The controversy involving the African American singer Beyoncé's Super Bowl 50 halftime performance exemplifies the radicalization of Black Panther symbolism. Naila Keleta-Mae (2016) described Beyoncé's performance of her latest single *Formation* as "...a notably complex meditation on female blackness, the United States of America, and capitalism. Beyoncé, along with twenty-eight female back up dancers were dressed in ...signature berets, heeled combat boots, afros and black leather" (Keleta-Mae, 2016, para.9). Drawing from the concept of Bey Feminism to describe Beyoncé's influence in reinforcing, creating and affirming Black women's initiatives and identities (Whittington and Jordan, 2014, p. 157), this research recognizes Beyoncé's halftime show as an act of Bey Activism in which her incorporation of Black Panther imagery signifies a fight to end anti-Black racism, state-sanctioned violence, and institutionalized poverty (Keleta-Mae, 2016, para. 9). Following Beyoncé's highly politicized performance, a Toronto city councilor suggested that she should be investigated by immigration before being allowed to enter the country (Herhalt, 2016). This demonstrates how Canada also facilitates and vocalizes its skepticism and mistrust of overt assertions of Blackness and Black presence.

Prince (2009) also links the use of the Afro as a symbol for Blackness in a Canadian context to the culture of rebellion that marked the period of the sixties and seventies. She describes the Afro in Canada as a style one put on to be Black, one that signified a sense of pride and represented affiliations with racially righteous ways of thinking. Prince also notes this style as an aspect of the Black community in the old days that young people aspired to be a part of (Prince, 2009, p. 115). Prince's (2009) reference to a past valorization of the Afro is also supported through the research findings where several participants have shared that they

would not feel comfortable showing up to a job interview with their hair styled in an Afro (Focus Group, 2015). Their uncomfortable sentiments identify a shared understanding within the Canadian workforce that discriminates against Black women. These normative rules being outlined as respectability politics facilitate anti-Black notions of workplace appropriateness.

The Politics of Respectability

Described as a counter discourse to racist ideologies, respectability politics are designed to reform behavior on an individual basis by rejecting stereotypes that depict Blacks as lazy, stupid, and immoral. The politics of respectability nevertheless fails to address the structural oppressions that facilitate these societal ideals (Griffin, 2000, p. 34). Respectability politics is also considered as a figurative entrance fee that is necessary to earn the right to respect and full citizenship (Paisley Harris, 2003, p. 213), often being aimed at obtaining white approval (Hill-Collins, 2005, p. 72). Several participants have revealed that the extent to which they are able to command respect and earn a livable income was largely dependent on their hairstyle (Focus Group, 2015). Their hair was frequently described as a central point in the navigation of the respectable standards of society.

Another research participant employed in the legal field shared her race-based feelings of exclusion that involves the presentation of her hair. These feelings of exclusion have made her aware of a need to present her hair in a way that can make her fit in more (Focus Group, 2015). This uncertainty of whether or not the hair of Black women will allow them to fit in their work environment mainly surrounds natural looking hairstyles. This subscribes to the idea of natural hair looking too Black and that is something that one should strive to avoid. Black Canadian women engage with respectability politics that inherently promote the invisibility of Blackness as shown through the styles they use to fit in at work. They attempt to contain their Blackness by muting the racialized markers attached to their hair as a way to make their race less visible.

The attempt to obtain full access to society using behavioural modifications is often demonstrated through the maintenance of certain hairstyles that are believed to be nicer and/or straighter. This demonstrates the existence of anti-Black preferences within Canadian workplace cultures that consequently facilitate Black women's internalization of a need to seek legitimized authorization from dominant societal ideals regarding their appearance. Notions of whiteness that are sustained by hierarchies of racial difference support this dominant perspective. These hierarchies are what foster the oppressive circumstances and traumatic experiences that many Black women endure because of their hair. Another woman shared that when she chose to go natural she assumed that it would not be accepted at her work. She stated, "I was working at a high end salon in Yorkville... I thought that me walking in with my short 'fro ...wouldn't be accepted because of the whole discourse around black hair not looking professional in its natural state" (Focus Group, 2015).

Equating looks of professionalism to having straight hair, she also noted that there is an assumption that Black women's hair being styled in a natural way indicates something about their intelligence. This is additional evidence of the dehumanizing characteristics Canadian society attributes to Black women, their hair and notions of Blackness. Linking a Black

woman's hairstyle to her level of intelligence eerily echoes the nineteenth century racist depictions of Black people as previously discussed. One of Prince's (2009) research participants shared the following: "It took me a while to become confident with who I am, and to accept myself, my hair, my beauty. My hair is nappy hair. It is who I am, take it or leave it" (p. 86). This woman's experience notes the time it took for her to accept who she was. This reference to time suggests that it took a relatively long process for her to be able to confidently position herself as a young Black woman in Canadian society.

It might be argued that this significant amount of time was a result of the meticulous processes of unlearning that was required to deconstruct the negative connotations attached to her Black womanhood. It is also important to recognize how her hair directly influences her conceptualization of beauty. Her challenge to others to either take it or leave it suggests that she rejects the ability for her hair to define who she is while simultaneously leaving no room for others to have the authority to do so either. This challenge becomes far more complicated when explored through the impact of Black women's hair and styles in the workforce. Having the willpower to challenge the politics of respectability is altered significantly when it comes to a matter of making a livelihood. The experiences of Akua Agyemfra (Jack Astor's, 2016; Server Akua, 2016) and Cree Ballah (Cree Ballah, 2016; Zara employee, 2016) both demonstrate how Black women's hair as a marker of difference is regulated and shunned.

Scenario One: Agyemfra and the Case of Jack Astor's Bar & Grill

While employed at a Toronto Jack Astor's restaurant in 2016, Akua Agyemfra was sent home mid-shift because of her hairstyle. This act was justified by the restaurant's managerial staff's preference that their women employees wear their hair down. At the time of Agyemfra's release, she had it styled in a bun. Although this requirement is not specific to Black employees, Agyemfra shares that this preferred down hairstyle invariably implies a want for straight hair. Her interview with *CBC News* also identifies why this rule is particularly difficult and an unfair expectation for Black women:

I know most black women at restaurants are forced to wear wigs or weaves or extensions, or are forced to straighten their hair everyday... I know white women who only wear their hair up because their natural hair is too annoying to deal with. It's much easier for them to straighten their hair or comply with the straight hair rule at restaurants. Unless your hair is permed, rarely does a black woman's hair stay down when it's straightened. It may stay laid for a few hours but that style is only temporary. I just want equality. If a woman, white or black, is more comfortable with their hair up, I don't understand why it's such an issue at a restaurant setting. (Server Akua, 2016)

Agyemfra's reference to an existing straight hair rule exemplifies the existing anti-Black racist undertones embedded within Jack Astor's hair preferences. This rule's normalized preference for straight hair conflicts with the tightly coiled texture of natural Black hair.

Agyemfra's statement above notes that it is easier for some women to comply with this rule more than others. The experiences of Black women being forced to straighten their hair either chemically, through the use of heat, or installing hair extensions are some of the extra measures required for them to adhere to this straight hair rule. This is why Agyemfra's styled bun cannot just be read as a mere act of deviance from a workplace policy involving attire.

These extra hair-related measures translate differently within the lives of Black Canadian women and highlight how certain societal expectations police their subjectivity. The wider societal attempt to control Black women's bodies as seen through this instance where Black women's hair is being forced into a mold of straightness indicates an attempt to reduce their Blackness into a more palatable state. This preferred state formed in the preference for straight hair is embedded within a broader white supremacist positioning of whiteness as the status quo.

This incident also caught the attention of the public on social media causing Agyemfra's story to go viral. This rapid addition being cultivated online triggered a tremendous amount of support for Agyemfra that included threats to boycott the franchise (Server Akua, 2016). Additional support for Agyemfra was demonstrated by an Ontario Human Rights Commission representative, who highlighted that employers should not rely on stereotypes or sexist ideas when establishing dress codes for their businesses (Jack Astor's, 2016). It is important to note that even in cases where their employers might not necessarily enforce a certain dress code that involves hair, the informal interactions that occur among coworkers continuously perpetuate ideas of how Black hair should be properly worn. This will be outlined in the next scenario concerning Cree Ballah whose single braids infringed upon the professional appearance policy being deployed at Zara.

Scenario Two: Ballah and the Case of Zara

Cree Ballah, a former employee of the clothing store Zara in Toronto, quit her job in response to being discriminated against because of her hairstyle. Although the company has no formal hair policy, employees are expected to maintain a professional appearance (Cree Ballah, 2016). Ballah shared that her managers asked her to take her hair down as it was too extreme for the Zara store. Her hair styled in ten thick single braids, Ballah was embarrassed after being walked outside of the store by two managers who supervised her repeated hair revisions. The managers were eventually satisfied with the braids being styled in a low bun (Zara employee, 2016). The company believes that there was no evidence of discrimination after Ballah filed a complaint with the Human Resources Department. Ballah hopes that Zara will develop clearer employee policies in the future so that managers are unable to use their discretion in ways that facilitate discriminatory acts against Black and mixed raced women (Zara employee, 2016).

Ballah, who identifies as biracial, received support from the NHM after her story was shared on social media: "I got a lot of love, especially from the black community" (Cree Ballah, 2016). This indicates how using online spaces to share stories can provide young Black women with access to wider networks of support. Examples of this support can be identified through the Instagram comment by @lthesyi in response to those who do not believe that this Zara case was discriminatory: "Discriminatory practices can very well be towards hairstyles... Braids have a long history in various African & native cultures (one of the reasons Cree decided to style her hair this way). Just because you don't see how this is discriminatory doesn't mean it's not" (Sheenmagazine, 2016). This example also demonstrates how Black Canadian women's use of social media plays in the creation of communities of racial solidarity.

Interactions on Twitter have also been useful in building support for Ballah as demonstrated by the Black Lives Matter Toronto (#BLMTO) group being identified as a part of Ballah's local support network (Cree Ballah). This support also reflects aspects of cyber activism that is attached to NHM and #BLMTO initiatives. Addressing the need to acknowledge Black lives worldwide, #BLMTO subscribes to statements such as, state-sanctioned violence against black lives is a global phenomenon. Anti-blackness is a global phenomenon. Pervasive anti-black racism is a global phenomenon (Black Lives Matter, 2014). Ballah's emerging conversation with the leaders of this group is consistent with #BLMTO's striving for justice through promoting Black solidarity. Their efforts offer insight into the experiences of Black Canadians and further demonstrate how the Internet operates as a site for negotiating the realities of Black life in Canada.

Ballah's awareness that being discriminated against because of her hair is linked to her race (Zara employee, 2016), alongside the demonstrations of cyber activism carried out by the NHM and #BLMTO, have propelled Ballah's work incident into a viral anti-discriminatory issue. This awareness within online communities can be viewed through a tweet by @iseeyouugly: "would you look at that- black girl gets in trouble at work for her braids. AGAIN" (T'Challa, 2016). Her emphasis on again supports the idea that black women's hair is continuously read as an issue within the Canadian workforce. Supportive tweets for Ballah were shared by @brotherhebrew and also indicate that there's room within the NHM for men too: "...@ZARA SHE DON'T NEED FIX ANYTHING AT ALL! YOU ALL NEED TO FIX YOUR ATTITUDES ABOUT BLACK HAIR! #CreeBallah #NaturalHair" (Brotherhebrew, 2016). The importance of these tweets are contextualized through Lee's observation that Black women's hair and politics continues to be a galvanizing topic on social media as online platforms allow people to develop collective responses to the negative issues being outlined in the news (2015, p. 104).

The broadcast of Ballah's story on a national level shows how the NHM continues to exert an increasing influence on Canadian society's views of Black women's hair. This Canadian influence is also established through the video-sharing site of YouTube. Black Canadian women create YouTube channels for other subscribers where they can access reviews about products, watch hairstyle tutorials and listen to personal hair related stories from Naturalistas. The next section will provide an alternative perspective on the NHM's role in Canadian society by discussing a well-established channel conducted by a young Black Canadian woman who actually does not identify with the NHM.

Grey, 'Oh So Limitless' and the Conundrum of Online Activism

Chanel Grey created the Oh So Limitless *YouTube* channel to broadcast her thoughts on health and beauty in the hopes of spreading positive energy and knowledge worldwide (About Chanel Grey, 2013). The introductory video to Grey's channel focuses on the topic of hair and discusses the reasons behind her choice to transition from processed to natural hair. The act of transitioning signifies the period between the withdrawal from chemically straightened Black hair to going natural. This in-between period is often interpreted as an initiating step to becoming a Naturalista and officially being a part of the NHM. Grey's choice to transition might be interpreted as an overarching political statement asserting her Blackness in a predominately white society, such as is often associated with the Afro hairstyle. Grey, however, specified that her decision to transition was driven only by her desire to be a positive role model for her niece.

This problematizes the assumption that those involved with the NHM always maintain a responsibility to use their hair as a widely publicized promotion of natural Black beauty. Despite Grey having a personal family intent for her transition, she has accumulated a significant online influence as demonstrated in her over 20,000 channel subscribers and over 1.8 million views (About Chanel Grey). This identifies the conundrum of online activism as it relates to the inescapable politics that is associated with Black women's hair. Grey's large following is a direct reflection of Black women's engagement with the NHM. Whether or not Grey herself shares the online identity of the Naturalista, her large following that has emerged within the context of the growing NHM consequently renders Grey's presence as a significant contributor to Canadian perspectives related to the NHM.

It is important to note that the NHM and Naturalistas do not solely exist in a virtual environment. Recognizing how these online engagements translate from imaginary spaces into tangible areas underscores how hair represents Black Canadian women's presence and value. Further evidence of this was shown through the Politics of Black Hair event held in Toronto on May 2015. This event was organized by London Ivy, a Canadian company specializing in organic Black hair products. The topic of this event, Hair Envy, raised many questions such as: Can you style your hair anyway you want or are you always making a political statement? (The Politics of Black Hair, 2015). This event included a panel of prominent vloggers (video bloggers) who self-identify as Naturalistas (The Politics of Black Hair Facebook, 2015). The presence of these vloggers demonstrates the communal interest that Black Canadian women have that is linked to conversations about the politics of Black hair taking place online.

Prince (2009) identified *Meetup* group organizations as another example of online interactions that influence Black Canadian women's hair experiences. Meetup uses online community organizing to promote face-to-face meetings for individuals with mutual interests worldwide (About Meetup, 2016). The 'Women for Natural Hair Meet' Meetup group was created by Black women from Toronto with the purpose of connecting offline with other Black women with chemical-free hair (Prince, 2009, p. 57). This initiative, dating back to 2007, was present before the establishment of the Naturalista and the NHM. Since then, there have been other Meetup groups developed that reflect this shift in online discourses on Black Canadian women's hair. For example, Nappy Roots Beauty – Edmonton and Ajax Naturals Meetup groups maintain relations to the NHM and self-identify as Naturalistas (Natural Hair Meetup, 2016).

The Black Beauty Brunch, another London Ivy event designed for Black women in the GTA to celebrate sisterhood (BlackBeautyBrunch, 2015), also extends the offline presence of the NHM. This event was created to address the gap created by the few events specifically designed as anti-oppressive, womanist spaces that encourage self-love for Black Canadian women. This event provided attendees with the opportunity to meet-and-greet @askpRoy, a well-known vlogger who has contributed significantly to the NHM and Naturalista culture. These opportunities further concretize the NHM and Naturalista as reflective of Black Canadian women's realities. Furthermore, they highlight how online interactions are a crucial component in building community and carving out spaces for sharing positive images of Black Canadian women. To continue the exploration of Black Canadian women's use of social media as a conduit for equitable visual culture, the following section will discuss the

photo sharing application of Instagram as a growing way to photographically participate in the NHM.

Gayle & @CanadianNaturalistas

The Instagram (IG) account @CanadianNaturalistas operated by a young Black woman named Brittianny Gayle is another example of Canadian contributions to the NHM. Gayle's online account is designed to showcase Naturalistas, businesses, salons, and stylists from across the country (Canadian Naturalistas, 2015). Black Canadian women are featured on this profile by simply posting with the hashtag #CanadianNaturalistas. The hashtag's ability to organize like-minded women according to the information they share and collect online has been attributed to a redefinition of feminism. Labeled hashtag feminism, it creates a virtual space that facilitates the coexistence of victims of inequality and acknowledges their pain, narratives, and experiences of isolation (Dixon, 2014, p. 34). Gayle's page currently has over 4000 followers and is a growing hub for Canadian discourses on natural Black hair. The ability for hashtag feminists to virtually redefine feminism as Dixon (2014) highlights is proven in the over 13,000 public posts that use the hashtag of #CanadianNaturalistas.

In addition to #CanadianNaturalistas' participation in the virtual redefinition of feminism, it also reflects Harris' observation that Black women use social media and IG to "...celebrate 'self' in communities of difference" (2015, p. 140). This celebration of self is often conducted through the sharing of self-portraits also known as a selfie. In understanding the importance of the selfie in the context of the NHM and the identity of the Naturalista, this research shares Shipley's (2015) definition of its role as autobiography and memoir:

The selfie requires the technologies of instant digital photography and social media circulation for its existence. Its techniques are reshaping basic aesthetic principles of how people understand modern bodies and desires, as well as the legal and moral relationships between public and private. I contend that the selfie, rather than a singular form of technologically driven self-portraiture, is a multimedia genre of autobiography or memoir that makes the image maker into the protagonist of stories of his or her own composition. (Shipley, 2015, p. 404)

In this way, the IG posts under the #CanadianNaturalistas hashtag allow Black Canadian women to disrupt hegemonic beauty ideals while concretizing their presence and identities in Canada.

The negative perceptions surrounding Black hair facilitated through workplace respectability politics for example, highlight how Black Canadian women are made to feel like their Blackness warrants constant regulation and surveillance. Participating in the NHM through acts like posting a selfie can be a very powerful way to disrupt the converging systems of subjugation Black women are surrounded by. It asserts Black presence and challenges both the overt and insidious societal attempts to negate that fact. Harris (2015) identifies the mastering of IG tools as a necessary skill to visually propel the silenced and ignored voices of Black women. She does this by outlining these images as narratives signifying a maximized perception of Black women. This perception shares Black women's communal understanding of how their posted selfish and other photos add to wider meanings of racialized existence in society (Harris, 2015, p. 141).

The styles that are featured on @CanadianNaturalistas showcase not only natural Black hairstyles but also those labeled as protective styles. Protective styles such as Senegalese twists, single braids and crochet braids cover up natural hair using hair extensions and are widely believed to give Black women's hair a break from the stress caused by repeated chemical styling practices, and to protect their hair from the harsh Canadian winter weather. While this belief obscures what constitutes natural Black hair because protective styles include (mostly synthetic) hair extensions in addition to the habitual natural hair styles that grow directly from the scalp, the majority of these natural protective hairstyles are often worn in a largely over-dramatized manner. These over-dramatized styles should be considered as resistance to the habitual suppression and rejection of natural Black hair in Canadian society.

This research upholds these exaggerated styles as symbols that boldly proclaim Black female presence. It also explores how the responses to these styles might shed light on feelings of inclusion and exclusion for Black women in Canadian society. For example, the widely extended Afro style using the crochet braid technique can be read as an evolved version of the neat Afro that was historically popularized during the African American and Caribbean Black Power movement. This is similar to the way that a woman wearing faux locks can still be seen as symbolizing a contemporary reflection of Rastafarian ideas that deconstruct societal ideas of hair appropriateness. The previously discussed case where Ballah (Cree Ballah, 2016; Zara employee, 2016) was discriminated against for her braids illustrates that the overly dramatic hairstyles worn by Black women are not always positively accepted like those promoted on the @CanadianNaturalists IG account.

The negative beauty ideals that are affecting young Canadian girls can be harmfully life changing. Prince indicates that ideas surrounding beauty affect the self-esteem and broader life choices of Black Canadian women (2009, p. 133). She also raises the crucial question of what a woman should do when the hair she was born with is considered offensive and disrespectful (Prince 2009, p. 142). Rooks provides a fitting answer by suggesting that it is the meaning of style choices that have significance rather than the actual hairstyles themselves (2001, p. 289).

The meanings attached to Black women's hair and styles are at times regarded as a politically charged form of expression. This politicization explains how Black hairstyles and textures are accompanied by a series of meanings that can be (mis)read by others. Prince mentions this process of misreading through her suggestion that the conclusions being drawn from Black women's hairstyles can translate into implications that vary from being insignificant to severe (2009, 16). Questioning why Black women make the hairstyle choices they do would be more useful in understanding women's political and personal choices. With the Afro now making a comeback almost half a century later, we are faced with the question of whether or not this (re)emergence carries the same meaning. Proof of the Afro as a style that is increasingly being worn today can be seen in the striking similarities between the styles of the 60s and 2010s as outlined by cut. com's "100 Years of Beauty - Episode 2" *YouTube* video (Watchcut, 2015). Answering this question necessitates a consideration of how social media functions given the fact that the NHM's success is dependent on social media access. Exploring what conditions facilitated the NHM's relevance to Black Canadian women usefully sheds light on the aspects of their online interactions that provide more inclusive opportunities than those allotted to Black women offline.

Social Media as a Platform for Counter-narratives

Like beauty salons, social media platforms are meeting places where Black Canadian women come together to share and connect with each other (Harris, 2015, p. 140). This is proven through how Black women's social media use has resulted in the creation of the Natural Hair Movement (NHM) and the image of the Naturalista to challenge mainstream white beauty standards. Black Canadian women's social media interactions involve the participation of a particularly young demographic that ranges from women in their late teenage years to those in their early twenties. Engaging with social media at this age alleviates the struggles of young Black women who are negotiating their self-definitions (Murray, 2015, p. 495). Young Black Canadian women use social media to establish their own forms of recognition by developing a radicalized aesthetical approach to the female body (Murray, 2015, p. 493). The cyber cultures being created by Black Canadian women differ from those formed offline because the internet enables them to share and connect with a greater number of other Black women instantaneously and often anonymously. The anonymity provides Black Canadian women with a sense of safety because they are less of a target for offline societal discrimination. This security further encourages Black Canadian women to engage with the NHM in an unrestricted manner. The unfiltered access to the public sphere that the NHM provides allows Black women to use their hair to establish their hyper-visible presence in Canadian society. Although the vocalization of their thoughts and experiences are centred on hair, additional perspectives critique the existence of racism in Canada.

Black women use social media as a refuge from daily racial and sexual oppression. The formulation of a virtual Homeplace acts as a site for identity affirmation, spirit elevation, networking and healing (Lee, 2015, p. 93). This idea of virtual Homeplace can be used to theorize the NHM as a digitally established space that Black women have created to promote self-worth, community, resistance, creativity and belonging. Harris and Goldman (2014) argue that social media is increasingly influencing how individuals view themselves and others (p. 2). This argument highlights the importance of online spaces that engage with Black women's hair through a repositioning of Black women's bodies in Canada. The NHM as a space of affirmation and community building is established through the discussion of Black women's shared experiences not only surrounding hair but also other issues relating to structural and institutional oppression (Lee, 2015, p. 99). Hence, the NHM can be understood as a virtual Homeplace that recreates and re-humanizes Black women while asserting and restoring their dignity. This is necessary since North American society routinely constructs the bodies of Black women as inappropriate (Lee, 2015, p. 96-97).

It is within this context where Black Canadian women's participation on social media is read as a counter-narrative to the Canadian societal projections that deem their presence as inappropriate. Roberta Timothy (2007) explicates the complexity of Black identities by elaborating on the existing struggle to establish racialized female identities in Canada. She attributes this difficulty to the fact that identities are historical, social, and political categories. These chosen or imposed categories classify individuals as well as groups under factors of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, (dis)ability, and age (p. 155-156). Black Canadian women's presence on platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Facebook and Twitter exemplifies how the NHM facilitates self-led responses to these chosen/imposed categories. This active engagement in redefining the online self outlines how Black Canadian women's online interactions influence their personal understanding of their hair and how this form of

representation extends to their experiences as racialized women.

Black hair and politics has therefore served as an appropriate lens for the conceptualization of Black Canadian women's subjectivity. Up until this point, this study has depended on a relationship between Black women and their hair to contribute to discourses of Black Canadian women's experiences. Their realities link exclusionary practices in Canada to the overlapping factors of their racialized and gendered experiences. This initial use of hair as a way to theorize Black Canadian women's lives was however deeply challenged by a woman who has very little hair. Feedback from this participant included a critique of our general hair culture and encouraged notable reconsiderations for the overall approach of this study.

A Critique of Hair Culture

One woman was diagnosed with a condition that results in significant amounts of hair loss. This circumstance has made her unable to personally relate to many of the experiences being described. Her unfamiliarity raises the question of whether or not there is room within a study of Black women's hair to consider the Black women who do not necessarily have any? Referencing back to earlier points surrounding how constructions race functions within Canada, the answer is yes. The fact that she also referred to the role of Black hair in the workplace makes it necessary for the inclusion of her story within this analysis. This reoccurring idea within participant discussions indicates that when it comes to earning an income, having the willpower to challenge the politics of respectability becomes less of a priority for Black Canadian women.

She stated, "I don't do anything to my hair but that's because I don't have much hair" (Focus Group, 2015). Despite being diagnosed with alopecia at a young age, she revealed that when she became old enough to obtain employment, her decision of whether or not she would wear a wig played a key role in how she presented herself during interviews. She disclosed that following her university graduation, the need to be employed was pressing, causing her to wear a wig during her job interviews: "I figured they might discriminate or find another person if they saw my natural hair, so I just figured I might as well do as much as I can to seem as safe and as good of an option as possible. And because I was wearing the wig I just kept wearing it" (Focus Group, 2015). Her thoughts indicate that regardless of the extent to which a Black woman's natural hair is or is not visible, Black women still experience barriers to employment in Canada.

This woman also outlined experiences that voiced an awareness of a persisting white beauty standard that Black women often obey using their hair. I think people have always known about it but I'm not sure they've always fought back about it as thoroughly as they're doing now was her opinion in regards to a resurgence in a collective effort to challenge dominant beauty standards through the NHM. In her particular case, it was the lack of hair that facilitated her unnerving feelings and, therefore, created an unsettling environment. She admitted to having more frequent feelings of shame about her hair when she was younger. After being employed for several years with increased financial security, she is now more comfortable with entering the workforce without a wig. This confidence exuded by this participant's ability to overcome prior feelings of shame shares the strong component outlined in the definition of a Canadian Natualista: Though often pressured by the demands of a professional workplace, the lack of straightness in her tresses, and harsh stares of

misunderstood persons, she is still able to wear her hair exactly how she feels (What is a Canadian Naturalista, 2015).

The fact that this definition touches on workplace culture is consistent with participant discussions and the multiple case studies outlined. To wear her hair exactly how she feels is the essence of what this discussion of Black Canadian women's hair politics is all about. When this woman was asked whether or not Canadian society's ideas on Black hair need to change, she instead insisted that hair culture in general is what needs to be changed: For the longest time I wanted to have more hair and then I realized that that's not actually what I wanted because I can't stand having to deal with a wig and having to deal with making sure that everything is in place. I'd really much rather that beauty standards didn't care about hair as much. Her challenge has been extremely critical to this research's initial requirement of the presence of hair as a fundamental characteristic of Black Canadian women's subjectivity.

Her desire to have less emphasis placed on hair culture certainly problematizes the extent to which this research on Black women's hair politics can be presented in an equitable manner. Her experiences consequently expand existing narratives surrounding the politics of Black women's hair by incorporating the perspectives of Black women who have very little to none. Her suggestion to create spaces for women to choose whatever is best for them personally is a more useful starting point that opens up space for often-overlooked perspectives like this one.

Conclusion

Black Canadian women's hair continues to be understood as a symbol of Black presence in Canadian society. Analyzing this presence through Black hair helps us to identify how societal standards of white beauty trigger impositions of Black self-representation. This paper recognizes how Black women in Canada actively resist these ideas by creating safer spaces for themselves and other women of colour. Katherine McKittrick echoes this by accrediting Black subjects for defining and constructing their world, challenging how we understand geography, and thus offering new possibilities on how it might be lived (2006, p. 92). The continued lyrics outlined in the introduction say, "You know this hair is my shit. Rolled the rod, I gave it time. But this here is mine" (Solange, 2016). Whether it's short, long, kinky, curly, straight, synthetic, human, or even there, these lines reflect Black women's agency by leaving no room for their appearance to be up for debate. Engaging with the discourses led by McKittrick (2006) and Solange (2016) offer us a different lens to interpret the self-directed new ways of Black Canadian women's representation, and space/place making.

The profiles of Black Canadian women on social media challenge the societal perceptions of Black women's hair not only online, but they challenge values of Canadian culture offline as well. The mystification of natural Black women's hair demonstrates this challenge by indicating that there is no longer a requirement for the use of natural Black styles to assert Blackness as a part of women's identities as Canadians. While some Black Canadian women have no intention of making a statement through their hair, this research shares that Black women's hair is involved in an ongoing state of politics as a result of Canadian constructions of race. The limiting societal conditions attached to ideas of race uphold the subjugated positions of womanhood that Black Canadian women are forced to navigate.

The multiple stories about Black Canadian women's hair broadcasted in the media shows that

these issues can no longer be ignored. This analysis can propel the Canadian societal impact of Black women's hair and use these findings as a point of reference to advocate for the implementation of anti-discriminatory public policies. Having specific policies implemented to combat anti-Black racism would also provide the opportunity to address the issues surrounding the discriminatory practices related to Black women's hair in the workplace. Ideally, governmentally sanctioned systems would enforce educational structures to instruct Canadians on how to recognize while being held accountable for even the most covert acts of racism. As outlined in the case studies, continuing to allow micro-aggressions to go undetected will only conserve the existing oppressive environments that Black Canadian women inhabit. These nuanced accounts of racism are equally as dangerous and threatening to Black Canadian women as more overt forms. In addition to having institutionalized initiatives that address the perpetuation of racism and discrimination against Black Canadian women, each individual living in Canadian society must also be cognizant of how they perpetuate the limitations that prohibit the recognition of the true beauty that lies in Canadian diversity.

Until then, it is worth noting a few Black women-led collectives that actively challenge our understanding of geography like McKittrick (2006) identifies: Black Wimmin's PhD Collective, Black Women Bridging Borders, Black Women in Motion, Damsel in the Six, issa sxsterhood and, NiaZamar. Facing the long history of anti-Blackness within Canada head-on through the use of online podcasts, building community through post-secondary student groups, providing educational/beauty services focused on self-love, or hosting parties in Toronto for women of colour (in reference to the now defunct Baregyal) are just a few of a plethora of methods that Black women use to make Canada more inhabitable. McKittrick reminds us that, in Canada, blackness and black people are altogether deniable and evidence of prior codes of representation that have identified blackness/difference as irrelevant (2006, p. 93). Problematizing representations of Black Canadian women through hair by adding to present discourses that proclaim Black presence and widening those meanings ultimately ruptures this perpetual state of irrelevance and declares that we Black women are here to stay.

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