

LOVING BLACKNESS: BLACK WOMEN DIGITAL CONTENT CREATORS AND
THE TRANSFORMATIVE HEALING POWERS OF THE CONTEMPORARY
NATURAL HAIR MOVEMENT.

BY

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A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

WAKE FOREST UNIVERSITY GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Communication

May 2016

Winston-Salem, North Carolina

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Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank God for strengthening me.

Also, I would like to express my deepest appreciation to Dr. T. Nathaniel French for serving as my thesis co-advisor, his continuous support and immeasurable insight contributed greatly to this project. I would also like to thank my co-advisor Dr. Alessandra Beasley Von Burg, Dr. Ananda Mitra, and Dr. Kristina Gupta, their time and feedback was greatly appreciated. I am also grateful to Dr. Sherri Williams for her guidance in helping me construct my research project, it was received with much gratitude.

A special thank you to my mother for her love, support, and all of the sacrifices she has made and continues to make for her children. On days when I felt defeated, I thought about all of the sacrifices that my mother's made, allowing me to make it thus far.

Similarly, I am grateful to my family and friends who have supported and encouraged me in the pursuit of this master's degree. Additionally, I would like to thank LaToya Green, Shahani Waas, and Aaron Weathers, I could not have done this without the additional love and support you all have provided for the last two years.

A huge thank you to Dr. Michael P. Shuman, in the WFU Learning Assistance Center & Disability Services, for putting together weekly thesis group meeting for graduate students. The support I received from him and my fellow colleagues was exceptional.

Last, but certainly not least, I would like to thank Black women digital content creators for their diligent work in securing a space where Black women with natural hair are affirmed.

I don't care what Black women's bodies represent to America. I only care what they represent to Black women. America has not included Black women in its ideal of what is beautiful. And when they do, it's a select few of us [...] so it's of absolute no significance what America thinks of our bodies. The problem is getting black women to recognize that. (Vanzant 239)

"When I die, I will not be guilty of having left a generation of girls behind thinking that anyone can tend to their emotional health other than themselves"
(Tate, 1983).

Abstract:

This thesis explores the way in which Black women digital content creators with natural hair utilize the private sphere -- the homespace-- as a means of claiming space on the internet to, educate, encourage, and inspire Black women with natural hair. Using a womanist lens, I examine five YouTube videos, as rhetorical artifacts, that demonstrate the communicative process of testifying. I argue that the combination of the homespace and testifying produces a transformative healing power that has mobilized Black women throughout the diaspora to wear their hair natural--otherwise known as the Contemporary Natural Hair Movement.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

I received my first chemical relaxer at age eighteen. I had a relaxer for a year and a half before I transitioned to wearing my hair natural. There was a combination of variables that influenced my decision to wear my hair natural: attending college and not being able to get my hair touched up regularly; two Black women trying to convince me to wear my hair natural; and watching an intense debate about radical black politics and subjectivity. After transitioning for six months, I went to get my split ends cut --at a Black woman's home -- and she persuaded me to cut off my relaxed hair. For me, that was the beginning of my natural hair journey. Even though I transitioned for six months, it was not until I did not have any chemicals in my hair that I really noticed my texture, realized I could not use the same products, and my hair maintenance was different because my hair was short. I started communicating with other Black women with natural hair about how to do my hair, and a friend of mine mentioned YouTube videos of Black women discussing how to care for natural hair.

My natural hair journey was and still is not easy. I've suffered from self-hate and low self-esteem. To me, they are different. Low self-esteem comes from looking out into the world, seeing what is deemed beautiful, and not being able to measure up aesthetically. Self-hate is looking into the world and realizing you could never measure up because what is deemed beautiful is antithetical to your very being. However, this natural hair community, built for and by Black women, created a space that affirmed me. Specifically, this online community was and is somewhere I go when I am bombarded with beauty images that are not representative of me. It is a space that did not simply say

love yourself, accept yourself -- in a world that does not love you-- but performed it. This performance of self-love, self-acceptance, and wellness through the communicative process of testifying is what I am interested in studying.

In this thesis, I analyze five YouTube videos by five popular Black women digital content creators with natural hair, who utilize their homespace to create and produce natural hair videos pertaining to: transitioning, maintaining, and affirmations of natural hair. Using counter public theory (Lacewell- Harris, 2004), homespace (hooks, 1990), and womanism (Phillips, 2006), I argue that the homespace is a unique space where Black women digital content creators testify about their natural hair journey to inspire, encourage, and educate Black women about their natural hair.

Prior to the digital age, many discussions surrounding the maintenance of Black women's hair were typically passed down in someone's kitchen or Black beauty salons. These Black beauty salons are salient spaces for Black women because they are "Black" and "women" spaces (Gill, 2010). Additionally, Black beauty salons are counter publics to mainstream media because "they contest the exclusionary norms of the bourgeois public, elaborating alternatives styles of political behavior and alternative norms of public speech" (Fraser ,1997). Within Black beauty salons Black women get their hair done while simultaneously conversing with their beauticians and other Black women about a variety of subjects (Lacewell, 2004).For many Black women, these Black beauty salons are safe spaces that affirm Black women's beauty. Even still, discussions encompassing the maintenance of Black women's hair are entrenched in Eurocentric beauty ideals which replicate and privilege straight hairstyles, as well as relaxers -- chemicals that remove the kink, or rigid curl pattern, out of Black women's hair.

Natural hair, hair that is not chemically changed or straightened by heating utensils (Banks, 2000), is categorized into two groups “good hair” and “bad hair.” Good hair is hair with a looser curl pattern, but this looser curl pattern symbolizes more than the size of one’s curls. Good hair represents mixed progeny, and the ability to grow long and visibly healthy hair. Bad hair is hair that has a tighter kink and is a “marker of blackness” (Patterson, 1982). Additionally, because tighter kinks and curls can shrink 50% -80% of its actual length and often has a sheen versus shine appearance (Sivasothy, 2011), it is assumed that this hair is visibly unhealthy and lacks the ability to grow. Depending on one’s hair texture there are different performative expectations that exist (Mallet, 2004), such that, Black women with good hair are permitted to wear their hair out, however, Black women with “bad hair” need to hide or alter their hair in some way.

Because the good hair and bad hair dichotomy is so insidious in the Black community, members of the Black community play an active role in regulating natural hair to the homespace. As a result, hair is another vessel in which the politics of respectability are enforced by members of the Black community. Straight hair --whether by chemicals or heating utensils --is respectable because it is in line with societal expectations, conforms to the dominant beauty ideal, and enhances the possibilities of social mobility. Natural hair, on the other hand, is depicted as threatening and associated with radical ideologies perpetuated by mainstream media. As such, natural hair is regulated to Black women’s private sphere - the home.

Regulating natural hair to the homespace by mainstream media and the Black community is a direct attack on Black women’s femininity and race because for women hair is a marker of beauty and racial classification. This policing of natural hair is meant

to break the spirit of Black women so that they do not feel comfortable wearing their hair in public spaces. However, the homespace is a space “where all Black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where we could be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty, hardships, and deprivation, where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied to us in the public world” (hooks, 1990). Black women “strive to be subjects not objects” in the homespace because it is a private space where Black women can question their ontology; an internal or inner search for “who we be” (Yancy, 2002). This internal questioning of “who we be” is particularly significant when Black women have been denied the ability to determine what it means to be, or to exist in a way that is not juxtaposed or contingent on anything outside of themselves. Allowing Black women to self-define becomes foundational to the self-empowerment of Black women. This internal journey of searching for “who we be” is quintessential to womanist theory.

The term womanist, which Alice Walker introduced in her 1983 book, *In Search of Our Mother's Garden: Womanist Prose*, is offered to Black women as an alternative to identifying as a feminist (Collins, 1996). With feminism's contentious past some Black women have opted for the Southern Black folk expression -- womanist (Collins, 1996).

After more than twenty years, Laylii Phillips offers a solidified definition of womanism:

a social change perspective rooted in Black women's and other [non-White] women's everyday experiences and everyday methods of problem solving in everyday spaces, extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people, restoring the balance between people and the environment/nature, and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension. I take the perspective that womanism is not feminism. ...Unlike feminism, and despite its name, womanism does not emphasize or privilege gender or sexism, rather, it elevates all sites and forms of oppression (Phillips, 2006, p. xx).

I utilize a womanist lens for several reasons. First, I identify as a womanist, and as such, my rhetorical readings are from a womanist viewpoint. Second, womanism's Black theologian roots provide a focus on the spiritual or inner being. This focus on the inner self is important considering that Bankhead and Johnson state, "Unlike the natural hair movement of the 1960's and 1970's today women of African descent are choosing in increasing numbers to wear their hair naturally simply for the sake of their hair. For many, it is less about a political statement and more about self-acceptance and the opportunity to embrace their natural tresses in its natural, unaltered state" (Bankhead and Johnson, 2013). Third, womanist theory derives from a southern Black expression, and testifying is a southern Black expression used to communicate "where someone's been", and "where they are at or going". Fourth, womanism is rooted in Black women's history in racial and gender oppression (Collins, 1996); and Black women's hair has a long history of racial and gender implications dating back to West Africa. Because our long and contentious history it is imperative that our history leads back to our "mother's garden" (Walker, 1983). Last, womanism focuses on the "everyday experiences" of Black women and non-white women, and for Black women, hair is an everyday experience; natural hair typically requires daily manipulation and moisturizing. Additionally, these Black women digital content creators employ "everyday methods of problem-solving" by uploading videos pertaining to transitioning, maintaining, and affirmations of hair. Similarly, these conversations are taking place in "everyday spaces" -- the homespace-- a unique space where Black women can re-calibrate their souls (Phillips, 2006). The theoretical chapter further explores womanism and the necessity of

using a womanist lens to articulate what is taking place within these Black women digital content creator's homespace.

Online Natural Hair Community:

The rise of online media allows an expansion of "home" creating a new space for Black women from all over the African Diaspora to connect and communicate about their natural hair.

The Black women who create and produce digital content from all over the nation post videos on YouTube, weblogs, and other various online platforms about how to maintain and care for textured hair. These Black women digital content creators are profound for posting videos about natural hair on the internet. Moreover, these Black women digital content creators performing care for their natural hair is representative of self-care and self-acceptance. As a result, these Black women digital content creators are not only teaching Black women how to do their hair, but how to care for and accept themselves the way they are. This spirit of acceptance has empowered women from all over the nation to wear their natural hair. In 2010, Design Essentials, a Black hair company that caters to natural textured hair, piloted research to gauge the popularity of natural hair and found that 26% of women eliminated relaxers in 2010 which increased 10% in 2011 bringing the new figures to 36% (Bankhead & Johnson 2011). According to Byrd and Tharps, "By 2013, there were thousands of blogs about Black hair. Twitter, Facebook, and Youtube also has countless pages and channels dedicated to discussing its significance, care, and versatility" (Byrd & Tharps, 2014).

Black women swarm to these new online spaces because they are built to accommodate Black women with various hair textures and promote accessibility to

information surrounding Black women's natural hair. Additionally, these spaces allow Black women to negotiate beauty ideals that are more authentic to their very being, while simultaneously eradicating harmful chemicals from their hair routine. "Naptural85," one of the most popular Black women digital content creators with natural hair on social media, has more than 600,000 subscribers to her YouTube channel, with multiple videos surpassing a million views. These Black women digital content creators are so influential in the growth of the natural hair movement that they have received endorsements from major hair companies. "Mahoganycurls," a popular Black women digital content creator with natural hair, with more than 300,000 subscribers on her YouTube channel, is the beauty ambassador for Shea Moisture products. As a beauty ambassador, Mahoganycurls posts pictures and videos on social media of her wearing Shea Moisture products showcasing their effectiveness when applied correctly and efficiently. This is significant within itself, given that several years ago there were very few products, if any that catered to Black women's natural hair. So much so, that before big corporations started mass producing hair products for natural hair, Black women were creating hair concoctions in their kitchen using: oils, shea butter, eggs, mayonnaise and various other products. However, the popularity of these Black women digital content creators has enabled some to financially support themselves through their different media channels, events, and endorsements.

It is evident that within the last five years there has been a dramatic move away from chemicals to healthier products for Black women's textured hair. This move away from chemical products, in such large numbers, is significant because it shows Black women performatively abandoning anti-black traditions, and rejecting the dominant

beauty standard --while simultaneously defining new traditions and beauty standards.

This large move away from chemicals has been coined - the Contemporary Natural Hair Movement.

Even though the Contemporary Natural Hair Movement began in the early 2000's, there has not been much academic literature dedicated to investigating the natural hair phenomenon. Even still, some Black women academics have made significant strides in issues concerning the Contemporary Natural Hair Movement. In Henderson's thesis, "Redefining the Identity of Black Women: "Natural" hair and the Natural Hair Movement, she argues that the word "natural" has been expanded from women who wear their hair in their unaltered state to all Black women who do not use chemical relaxers. Additionally, Rowe's thesis, "I LOVE THIS COTTON HAIR!" BLACK WOMEN, NATURAL HAIR, AND (RE) CONSTRUCTIONS OF BEAUTY, argues that while the Contemporary Natural Hair Movement resists dominant beauty images in society by creating beauty ideals that better represent Black women; it still largely reifies dominant beauty images within the Black community such as the "good hair" and "bad hair" dichotomy. This thesis adds to this existing literature on the Contemporary Natural Hair Movement.

The next chapter is a herstorical analysis of the meanings attached to women's hair throughout different periods and societies; followed by an examination of hair and its relationship to feminine beauty ideals and ending with an in-depth analysis of Black women's hair -- from West Africa to the Contemporary Natural Hair movement. In chapter three, I unpack my theoretical frameworks: counter-publics, the homespace, and womanism. I argue that even though this online natural hair community is a subaltern

counter public, bell hook's articulation of the homespace better addresses the phenomenon taking place within this online space. Additionally a womanist lens is explored in more detail to tie all the theories together. In chapter four I apply these three theories to five YouTube videos created by five Black women digital content creators, specifically examining the communicative process of testifying. Last, chapter five offers concluding thoughts on this project as well as implications of the analysis on future investigations into the Contemporary Natural Hair Movement.

Chapter 2: Herstory of Black Hair

Hair has and continues to hold remarkable value in cultures across the globe - especially for women. For centuries, women's hairstyles have communicated age, marital status, gender, social status, ethnic identity, religion, wealth, and rank within the community (Byrd & Tharps, 2001; Mageo, 1996; Morrow, 1968). For instance, in 1830, Samoan women in their virginity wore a hairstyle known as the *tutagita*, which consisted of a shaved pate decorated by a tuft hanging over the left temple where a long tuft would hang down the cheek (Mageo, 1996). Similarly, the Wolof culture of Senegal would partially shave their heads, however, to show when they were available to start courting (Byrd & Tharps, 2001). Hair also held social importance within communities because hair symbolized one's social status, or one's potential status (Byrd & Tharp, 2001; Mageo, 1996). Women with beautiful hair were seen as a financial asset to their family because those women had the potential to marry into a better family (Mageo, 1996; Miller, 1998). The Indian colloquy, "the quality of life depends on the quality of your hair" (Miller, 1998), speaks to the social importance of hair.

The litmus test for beautiful hair in many societies was grounded in the length, thickness, and color of the hair. Many cultures believed that long, thick, and preferably black hair symbolized femininity and good health (Byrd & Tharps, 2001; Miller, 1998). Additionally, cultures adorned and colored the hair with fruits, natural dyes, and flowers. For instance, Samoan women repeatedly rubbed lime on their hair until the hair turned a blonde color (Mageo, 1996). Similarly, the Himba women of Namibia are known for saturating the hair with red clay leaving a reddish-orange coating (Sieber, R., Herreman, F., Batulukisi, N., & Museum for African Art). Alternatively, gray hair signifies defect

(Miller, 1998). The father of an Indian woman whose hair was grey before marriage had to pay to marry her off (Miller, 1998).

Many of the sexual connotations attached to hair were derived in antiquity and have spiritual and religious meanings. There are several accounts throughout the Bible that speak to the religious beliefs attached to hair. For example, Luke 7:36-50 speaks of a woman, who is presumably a prostitute, who wept on Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair (Cosgrove, 2005). According to Cosgrove (2005), in those days, women who wore their hair long and loose were seen as sexually promiscuous (Cosgrove, 2005; Mageo 1968). More spiritual societies believed that spirits and deities lived in the hair and could be called upon (Byrd and Tharps, 2001; Mageo, 1996). For instance, the Wolof tribe believed that women had the power to make men go crazy for them by calling on the spirits and genies in the hair (Byrd & Tharps; 2001). Because of these beliefs, the removal of the hair on the head for reasons other than customs such as: a monk or mourning a death were translated as defiance and/or asexual (Byrd & Tharps, 2001; Hildebeitel, 1998; Miller, 1998, Mageo, 1996). Also, women who had long but unkempt hair symbolized a woman who did not want male attention (Byrd & Tharps, 2001; Hildebeitel, 1998; Miller, 1998, Mageo, 1996). Today, many of these sexual undertones still remain, however more recently, women's hair color denotes one's sexual characteristics. For example, red hair symbolizes fiery sexual pleasure, and blonde hair represents women who like to have fun, whereas, grey hair signifies a defect (Weitz, 2001).

The contemporary beauty standard in the United States is a Euro-American women whose features uplift a European beauty ideal. A feminine woman's hair should

be “long, straight, curly, or wavy hair - not kinky- and preferably blonde” (Weitz, 2001). Also, this woman should have “[a]thin nose, lips, and limbs” (Hooks, 1992), leaving room for non-European features such as fuller lips, fuller breast, and a proportional rear end (Miller, 1998). Conversely, even though women are expected to have thick hair on the head, they should not have hair on their body; such as arms, legs, armpits and pubic hair (Weitz, 2001).

Hair in West Africa:

Hair is important to other races, however, hair is specifically important to African people because of the matchless texture, divine nature, cultural, and aesthetic beauty in the everyday lives of African people (Bankhead & Johnson, 2012). One of the distinctive capabilities of African textured hair is its ability to be molded and formed into various shapes and styles. African women would showcase extravagant works of art such as; “braids, plaits, patterns shaved into the scalp, and any combination of shells, flowers, beads, or strips of material woven into the hair” (Byrd & Tharps, 2001). Even though there were an array of hairstyles and textures of African hair throughout West Africa, there was not a universal beauty standard; there was a multiplicity of beautiful tresses ranging from deep ebony, kinky curls, to flowing locks (Byrd & Tharps 2001).

In 1444, Europeans came in contact with West Africans, and were amazed by the complexity of hairstyles, so much so that several explorers discussed the intriguing beauty and socio-cultural role hair played in communicating messages within communities (Byrd & Tharps, 2001). However, because Europeans traded with West African nations for a hundred years prior to the Atlantic Slave Trade, slave capturers were aware of the socio-cultural meaning attached to hair (Byrd & Tharps, 2001). As a

result, one of the first acts of colonizing West African people was shaving their heads (Morrow, 1968; Byrd & Tharps, 2001). The slaveholders' first attempt to strip Africans of their culture was the shaving of their hair which was either done before or after their arrival to the Americas (Morrow, 1968). A member of a prominent West African family, Ayuba Suleiman Diallo, who was kidnapped and forced into slavery, explains that his captors shaved his hair and beard to make him appear as if he was a prisoner taken in war (Byrd & Tharps, 2001). He calls shaving another's hair "the highest indignity" (Byrd & Tharps, 2001). Frank Herreman, the director of exhibitions at New York's museum for African art and specialist in African hairstyles, shared similar sentiments, stating, "A shaved head can be interpreted as taking someone's identity" (Byrd & Tharps, 2001). The Atlantic Slave Trade marked a new era, where an African aesthetic was subordinate to an European aesthetic.

The dehumanization of African textured hair intensified upon the arrival to the New World. After tireless months bound on slave ships African textured hair was matted and tangled. Because many Euro-Americans had never come into contact with African people, at slave auctions, Euro-Americans were apt to tugging and pulling on Africans' hair (Morrow, 1968). Additionally, Euro-Americans believed that African texture hair was not hair at all, but resembled animal wool (Morrow, 1968; Byrd and Tharps, 2001).

Once glorified African tresses were now, with the support of the scientific community, a sign of inferiority. The scientific community regulated people with dark-skin and "wooly" hair to the bottom of the evolutionary ladder (Leary 2001, Cornel West, 1982). Slaveholders capitalized on these scientific beliefs creating divides amongst the slaves; according to Leary, "White slave owners sought to pathologize African features

like dark skin and kinky hair to further demoralize the slaves, especially the women” (Leary, 2001). This resulted in hierarchies amongst the slaves. Slaveholders enforced these hierarchies by providing privileges to slaves who were of mixed progeny (e.g. wavy, or straight hair, white facial features). The privileges afforded to individuals with lighter and/or straighter hair were so life-altering that the first thing midwives would check for after the birth of a slave child was the texture of their hair (Morrow, 1968). These privileges consisted of less physically demanding jobs, and more material goods such as education, food, warmth, and life necessities (Morrow, 1968).

Also, for the first 150 years of slavery, slaveholders did not provide African slaves with proper grooming utensils (Morrow, 1968). It was not until African slaves’ became a commodity to sell and trade, that slave owners started allowing grooming processes (Morrow, 1968). Even then, slaves were not given the necessary utensils nor products to tend to their hair, as a result, slaves started using different household products and tools to tend to their hair (Morrow, 1968; Byrd & Tharps, 2001; Bankhead & Johnson, 2012). Slave women and men used oil based products such as butter and bacon grease to moisturize and condition their hair (Byrd & Tharps, 2001). To straighten the hair, African slaves applied oil-based products on their hair and used a heated butter knife (Byrd & Tharps, 2001). Eventually, slave women and men began using lye mixed with potatoes to create a harmful concoctions now commonly referred to as “creamy crack” (Byrd & Tharps, 2001); Creamy crack applied to African textured hair alters kinky/curly textures and makes the hair permanently straight. In Malcolm X’s autobiography, he illustrates the process of buying the ingredients, receiving his first relaxer, and his transformative, yet shameful experience (Malcolm X, 1964). The chemicals inside this

creamy crack were so potent that if applied incorrectly could physically burn the scalp; even still, some African men and women took to extreme lengths to achieve straight hair. Additionally, slaves who worked in the big house were required to cover their hair so that the slave owner did not have to look at it (Morrow, 1968).

Slave owners went to extreme lengths to destroy the relationship between Africans and hair, however, some slaves consciously wore their hair natural as a form of resistance. Slaves were apt to wearing unconventional hairstyles to display their individuality and humanity (Byrd & Tharps, 2001). Slave posters from the 1700's mention flamboyant hairstyles worn by runaway slaves who wore their hair natural with no shame (Byrd & Tharps, 2012). For instance, in South Carolina, a female runaway named Kate was described as having "bushy hair, which she is apt to keep uncombed" (Byrd & Tharps, 2001).

Post Emancipation:

The end of antebellum slavery ushered in a sense of agency concerning Black hairstyles. No longer did Black people have to follow certain protocols concerning their hair such as; covering their hair, and/or using hair substitutes that were available on the plantation. Black people were able to decide what they wanted to do with their hair without repercussions - or so they thought. Black people quickly realized that if they wanted access to the American Dream they were going to have to make White people feel comfortable (Byrd and Tharps, 2001). As such, the "New Negro" professional Black women and men took it upon themselves to uphold respectable images and it was necessary for others to follow suit (Rooks, 1996). Education and/or training did not matter if that person had African features, such as; kinky hair, wide nose, and full lips

because these features symbolized ignorance (Byrd and Tharps, 2001). In many instances, Black women and men emulating European standards of dress, beauty, and behavior were survival strategies. Upholding respectable images became even more important for Black women, according to Booker T. Washington, “the African American woman can prove to the world that Negro Womanhood when properly treated and educated will burst forth into gems of pure brilliancy unsurpassed by any other race” (Byrd & Tharps, 2001). With an immense amount of pressure on Black women to uphold and symbolize Black womanhood; Black women started searching for ways to enhance their beauty.

The first Black woman to create hair products that catered to African-American texture of hair was Annie Turnbo (Byrd & Tharps, 2001; Bankhead & Johnson, 2012). As a young woman, Ms. Turnbo suffered from balding and breakage resulting in her mixing chemicals in her kitchen to resolve these problems. (Byrd & Tharps, 2001). Ms. Turnbo’s education in chemistry played a large role in Ms. Turnbo’s ability to whip up hair products in her kitchen and sell them door-to-door (Byrd & Tharps, 2001). Eventually, Ms. Turbo opened a beauty college and offered other Black women the opportunity to sell her products for a living (Byrd & Tharps, 2001).

Following in Ms. Turnbo footsteps, Madam C.J. Walker, also created hair products that catered to African-American texture of hair. The ingredients that Madam C.J. Walker used she explains came from a dream sent from God of a Black man showing her what to mix up to create the products (Byrd & Tharps, 2001). Madam C.J Walker’s sold an immense amount of hair products, however, the introduction of the hot comb to Black women drastically increased Mrs. Walker’s success (Bankhead & Johnson, 2012).

According to Byrd and Tharps, “A hot comb is a metal comb that is heated on a range top or burner and then pulled through the hair to straighten it temporarily” (Byrd & Tharps, 2012). Prior to the introduction of the hot comb, Black women were still using old slavery methods to straighten their hair (Byrd and Tharps, 2001). However, the hot comb not only changed the method of straightening Black women’s hair, but also, Mrs. Walker’s “shampoo-press-and-curl” method, became the foundation of the Black beautician industry (Byrd & Tharps, 2001). Madam C. J. Walker’s hair care products stimulated the Black hair care industry as well as, the Black community through countless beauty schools and jobs provided (Byrd & Tharps, 2001). Mrs. Walker impact was so astounding, she actually became the first self-made woman millionaire in America (Byrd & Tharps, 2001; Bankhead and Johnson, 2012). Although, Mrs. Walker did not challenge mainstream culture’s beauty ideals, she accomplished her goal of finding ways for Black women to feel good about the way that they look and feel. (Byrd & Tharps, 2001). Straightened hair remained the popular and respectable image for Black women until the early 1960’s.

Straight hair was the norm and the respectable hairstyle for Black women until the early 1960’s, when there was a cultural and political shift in the meanings ascribed to Black hair. Because many college Black men and women spearheaded the Black Power Movement they played a critical role in instilling pride and beauty amongst natural hairstyles -especially the afro (Kelley, 1997). The afro symbolized Black pride more than any other hairstyle or style of dress (Kelley, 1997). Popularized by the iconic Angela Davis, afros were an emblem of Black Pride and self-esteem (Malanda, 2008). According to Kelley (1997), “For many Black women, more than for Black men, going ‘natural’ was

not just a valorization of blackness or Africanness, but a direct rejection of a conception of female beauty that many Black men themselves had upheld” (Kelley, 1997). The afro originally communicated one’s political and cultural consciousness, however, the afro became appropriated by white culture making it a fashion statement that could be worn by anyone - especially white women (Mercer, 1990; Kelley, 1997).

The 1980’s ushered in a new natural hair presence in the United States - locs (Rowe, 2015). According to Byrd and Tharps, the fame of reggae music also brought an introduction of locs, “the style popularized by Rastafarians, [and] the result of hair that has not been combed and has grown into 5 ropelike pieces” (Byrd & Tharps, 2014). Rowe argues, “a critical mass of Black people, particularly those inhabiting politically conscious, liberal, or subversive spaces, continued consistently wearing their hair loc’ed into the 1990s and 2000s” (Rowe, 2015). Although not as well-known as the Afro during the “Black is beautiful” era, locs also communicated blackness and are counter hegemonic (Rowe, 2015).

Even though the Afro became a fashionable hairstyle for everyone, for Black women, it communicated militancy; and with the decline of the Black Power Movement, Black women with natural hairstyles were having a harder time finding work (Byrd and Tharps, 2001). As a result, many Black women reverted back to chemically processing or straightening their hair with a hot comb (Byrd and Tharps, 2001). The Black women who did not revert back to wearing their hair straight paid the greatest price; According to Caldwell (1991), “Across the country dozens of Black women, from TV news anchors to airline flight attendants, were banned from wearing braids or lost their jobs because they refused to comply. Employers regarded braids as distasteful, threatening or inappropriate

statements of ethnic pride - and the courts, in many cases, upheld workplace policies banning African-style braids” (Caldwell, 1991: 365-96). Today, there are still issues surrounding “appropriate” hairstyles for Black people. In recent years there have been several accounts of Black children who have been suspended from school for wearing “faddish” hairstyles such as locs, cornrows and afros. For instance, in Tulsa Oklahoma, a seven year old Black girl named Tiana, locs were banned from being worn at her public school (Klein, 2013). Similarly, in 2014, the United States military put a ban on natural hairstyles such as locs, cornrows, and braids (Henderson, 2014).

The Contemporary Natural Hair Movement:

The Contemporary Natural Hair Movement has largely disseminated via the internet (Rowe, 2015). Beginning in the late 2000’s, Black women from all over the United States started communicating and posting information about caring for natural hair (Rowe, 2015). Numerous Black women created and developed blogs; YouTube channels, Instagram pages, Web pages, Tumblr, and many other internet sources to discuss products, perform tutorials, trade pictures, suggestions, and provide encouragement. According to Byrd and Tharps (2014), “By 2013, there were thousands of blogs and Black hair. Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube also has countless pages and channels dedicated to discussing its significance, care, versatility” (Byrd and Tharps, 2014). The twitter hashtag “#teamnatural” became common vocabulary that other Black women used to connect throughout several mediums (Byrd and Tharps, 2014). These connections lead to natural hair meetups, happy to be nappy party, and even hair cruises (Byrd and Tharps, 2014). Additionally, the annual World Natural Hair Healthy and

Beauty show in Atlanta went from drawing 8,000 visitors in 2006, to drawing 50,000 in 2011(Bey, 2001).

When the natural hair movement started on the internet specifically, is unknown; however, research chart these dates back to 2008 or 2009 (Rowe, 2015). One of the most popular Black women digital content creators on YouTube, MahoganyCurls, who is also arguably, one of the forerunners of the natural hair movement, began her YouTube channel, March 27, 2009. With an increase of information circulating the web surrounding care for natural hair, there also seemed to be, “countless [Black] women who stopped chemically straightening their hair via ‘relaxers’, and began wearing their hair ‘natural’ as it grows out of their head without chemical processing”(Byrd and Tharps, 2015; Muther, 2014; Yawson, 2014;Saro-Wiwa, 2012). According to Muther (2014), “from 2008 to 2013, chemical hair relaxers sales decreased from \$206 million to \$152 million, and in that same period, there was a steady growth in all Black hair care products except chemical relaxers” (Muther,2014).

Through this online community a culture grew (Byrd and Tharps, 2014); one that focused on safe spaces for Black women, while instilling principles of self-love, self-acceptance, and wellness in the natural hair movement. For New York Time writer Zina Saro-Wiwa, “this movement is characterized by self-discovery and health” (Saro-Wiwa, 2012). Journalist Zina Saro-Wiwa notes:

It is not an angry movement. Women aren’t saying their motivations is to combat Eurocentric ideals of beauty. Rather this movement is characterized by self-discovery and health. But black hair and the black body have long been a site of political content in American history and in the American imagination. Against this backdrop, the transition movement has a political dimension- whether transitioners themselves believe it or not, Demonstrating this level of self-acceptance represents a powerful evolution in political expression. (Saro-Wiwa, 2012).

The use of “transition movement” and “transitioners” is an important description of the natural hair movement because, as history shows, some Black women have been wearing their hair without chemical straightening, long before what is currently known as the natural hair movement (Rowe, 2015). Yet, this movement speaks to the numerous amount of Black women who have consciously decided to “transition” from chemically relaxing their hair to wearing their hair in its natural state (Flewellen, 2012). Nonetheless this is a movement due to the scope and links to social change (Rowe, 2015); according to Flewellen, “The forerunners of the natural hair movement took on the issues of self-love and inner beauty, which ultimately lead to outward expression” (Flewellen, 2012). The journey from chemically relaxed hair to natural hair can be exceedingly powerful and emotional, for some Black women, because of the cultural meaning hair holds within the Black community (Rowe, 2015).

Although this movement is centered on Black women having a safe space to define and re-define beauty ideals that are conducive to their physical, mental, and emotional health; there has been pushback from within the community surrounding racialized biases. Hierarchies of “good” and “bad” hair exist within the natural hair movement, which is ironic, figuring “natural” hair is associated with self-love and Black pride (Rowe, 2015). Byrd and Tharp’s reference a Black women digital content creator named Nakesha Smith who became an online sensation for pointing out that the good/bad hierarchy still exists; “In 2010, Smith released a video on her popular YouTube channel called ‘You Natural Hair Girls Make Me Sick!’ which claims that there are not enough women with ‘real African, textured hair’ present on many natural hair sites (Byrd & Tharps, 2014). Similarly, a Black women digital content creator on YouTube, Jouelzy,

posted a video in April 2014 called, “So over the Natural Hair Community & Texture Discrimination” (Byrd & Tharps, 2014). According to Rowe (2015), “Jouelzy discusses in this video, the ways in which she feels she has been overlooked and marginalized by advertisers, sponsors, and some viewers because she has self-described ‘nappy’ hair” (Rowe, 2015).

Hair hierarchies are based off a numerical and alphabetical scale commonly referred to as hair typing within the natural hair movement. According to Byrd and Tharps (2014), “hair typing” is: the numerical system [that] goes from one through four with A, B, and C variations. The straighter the hair, the lower the letter and number. Most Black women fall somewhere between 3B and 4C, though there are many, like Smith, who argue that a substantial amount of natural hair sites spend a lot of time focused on the threes (Byrd & Tharps, 2014). However, for some hair typing is problematic because, according to scholar Yaba Blay, “It is no different than talking about ‘grades’ of hair. When we talk about the politics of beauty, it is aligned with and reflective of White power and White supremacy. And this exists in the natural hair community (Rowe, 2015)”

The hair typing system is contentious within the Contemporary Natural Hair Movement because the idealization of certain “types of hair” re-surfaced deep seeded notions of “good” and “bad” hair. Soon Black women digital content creators have taken up this idealization of textures that would be seen as “good” hair (3’s) over “bad” (4’s) hair. Because the “good” and “bad” dichotomy is a touchy subject in the Black community, it requires Black women digital content and members of the movement to be reflexive to make sure that all textures are properly represented and affirmed within this

movement. In this spirit of reflexivity, this analysis incorporates Black women digital content creators with a range of textures. Additionally, because I believe that this hair typing system is essentially a grading system, I will not be using the numbers or letters to discuss the texture of someone's hair -- unless used by the Black women digital content creator. Instead I will refer to their hair as: curly/kinky, kinky/coily, and/or curly/coily.

Conversely, Black women have been doing Black men's hair for centuries, so it is of no surprise that Black women are posting videos that discuss the maintenance of Black men's hair. Interestingly, Black men embracing the hair on their heads has led to the many Black men embracing the hair that grows on their beards. Nevertheless, this analysis aims to record and give voice to the Black women digital content creators who utilize their homespace to discuss their natural hair and notions of self-care.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

Counter Public

Largely, Caucasian men dictate what is created and produced in mainstream media, leaving other groups of people and issues pertaining to those communities marginalized and excluded from dialogue within these dominant spheres. Mainstream media is a public sphere where men engage in creating the politics of our “lifeworlds” (Habermas, 1984; Harris-Lacewell, 2004), as a result, African Americans created public spheres that better addressed their needs. A popular public sphere within the Black community are beauty salons (Harris-Lacewell, 2004). Beauty salons are places where Black women go to get their hair done, where beauticians and clients discuss everything from hair to politics. According to Tiffany Gil “of all of the sites he mentions, the beauty shop is the only space that was not only a “black space” but also a “woman’s space” owned by black women and a place where they gathered exclusively” (Gill, 2006). Also, Harris- Lacewell argues that, “These ordinary spaces of everyday talk among African Americans serve as forums for dialogue that contribute both to the development of individual ideological dispositions and to the revisions of ideologies across time” (Harris-Lacewell, 2004). Because, “African American women use both hair itself and language about hair as cultural resources to shape the way they see themselves and are seen by others”(Jacobs-Huey, 2006), it is important the that the language produced within these spaces is positive and affirming to Black women’s identity formation. However, some of these spaces largely reproduce the same unconscious, anti-black rhetoric propagated throughout society. As such, Black women have swarmed these spaces to learn how to care for their own hair.

Beauty salons are counter publics because “they contest the exclusionary norms of the bourgeois public, elaborating alternatives styles of political behavior and alternative norms of public speech” (Fraser, 1997). Although these beauty salons function as counter publics, they still largely perpetuate hairstyles that uphold Eurocentric beauty standards. The online natural hair community is a subaltern counter-public: “parallel discourse arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (Fraser, 1997), because it contests the exclusionary norms of the dominant spheres while simultaneously creating counter rhetoric to transform the relationship between Black women and their hair. This online community is a parallel discourse arena because it contests the exclusionary norms of the dominant spheres while simultaneously creating counter rhetoric to transform the relationship between Black women and their hair. Additionally, this online community is a parallel discourse arena to the physical beauty salon because these Black women teach others how to take care of their hair while still engaging in the everyday talk of a physical beauty salon. Even though this online natural hair community is a subaltern counter public, counter-publicity theory does not account for what is taking place within this online community because it does not address the transformative healing powers available within counter-publics.

The Homespace

Traditionally, the homespace is a private sphere away from the public sphere. According to Moore, “Home is often described in the literature as a haven or refuge. It is depicted as a place and/or space where people can retreat and relax” (Moore, 1984). The home space is commonly referred to as a private space that offers freedom and control

(Darke, 1994), security (Dovey, 1985), and scope for creativity and regeneration (Allan and Crow, 1989; Bachelard, 1969; Korosec-Serfaty, 1984; Cooper 1976; Finighan, 1980); whereas the public space is connected with work, political engagement, and non-kinship relationships (Mallet, 2004). Within this private/public dichotomy there are different rules of engagement with people, places and things (Mallet, 2004).

Yet the notion of home as a haven or refuge has been contested by second wave feminist writers, especially socialist feminists who associate the home as a site of oppression, tyranny, and patriarchal domination of women (Mallet, 2004). It is within this private space that women are assigned to a life of reproduction and domestic labor (Oakley, 1974; Einstein, 1984). Black feminists, such as Kimberle Crenshaw agree that the home space is a site of oppression and disempowerment for women of colour, embedded in intersecting issues of race and gender (Mallet, 2004); other Black feminists criticize this generalization of the home space as only a site of oppression, and argue that such criticisms arose from a position of privilege. hooks argues that the home is a potential site of patriarchal oppression for Black women. However, she also acknowledges that it need not be a politically neutral place. The home can be a site for radical subversive activity for Black men and women who feel marginalized in public spaces (hooks, 1990; Mallet, 2004).

Historically, females are assigned the role of establishing and maintaining the home environment (hooks, 1990). Black women took this traditional role and expanded it to include caring for ourselves, and our families, in ways that elevate our spirits (hooks, 1990). Furthermore, Black women work to establish a homespace as a way of resisting white supremacist domination (hook, 1990). According to hooks (1990), the homespace

is a “place where all that truly mattered in life took place- the warmth and comfort of shelter, the feeding of our bodies, and the nurturing of our souls. There we learned the dignity, integrity of being; there we learned to have faith” (hooks, 1990). It is within these spaces that Black women “...could affirm one another and by so doing heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination. We could not learn to love or respect ourselves in the culture of white supremacy, on the outside; it was there on the inside, in that ‘homespace’, most often created and kept by black women, that we had the opportunity to grow and develop, to nurture our spirits” (hooks,1990).

The homespace holds cultural references that are typically only known amongst the Black community. Within the homespace, the physical kitchen is a place where some Black women heat up their pressing comb on the stove. Similarly, the hair that grows on the nape of the neck is also referred to as a “kitchen”. I cannot count how many conversations I have had with Black women about our mothers or usually another Black woman, pressing our hair and asking them to blow the pressing comb and wipe it on a towel before they pulled the pressing comb through our hair, the pressing comb which was heated anywhere from 325 degrees to 425 degrees.

For Black women, the homespace is where some of the most intimate and personal experiences take place. Black women letting other Black women in their home space to discuss hair, and inadvertently the world, allows this space to be invaded by people outside of this community, which could result in the homespace no longer being a safe environment. According to Mitra, “Sometimes the powerless have to be crafty in the way that their practices play out in the dominant spaces, since the powerful discourage the practices of the marginalized. Barriers established by the dominant can make a place

unsafe for the marginal” (Mitra, 2006). Because Black women have few spaces that are safe --private and public spaces-- protecting this online homespace is of the utmost importance. Furthermore, the fact that these Black women digital content creators are even allowing people into their home also speaks to the absolute necessity of this space.

The online natural hair community is a counter public, however, bell hooks articulation of the homespace is more useful for this analysis because it accounts for the transformative healing available within this space. Now that there is an understanding of the power within the homespace, a womanist lens is applied to interpret the counter-rhetoric--testifying -- taking place within this space.

Womanism:

This paper utilizes a womanist lens to analyze five YouTube videos, created and produced, by five Black women digital content creators with natural hair. A historical account of feminism, black feminism, and womanism is essential to understanding the intersections and differences of these ideologies. ¹

Feminism is typically referred to in three waves, however, only the history of the first and second wave will be discussed because these two waves play a critical role in the rise of black feminism and eventually - womanism. First wave feminism, also referred to as the suffrage movement, began in the 19th and early 20th centuries and its focus was primarily on women’s rights to vote. This wave of feminism claimed to be interrelated to the abolitionist fight, however according to Bell hooks, “In the eyes of 19th century white public, the black female was a creature unworthy of the title woman; she was mere

¹ Although this analysis uses a wave model -- which is a useful simplification, it has often been critiqued by Black feminist in particular.

chattel, a thing, an animal” (hooks, 2000). The performance and perpetual denial of Black womanhood is illustrated when Sojourner Truth was denied the ability to speak at the second annual convention of the women’s right movement in Akron, Ohio in 1852 (hooks, 2015). The speech “Ain’t I a Woman” is legendary for highlighting feminists lack of inclusion within the women’s movement.

Second wave feminism arose during the 1960 and lasted until the 1990’s. This wave of feminism was dedicated to equality between men and women as well as challenging gender roles. Although Black women were skeptical about participating in the feminist movement, some Black women chose to actively fight for women’s rights. However, it was not long before Black women who participated in the feminist movement and the Civil Rights movement realized that neither adequately addressed the needs or accounted for the unique position of Black women (Hull, 1982). Black women, who were sick and tired of being sick and tired, realized that these movements were not going to recognize the interlocking oppressions. Some Black women articulate the invisibility experienced within the movements: “We exist as women who are black who are feminist each stranded for the moment, working independently because there is not yet an environment congenial to our struggle – because, being on the bottom we would have to do what nobody else has done: we would have to fight the world” (Combahee River Collective, 1977). Out of these workings arose black feminist thought: “We are a collective of black feminist who have been meeting together since 1974. During that time we have been involved in the process of defining and clarifying our politics, while at the same time doing political work within our own group and in coalition with other progressive organization and movements” (Combahee River Collective, 1977). According

to Patricia Collins, black feminism is defined as “the belief that women are full human beings capable of participation and leadership in the full range of human activities – intellectual, political, social, sexual, spiritual, and economic”(Collins, 1996). The name black feminism remains interlocked with the women’s movement by keeping the name feminist while conjointly, criticizing White feminists: “using the term ‘black feminism’ disrupts the racism inherent in presenting feminism as a for-white-only ideology and political movement. Inserting the adjective ‘black’ challenges the assumed whiteness of feminism and disrupts the false universal of this term for both white and black women” (Collins, 2000).

Although Black feminism is a distinct branch of feminism, created for and by Black women, some Black women still have a difficult time identifying with feminism because of its contentious past. As such, some Black women have identified with the Black southern expression --a womanist. Alice Walker introduces this term in her book, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* in 1983, stating that a womanist is:

Womanist 1. (Opp. of “girlish,” i.e. frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, “you acting womanish,” i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one. Interested in grown up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: “You trying to be grown.” Responsible. In charge. *Serious*.

2. *Also*: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually.

Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values

tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally a Universalist, as in: "Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige and black?" Ans. "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented." Traditionally capable, as in: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time."

3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*.

4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender (Walker, 1983).

After more than twenty years of Walker's seminal definition of a womanist, Laylii Phillips provides a more a solidified definition of a womanist ideology in *A Womanist Reader*, expounding that womanism is:

a social change perspective rooted in Black women's and other [non-White] women's everyday experiences and everyday methods of problem solving in everyday spaces, extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people, restoring the balance between people and the environment/nature, and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension. I take the perspective that womanism is not feminism. ...Unlike feminism, and despite its name, womanism does not emphasize or privilege gender or sexism, rather, it elevates all sites and forms of oppression (Phillips, 2006, p. xx).

Within academia there is an on-going debate surrounding the similarities and differences between Black feminism and womanism (Collins, 1996). Some Black women

academics argue that there is no real distinction between Black feminism and womanism figuring that Walker's own definition claims that a womanist is: a Black feminist or feminist of color (Walker, 1983). I believe that a womanist can be a Black feminist, and Black feminist a womanist because both are concerned with giving Black women a "voice" to "talk back" (Collins). For example, if I was analyzing the natural hair during the Black Power Movement I would use a Black feminist lens because wearing natural hair was a cultural and political symbol -- external politic. According to Bankhead and Johnson, "Unlike the natural hair movement of the 1960's and 1970's today women of African descent are choosing in increasing numbers to wear their hair naturally simple for the sake of their hair. For many, it is less about a political statement and more about self-acceptance and the opportunity to embrace their natural tresses in its natural, unaltered state" (Bankhead and Johnson, 2013). Moreover, because womanism focuses on the "reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension", there is an innate inner focus. In other words, our starting point is internal--first, and then disseminates outward. Also, womanism's definition clearly focuses on the "everyday experiences "of Black women, and hair is an everyday experience. Similarly, these Black women digital content creators are in "everyday spaces" --the homespace-- and employ everyday methods of problem-solving by uploading videos pertaining to: transitioning, maintaining, and affirmations of hair. Despite this, I will be drawing from womanist and Black feminist literature to articulate this phenomenon taking place within this online natural hair community.

Womanism has theological roots allowing for a distinct form of storytelling that is largely overlooked in discussions surrounding communication and rhetoric -- testifying. Within the communications field, Fisher's narrative paradigm comes closest to

articulating the communication imbued in storytelling. Fisher's Narrative Paradigm argues that storytelling is the basis of all human communication. He explains that all human communication can be seen as a narrative that can substitute for traditional rationality (Fisher, 1989). Within Fisher's narrative paradigm, history, biography, culture and character uniquely influence the interpretation of a narrative. This is uniquely true in the context of Black women and their natural hair; however, Fisher's narrative paradigm does not account for testifying and the transformative elements of this communication style. Testifying is a life-altering methodology germane to Black culture where Black people tell stories which Gloria Hull claims "are funny, some sad; some elicit outrage and praise from the group. It's a familiar and comfortable ritual in Black culture..." (Hull, 1982).

Interestingly, a womanist methodology has been explored by women and men of color in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Europe (Jain and Turner, 2012). A simple Facebook search of natural hair groups will display hundreds, if not thousands, of groups connecting and communicating about natural hair throughout every continent. This is specifically important to this research because Fusionofcultures, a popular Black women digital content creator, is located in the United Kingdom. In fact, these Black women digital content creators are so popular throughout the world, that hair companies sponsor natural hair events, brunches, and send some of the most popular Black women digital content creators to these countries.

Also, womanism privileges Black women's everyday lived experience as a valuable and necessary form of knowledge production because of Black women's unique perspective being so interestingly tied up in interlocking systems of oppression.

Likewise, the marginalization of certain voices and experiences within academia makes this research even more vital to bridging the gap between academics and non-academics (Phillips & McCaskill, 1995); while simultaneously focusing and understanding the diverse ways that these Black women digital content creators communicate and build communities surrounding topics such as their natural hair.

Chapter 4: The Recreated Homespace

Many Black women can attest to getting their hair “done” on the weekends, either for church on Sunday or school on Monday. Typically, this process took place in your homespace, and consisted of a Black woman washing, parting, combing, oiling, and greasing the scalp and hair, while discussing a variety of subjects. One of these subjects usually consisted of discussing the progress of your hair. It was during this time that your mother, grandmother, godmother, aunt, sister, or cousin would affirm our beauty making claims such as: “your hair is your crown and glory” -- a Black southern expression. Unfortunately, because the process of getting our hair done is such a tedious process, many Black women learn how to care for their own hair at a young age, and/or they go to beauty salons.

Unfortunately, because Black beauty salons largely replicate Eurocentric hairstyles, the care for natural hair and words of affirmation, *while caring for natural hair*, is lost, and natural hair is met with a pressing comb or a relaxer. Regulating Black women who did not want these services back to their homespace. However, because Black women are aware of the historical and cultural implications surrounding our hair, Black women digital content creators are aware of the necessity of re-creating the homespace and spreading counter-rhetoric that educates, encourages, and inspires Black women with natural hair. Black women digital content creators produce this counter-rhetoric through the working methodology --testifying. Traditionally, testifying consists of Black people expressing, “where they been”, “where they at”, “how they got there” and sometimes “where they going”. In transitioning, maintaining, and words of affirmations, these Black women digital content creators are testifying about: “where they been” “where they are at”, “how they got there”, and/or “where they going”. It is a

combination of the homespace and the counter-rhetoric that Black women digital content creators permeate throughout this online homespace that allows for the nurturing of our souls.

Black Women Digital Content Creators

While analyzing natural hair videos on YouTube, I noticed a reoccurring phenomenon: Black women digital content creators with natural hair were largely creating and producing these videos from their homespace. These Black women digital content creators are not only discussing their natural hair, but they are allowing other Black women into their home space -- a space that, until recently, was deemed private. In turning these private spaces into semi-public spaces, these Black women digital content creators are engaging in resistance. The resistance is taking place within these spaces against sexism, which regulates women to the homespace, and racism, which regulates natural hair to the homespace. The homespace has become a platform for Black women's voices to be heard by other Black women who share a common story -- our hair. Together Black women digital content creators and Black diasporic women, sit in their homespace teaching and learning how to perform self-care, self-acceptance, and self-love. Similarly to the way that Black women typically learn how to do their hair, by getting their hair done or watching someone, these Black women digital content creators are simulating that experience. They are sitting in their home, re-teaching Black women how to do their hair by physically doing their own hair. The following chapter will further explore the critical role that the homespace occupies within the online natural hair community.

An analysis of the online natural hair community consists of examining five popular Black women digital content creators' YouTube channels. The YouTube channels of these Black women digital content creators with natural hair are: Naptural85, Fusionofcultures, The Green Beauty Channel, MahoganyCurls and BeautifulBrwnBabyDol. I chose these five Black women digital content creators for a couple reasons. First, I chose them based off the amount of subscribers and views they had on their YouTube channel. Additionally, I made sure that all of these Black women had different textures to represent the whole natural hair community. In addition to the reasons offered, I chose Naptural85 and MahoganyCurls because they are frontrunners of this online natural hair community. Based on a preliminary analysis of the Online Natural Hair Community, I have identified three major themes: transitioning, maintaining, and affirmation of natural hair. In this chapter, I analysis the counter-rhetoric -- testifying-- employed throughout this online community.

Transitioning is the process of eliminating chemically treated hair. This is usually done one of two ways: a big chop or growing out the chemically treated hair over an extended period of time. As described in the natural hair community, the “big chop” is a dramatic cut that serves the purpose of beginning an entirely new hair growth journey.² Although there are two ways of transitioning to natural hair, the big chop is significant because women are expected to have hair on our heads and preferably long thick hair. As a result, Black women who choose to big chop are blatantly rejecting femininity and dominant beauty ideals. Whereas, individuals who transition for an extended period of

² Some Black women big chop to eliminate chemically processed hair, but it is not uncommon, for Black women to do major cuts in acknowledgement or celebration of major life events such as, births, deaths, accomplishments, and other significant life changes.

time are arguably, challenging femininity and beauty, but not necessarily rejecting it. Even still, some Black women prefer to keep their relaxed hair while they grow out their natural hair because it is a less drastic change. Regardless, the process of transitioning is important to evaluate because for many Black women it is the first step in their natural hair journey, it is an entirely new process of handling and caring for their hair, and more importantly, it is a critical stage where Black women began fostering a new relationship with hair. For this section, I will analyze Naptural85's 2009 video, "My Natural Hair Journey!", and Fusionofcultures' 2012 video, "Let's Talk 3yrs Post Relaxer, Natural Hair Encouragement & Colour".

Naptural85:

Within the Online Natural Hair Community, Naptural85 is one of the most popular Black women digital content creators with 57,066,628 views of 227 natural hair videos, 697,381 subscribers. In fact, Naptural85's 2009 video, "My Natural Hair Journey!", which consists of pictures and texts discussing her decision to transition to natural hair --has 619,810 views. Naptural85 uses popular songs —known in the Black community— throughout her video because it resonates with affirmative themes found in the Natural Hair Movement. In the original version of Naptural85's video, it begins playing Janet Jackson's song, "The Velvet Room" as she shows pictures of her relaxed hair. However, because YouTube removed the song from her video, Naptural85 replaces the music with a quote stating, "We have a special need to feel like we belong" which is a verse from Janet Jackson's song. As the pictures flash across the screen, Naptural85 enters comments she received as a result of having long relaxed hair: "is that your real

hair?” and “how did you get your hair like that?”³ As the video continues, Naptural85 explains how having relaxed hair is more than a hairstyle; it is a lifestyle because it requires certain decisions to be made around the hairstyle. To put it another way, Black women who receive relaxers typically receive them to make their thick kinky or curly hair straight without having to continuously straighten their hair. However, swimming and other outside activities commonly results in the hair getting wet or sweating out. This causes the hair to poof up, requiring more heat. This in turn, creates thinning because in addition to having harmful chemicals there is also heat applied --which defeats the point of receiving the relaxer. This is seen in Naptural85’s video when she discusses having to choose between having “good hair”, and playing sports.⁴ As Naptural85 wrestles with deciding which one is more important, she realizes that her hair is thinning. Soon after, Naptural85 begins wearing her hair curly, realizes that she likes her hair better this way, and begins dreading her next relaxer.

She eventually decides that she has had enough, and echoes this feeling throughout her video by playing daunting music in the background as pictures pop up of the original Barbie doll --who is a thin Caucasian woman with long blonde hair --and Black women celebrities such as Christina Milian, Tyra Banks, and Mary J. Blige, who

³ The very act of asking whether or not her hair is real, and if so, how she got her hair like that speaks to the underlying assumption that Black women cannot grow long hair. These types of statements, are a perfect example of why some Black women have a difficult time transitioning, let alone big chopping; because the assumption is always that Black women with short hair cannot grow hair, rather than Black women with short hair simply like having short hair, or cut their hair short --as in other cultures. These anti-black assumptions that pervade society and the Black community starts to address the intersections of womanness and Blackness. Because women are believed to have the ability to grow long hair, Black women who have short hair, automatically calls into question her womanness as well as, her Blackness, because in many cases, it is believed that it is their “Blackness” that inhibits Black women’s ability to grow long hair -- which explains why Black women who have long hair are commonly asked, “how did you get your hair like that” and/or “What are you mixed with?”.

⁴ “Good hair” in this context is referring to hair that is completely straightened by the relaxer.

are imitating this look --wearing long blonde hair, except for Mary J. Blige who had short blonde hair. Following these pictures, Naptural85 displays relaxer brand advertisements, and large text that reads, “NO MORE LYE!”

In this moment, Naptural85 has an epistemic break from dominant beauty ideas, in other words, Naptural85 received relaxers to feel as though she belonged in society and the Black community’s definition of beauty -- which is why she displays barbie and Black women with long blonde hair. However, to feel as though she belonged she was required to adopt a lifestyle that affected other areas of her life. This break, which is seen through the flashing of pictures of: barbie, Black women celebrities with long blonde hair, relaxer advertisements, and “NO MORE LYE” text-- is Naptural85 questioning, for the first time, this “notion of belongingness” and what it really means to belong if it requires her to alter her lifestyle to become something that is antithetical to her natural being. Furthermore, just as having a relaxer is a lifestyle, having natural hair is a lifestyle, in which case, when Naptural85 became natural it allowed for other changes to take place such as: creating new beauty ideals, fostering new relationships with her hair, and engaging in activities she might not otherwise.

Immediately following the “NO MORE LYE” text, the India Arie song, “I Am Not My Hair” begins playing in the background, and continues playing throughout the video, as Naptural85 reveals pictures of her big chop. It is important to note that even though this video consists only of pictures and texts, Naptural85’s pictures of her big chop reflects her inside of a homespace. Whether or not it is her homespace is unknown, however, her pictures show her standing in --what is presumably-- the living room, with a towel around her neck, staring at her recently chopped hair in a mirror on the wall. These

photos are also an indicator that tasks that typically take place in a beauty salon are taking place in the homespace. Initially following her big chop, Naptural85 expresses not fully being ready to wear her natural hair in public, and decides to put her hair into braids. However, shortly after she describes “feeling free” and began to fully love her curls regardless of what other people thought. Naptural85 arguably, felt free from upholding an image of beauty that was not intrinsic to her natural being.

Finally, Naptural85 thanks several other Black women digital content creators with natural hair on YouTube that she recounts affirmed, supported, and inspired her., Naptural85 states,

I wanted to post my journey because I took a lot of inspiration from the other movies I saw here on YouTube. When I thought "I can't do this, I'm going to relax it," all I had to do was go online and see all the other stories, and know that what I am feeling is natural and I WILL get through this. So thank you to everyone who posts natural hair care/journey videos, you really do make a difference and inspire women like me who never knew they could make it this far and feel so free!

Naptural85, is directly speaking about the influence that other Black women digital content creators have had on her ability to transition and to maintain her natural hair, but more importantly she is addressing how these Black women digital content creators created a space where she belonged. This notion of belongingness that Naptural85 is searching for in society does not leave, instead it shifts to another community, a community that was not there before, and a community that is more innate to her very being. Moreover, Naptural85’s video is a testament of the courage and strength that it takes many Black women to transition to natural hair because of the need

to feel as though we belong to the larger community. Her video also show how Black women are bombarded by mainstream media with beauty images that are not reflective of ourselves in our natural state, but this online community creates a space where Black women with shared experiences can come --when they are overwhelmed with beauty images--and their beauty will be re-affirmed.

Fusionofcultures:

The following Black women digital content creator, Fusionofcultures, is a diasporic Black woman located within the United Kingdom. Fusionofcultures, who has 254 videos with 11,661,650 views, 176,139 subscribers and 103,889 views on her 2012 video, ““Let’s Talk 3yrs Post Relaxer, Natural Hair Encouragement & Colour,”” delves into the necessity of being ready to transition, and the significance of the transitioning process. Also, this video is recorded within Fusionofcultures’ homepage -- this is known because she is in a fully furnished room with a bed, book shelves, and other room amenities. Additionally, Fusionofcultures’ hair and make-up are done, and she is a wearing a bright peach blouse. Although, Fusionofcultures’ chooses to dress up in her videos, other Black women digital content creators choose not to. It’s a personal choice on behalf of the Black women digital content creators, however, Black women digital content creators who do chose to dress up further blur the lines between the private and public sphere.

Fusionofcultures’ begins the video with the title in the background stating, “three years creamy crack free, “creamy crack is an idiom used within the Black community which means relaxer. According to Fusionofcultures, she stopped receiving relaxers three years after July, 6, 2009, however she did not immediately big chop; instead she grew out

her natural hair for two years and then chopped off her relaxed ends -- one year before her three year natural hair anniversary.

Fusionofcultures' transitioning video is critical to the conversation of transitioning because she converses about the importance of loving her hair and how that relationship shapes your outlook on your transitioning journey. Unlike Naptural85's video which focuses more on her personal reasoning behind transitioning , Fusionofcultures' video focuses more on expressing the necessity of being ready and spelling out more of what can be expected during this transitional process -- whether someone is big chopping or slowly transitioning. Fusionofcultures' begins her video describing her journey saying, "It has been such a beautiful journey, it had its ups and downs, but I don't regret one second of it at all... I am just really happy and I am really proud of myself". Although Fusionofcultures' admits that her journey is beautiful, she also admits that her journey "had its ups and downs" and as a result, she believes that the transition will be smoother if the person is doing it for themselves. She explains:

So for anybody out there that wants to go natural, I just want to say, that if you are ready, and you are not doing it for someone else, and you are doing it for yourself. Then go for it. Seriously, you are not going to regret it. There may be times where you feel like [the sound] uhhhhhhh, but those too shall pass, like it will pass. So do it. I know we do not want to hear do it but, seriously guys, going natural has been one of the best decisions that I have made, for me, and not just because of the hair on my head but genuinely because of the path that it has taken me.

This statement is a testament, of Fusionofcultures tackling --not only-- the vitality of transitioning for the correct reasons, but also why transitioning for the correct

reasons plays such a critical role in how well someone's journey is. In other words, journeys are not perfect, there are trials and tribulations, frustrations, and setbacks, bad hair days, along with victories, success, conquests, and good hair days, however it is integral to understand that both of these positives and negatives is what makes the process beautiful. This is the reason why Fusionofcultures' continues to stress the necessity of beginning this process "when you are ready". Nonetheless, the most powerful statement within this passage is when Fusionofcultures; states, "but those too shall pass, like it will pass." This statement is an idiom that is commonly used within Black communities; meaning hardships are inevitable, they are going to come, however, "they too shall pass"-- or leave. Furthermore, the "like it *will* pass" is a comforting phrase, meaning: yes, it will not be easy, but you can do it, because it temporary -- it *will* pass.

Fusionofcultures is using her story as a testament of what the transitional process entails so that Black women understand the magnitude of this journey. However, once Fusionofcultures explains the significance, she continues stating, "So do it". Fusionofcultures is informing Black women that this journey will have "ups and downs", but she only hints at the life-altering potential of transitioning to natural hair. However, I believe that this decision is deliberate, because Black women who are natural understand that this potentially life-altering component of natural hair is more visible when Black women are aware of what they are "getting into". She continues:

There is nothing wrong with looking at someone else's hair and thinking, "Omg your hair is so beautiful, your hair is gorgeous, I love it" , that's fine; but it's so so important that you can feel exactly the same about your hair and "then

sum” you know? Once you get to that stage, once you feel like, “Omg this hair on my head is so beautiful, it’s gorgeous, and I love it”. Once you accept your hair for the things that it does, and most importantly, for the things that it doesn’t do. Then you will take your hair journey, all your experiences with your hair to a whole new level. I’m telling you, you will have like such a different appreciation from your hair once you come to that place where you love it and when you do get there... I’m telling you, you will even be able to love other people’s hair more because there is nothing behind it, it is coming from a good place, it is not coming from having a slight doubt in the back of your own mind about your hair.

In this passage, Fusionofcultures stresses the importance of Black women beginning their journey actively loving their hair, because Black women who take this approach are more likely to have a more positive outlook on their natural hair journey; since these Black women are focusing on keeping their hair healthy rather than comparing their hair to other women’s hair. In fact, Fusionofcultures points out that once Black women learn to love their hair then their journey will be taken to a whole new level — hinting at the life-altering possibilities.

Furthermore, she reveals that this process of self-love is so transformative that it allows Black women to love each other’s hair without it taking away from the beauty of their own hair. She continues:

People say to me, “[the sound] Ahhhh Layla I love your hair”. I love my hair more than you love my hair and that’s how it should be, that’s how everyone should feel. So I want you all to get there if you are not already there, and especially if you are just starting out your transition or you just B/c’d this is the

perfect time to work on it, make sure that you love your hair 110% because your journey will be so much better if you do, trust me you are going to avoid a whole lot of heartache, disappointment, discontentment, if you offset accept your hair for what it is and what it is not.

Fusionofcultures' video is an informational video for Black women who are considering transitioning to natural hair (to give them a better idea) and what they should expect on their natural hair journey. Moreover, Fusionofcultures' expounds on the correlation between loving your hair and having a positive natural hair experience. She also discloses the life-altering possibilities Black women can experience on this journey when they truly learn to love their hair.

The video that I analyze for the maintenance of natural hair focuses less on testimonials and words of affirmation, and more on how to care for natural hair so that it stays healthy. Even still, the maintenance of natural hair is an essential topic to the discussion of the natural hair community because Black women who are transitioning from relaxers are in need of tips and tricks on how to maintain thick kinky/curly hair, especially since one of the benefits of having a relaxer is that it is supposed to be less maintenance. As such, Black women digital content creators create informational videos on how to maintain healthy hair on their journey so that Black women do not get overwhelmed and transition back to chemically processed hair. This idea of transitioning back to chemically processed hair should not be underestimated, as MahoganyCurls will address later, natural hair is "a lot of work. "For this section, I will be observing Green Beauty Channel's 2014," 6 Steps for starting a successful healthy hair journey."

Green Beauty Channel:

Green Beauty Channel, has 3,194,822 views of 70 natural hair videos, 75,042 subscribers and, 34,593 views on her 2014, “6 Steps for starting a successful healthy hair journey”, is favorable within the online Natural Hair Community because her channel relies on the science of hair rather than individual experience. Even still, Green Beauty Channel creates these videos within her homespace --this is known because she illustrates the six steps of the hair tutorial on her bed. Within her homespace, Green Beauty Channel is dressed casually with a towel around her neck and without any make-up. Also, it is important to note that some Black women digital content creators do not apply make-up and dress up because they are performing hair tutorials where there is water and hair products that run down their face.

Green Beauty Channel begins her video making a distinction between healthy hair and long hair, but concludes that healthy hair is the ability to grow long hair. As such, Green Beauty channel lays out six steps that she guarantees will help Black women reach any hair goal they have for their natural hair. The first step she outlines is to do your homework. She explains, “Your research should be a method of gaining inspiration and education on your hair. This can consist of watching videos of other Black women who have similar hair textures, books, articles, and other social media outlets. However, she urges Black women not to overdo it by becoming a product junkie and over manipulating your hair because this can cause hydro fatigue. Instead, she argues that new transitioners practice patience stating, “as long as you are in good health, making a real effort to take care of your hair, and educating yourself, your hair is going to do what its meant to do, the hard part is making sure what grows stays on your head”. (Green Beauty Channel, 2014).

The second tip Green Beauty Channel offers is to begin with a simple hair regimen. She explains that the best regimen will come with time, but until then, to make sure to include the key components necessary to any personal hair regimen: figuring how often to handle hair, protect it, cleanse, moisturize, and creating a treatment routine. She argues that the key to handling hair is to manipulate it as little as possible while still making sure the hair remains tangle-free. As such, Green Beauty Channel argues that wearing the hair in protective styles 75-80%, and wearing your hair out 20-25% of the time is the best way to attain healthy hair. Determining how often to cleanse natural hair depends on a couple factors: what products you use, how often oil is produced on your scalp, and lifestyle, as such, Green Beauty Channel advises starting with a weekly schedule, however, learning how often to cleanse hair will come with trial and error. Green Beauty channel articulate that the objective when creating a moisturizing regimen is to find a schedule that prevents your hair from ever drying out and becoming brittle -- this can typically be addressed by moisturizing the hair in the morning and at night.

Green Beauty Channel's third tip is to find hair products that work well. There are several ways that someone can go about finding hair products that work best for their textured hair. For example, some hair companies advertise on their product which textures their product works best on, by highlighting keywords such as: kinky, curly, and coily. Another way of finding products based on texture is to search social media: YouTube, Tumblr, Instagram, Twitter, and Pinterest; and use popular hashtags used throughout the community to connect other Black women with natural hair such as: “#naturalhair #naturalhaircare, #naturalhairproblems”. However, even though there are several different outlets to research which hair products work best for each texture, every

product that is advertised for that texture, and/ or products that work good on one person's head -- who has a similar texture-- is not necessarily going to work well on your head. Finding products that work best for each individual is, usually, a trial and error process. Green Beauty Channel expresses one concern in terms of finding products that work, "for something to work you need to know what it looks like for it to not work, and to give it time before ruling it out". As such, the goal is to explore products, allow your hair time to adjust to those product, observe your hair, and replace products one at a time to see which products work best.

The fourth tip that Green Beauty Channel provides is to adopt a healthy lifestyle. She comments, "the status of your health is very important for all things concerning hair care, this can make or break you, remember your skin, hair, and nails receive all the nutrients from the foods you eat last, so unless you have some kind of medical condition, staying active and eating less processed foods will help your hair perform to its highest potential at all times".

Green Beauty Channel's fifth tip is to learn your complete hair type. Learning your complete hair type becomes, even more, vital after three to six months of trying hair products because, Green Beauty Channel remarks, this is a good time to start testing the porosity of your hair to decide whether or not to incorporate a protein treatment or moisturize with a hot oil treatment. Green Beauty Channel argues that these treatments, "definitely changes the game and makes slip ups easier and quicker to temporarily fix". In other words, these treatments supplement the other four steps listed above, especially in cases where something is lacking in your hair care regimen.

The sixth and final step Green Beauty Channel provides, as a helpful tip to maintaining healthy hair, is to adjust your mindset. Against popular belief, Green Beauty Channel recounts that finding someone who has a similar texture, and is ahead in their hair journey is an effective method of learning new skills. She also reports that finding someone can be very motivating and make your goals seem more attainable. However, she cautions that approaching your hair journey with unrealistic expectations, and using comparisons to put yourself down will only create anxiety, and possibly, convince some to quit. She argues that, “A clear and objective mindset. Understand you will have set back ... [however], the more you surround yourself with positivity and factual knowledge the more you are equipped to achieving your hair goals”.

Black women digital content creators spread notions of self-care throughout their videos as a means of affirming and motivating Black women on their natural hair journey. The affirmative videos that I will be evaluating are MahoganyCurls’ 2013 video, “Hair Typing: Learning to Accept the Hair You Have”. In this video, MahoganyCurls addresses hair typing and issues surrounding “good hair” and “bad hair”, and inspires Black women to love the hair that they have regardless of their hair type. Additionally, I will consider BeautifulBrwnBabyDols’ 2011 video, “Hair Growth Motivation”. In this video BeautifulBrwnBabydol inspires Black women to “keep on keepin on” by showing Black women “where she’s been, where she is at”.

MahoganyCurls:

MahoganyCurls, another frontrunners of the Online Natural Hair Community, has 24,778,746 views of 209 videos, 347,503 subscribers, and 135,285 views on her 2013 video, “Hair Typing: Learning to Accept the Hair You Have”. This video which is

recorded within MahoganyCurls homepage – presumably a girl’s bedroom because there is a Minnie Mouse doll sitting on a dresser in the background. Additionally, MahoganyCurls who is only able to be seen from the neck up, presumably because this is a personal conversation and not a hair tutorial— is casually dressed with a scarf around her neck, soft makeup, and her hair is straightened.

MahoganyCurls begins her video breaking down the hair typing system and what it should be used for. There are 4 types of hair: type 1 hair is straight, type 2 is wavy, type 3 is curly, and type is 4 kinky. Hair typing, as mentioned earlier, is a controversial issue within the natural hair community for several reasons. Many Black women, some Black women digital content creators and other Black women within the community have expressed issues concerning favoritism of hair textures and as a result, less attention and admiration of type 4 hair. However, MahoganyCurls is addressing another issue related to hair typing in the Online Natural Hair Community, she comments:

I feel that some people (Black women) get so caught up in the hair typing system that they want their hair to be a certain number such as a type 3. I noticed a lot of people want really lose curls, nice curly hair, and they feel that they do not want type 4 hair. They have a hard time accepting that they have type 4 hair. They are going natural because they are thinking they are going to have type 3 hair and they realize they have type 4 hair, and they are upset, and that is not the right look to have on your natural hair journey. If you are going natural because you want type 3 hair you are going natural for the wrong reason, because after you realize the work it takes to be natural you are going to realize you put it a lot of time and you’re not going to be happy and you’re just not going to accept your hair. Having self-acceptance is more important.

MahoganyCurls acknowledges the favoritism of type 3 hair within the Online Natural Hair Community, and argues that Black women that are “going natural” hoping to have type 3 hair are “going natural” for the wrong reasons. Ironically, this Online Natural Hair Community is built for and by Black women to inspire and promote Black women’s natural tresses, but in doing so, this community still struggles with combating dominant beauty ideals that favor some textures over the other. This idealization of type 3 hair is reflective of the insidious nature of “good” and “bad” hair notions prevalent within the Black community. In other words, type 3 hair is preferable because it is seen as “good” hair and type 4 hair is seen as “bad” hair. Also, it is important to note that one of the reasons that type 4 hair is seen as less desirable is because of the assumption that type 4 hair does not grow. Additionally, because type 3 hair is considered “good” hair, they are *allowed* to “go natural”, meaning they are allowed to wear their hair out in public spaces because it is acceptable in society and the Black community. Whereas, Black women who go natural and have type 4 hair must learn the importance of re-defining and re-conceptualizing beauty, as well as, overcoming the assumption that certain hair types should not “go natural”. This is another reason, Fusionofcultures expresses the importance of “being ready” to transition to natural hair before actually transitioning. Likewise, MahoganyCurls urges Black women not to get caught up in the hair typing chart, but rather to use the chart to figure out what curl size you have so that you can make the best informed decision about hair products and other hair matters. She recommends that Black women learn to accept their hair texture rather than trying to find ways to change it. She comments:

Hair, it is so much deeper, focus on getting your hair healthy and loving your hair don't get so caught up because your hair doesn't look a certain way. Don't get depressed, your hair is beautiful, don't let someone tell that you that you don't have nice hair. If you are constantly looking at your hair type and looking for ways to alter the texture, you're not focusing on the health of your hair. You are going to be disappointed every single time, you're not going to be happy, and it is just going to be a very hard journey for you, but if you accept your hair and understand that your hair will not look a certain way or it may not do certain things, but you can find ways to make it look great, you can find hairstyles where it's going to be fabulous. You can find ways to keep it healthy. You'll have a better understanding of this natural hair journey, and realize that it is more to it than hair typing.

MahoganyCurls explains that part of learning to accept the hair that you have is focusing on the health of your hair, and finding hairstyles that make your hair look beautiful. Similarly, she reveals that, Black women who focus on what works best for their hair will have a better natural hair journey. MahoganyCurls goes on to express issues with internalizing these notions of "good" and "bad" hair stating,

We are so conditioned to believing that this look, like what I am wearing right now, straight hair or curly hair is so ideal, and that's the way we are supposed to look that you know, having kinky hair and your hair grows up instead of down is wrong. Your hair is going to grow, there is nothing wrong with your hair, it's going to grow its going to be beautiful, and you having confidence is going to show the beauty in your hair. If you do not have confidence yeah your hair may

not look good because it is going to show and people can see that you. You need to uplift yourself.

MahoganyCurls mentions that part of learning to accept your hair is uplifting yourself through words of affirmations, and not allowing others opinions to deter you. Also, she expresses the necessity of getting past this idea that only Black women with “good” hair can go natural, stating, “We have to get past this, this isn’t 1960’s anymore, I know I’m from the South, I hear all the time, ‘girl you got a good grade of hair’, I know how it goes, ‘child you can go natural, I can’t go natural, you got good hair’”. Using her biological sister’s story, MahoganyCurls expresses how people tried to deter her sister from going natural because she did not have what they considered a “good” grade of hair. She continues:

Like my sister for instance, when she was getting ready to go natural I had family members tell her Jessica got a good grade of hair your hair doesn’t look like Jessica’s hair, guess what? Her hair is growing, it’s long, it looks good, she does have a tighter curl pattern than me, but she is working her hair and she is making it look right.... It’s on point, your hair can be on point too, do not let people discourage you.

MahoganyCurls describes how even though people tried to deter her sister from transitioning to natural hair because she did not have what they considered a good grade of hair, her sister continued with her natural hair journey and her hair is healthy and long. Additionally, MahoganyCurls stresses the importance of loving your hair for the simple fact that some people do not have or cannot grow hair, she states “you always have to realize that, its people in this world that cannot even grow hair, its people that’s losing

hair from medication, its people that have cancer and it is just falling out because of chemotherapy. Be thankful for what you have”.

MahoganyCurls goes on to acknowledge that she understands the importance that hair has in women’s lives, and especially Black women’s lives, but there has to be a reconfiguration and creation of a new self-concept, she comments:

Yes, we love our hair, women love our hair, Black women, we love our hair, but we have to get out of this mentality that my hair is not beautiful because it doesn’t look a certain way, everybody’s hair is beautiful... Good hair is healthy hair.... just embrace your hair, love your hair, care for your hair and do not let others discourage you, if they have something bad to say tell them to kick rocks.

MahoganyCurls’ video addresses the hair hierarchy within the Online Natural Hair Community, and argues that Black women need to recalibrate their beauty standards to represent and affirm Black women with all hair textures. Additionally, she advises Black women to perform self-care by finding styles and products that make their hair look beautiful. Furthermore, MahoganyCurls encourages Black women to wear their hair with confidence, and to tell people who have negative opinions to kick rocks.

Beautifulbrwnbabydol:

Beautifulbrwnbabydol, a popular Black women digital content creator who tackles conversations surrounding natural hair and health on her Youtube channel, has more than 286,000 subscribers and 18,000 views on her 2011 video, “Hair Growth Motivation!” Beautifulbrwnbabydol begins her video with the title, “My ponytail to the back” and several slides of her ponytail from different angles. Although Beautifulbrwnbabydol begins the video with pictures and texts, she transitions to

recording within her homespace--the bathroom. Inside the bathroom,

Beautifulbrwnbabydol appears casually dressed with a pink tank top and no makeup.

Beautifulbrwnbabydol, transitioned for eight months before big chopping, was unable to put her hair in a ponytail, however, three and a half years later she is able to put her hair in a ponytail effortlessly. In this video, Beautifulbrwnbabydol discusses how she sometimes takes being able to put her hair in a ponytail for granted, and as such, decided to make a quick video to motivate other Black women that are natural, transitioning, and/or relaxed. She states:

So now that I think about this, and I am able to actually put my hair in one goodie band—one. With only bobby pins to hold not hair that is flying out, but hair that is too puffy and it doesn't make it look like a ponytail -- because I don't like pulling my hair tight. I don't have to anymore, I can just throw my hair in a ponytail and that is something we take for granted, but I know that it will serve as a motivator for you all that are truly growing your hair out, and understand the struggles it takes to get there. But I just feel like, this is amazing to me, you know like to be able to just pull my hair back. People are always like, “Oh my gosh you have so much hair “and I take it for granted sometimes. Coming from that stage to here is just amazing to me.

Beautifulbrwnbabydol uses her own hair journey as a testament, to prove to other Black women, that this point will come for them too. She goes on to explain that, she has kinky/coily hair and if her hair can grow so can other Black women's hair. She continues:

I just wanted to share that with you all.... I take this for granted I can put my hair in a ponytail, like, and you can look forward to that too. It coming guys, it's coming, this is kinky/coily hair at its best.... and my hair has grown bountifully in

these years.... And you all have seen my stages and again, I'm going to start showing those more often in these videos just because I want you all to be motivated. So after this you'll see the stage pictures and the progress just so you can see "where I've been and where I am at".

The most powerful affirmation within Beautifulbrwnbabydol's statement on her "ponytail to the back", is when she states, "So after this you'll see the stage pictures and the progress just so you can see 'where I've been and where I am at' -- otherwise known as "where I've been and where I am going", which is a commonly used idiom within the Black community. This declaration is important because she is summing up what Black women digital content creators are actually doing within these online spaces, which is, testifying about "where they have been", having relaxed hair and "where they are at", having healthy natural hair. These testimonies serve as proof that our hair can grow and grow bountiful. This is shown when Beautifulbrwnbabydol states, "It coming guys, it's coming, this is kinky/coily hair at its best and my hair has grown bountifully in these years". Black women digital content creators are communicating through their pictures and video that they have been there: they know what it is like to have relaxed hair, and to have to completely learn a new hair routine, they have been through the big chop or transitioning for long periods of time, and have heard negative comments about their hair --they have done it all, and so can anyone watching.

These Black women digital content creator with natural hair occupy online spaces to reach and teach Black women how to transition, maintain, and affirm their natural hair because fictive kinship and community building is intrinsic to the Black community. To put it another way, Black culture is built on fictive kinship where Black people who are

not related “take in” other Black people as a way of creating a makeshift community — which is exactly what these Black women digital content creators have done.

Metaphorically speaking, Black women digital content creators have “taken in” other Black women —who are not related to them— to teach them how to maintain their natural hair. Also, because these Black women digital content creators are aware that much of the criticism surrounding Black women wearing their natural hair comes from the Black community, these Black women digital content creators have forged a community that encourages and affirms Black women. For instance, Walker’s definition of womanist states, “Traditionally capable, as in: ‘Mama, I’m walking to Canada and I’m taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.’ Reply: ‘It wouldn’t be the first time.’” In other words, Black women have always actively sought strategies that focus on the survival of the Black community. In this instance, Black women have utilized YouTube as a way of congregating with other Black women throughout the diaspora about their natural hair.

Conclusion:

This thesis has examined five YouTube videos by five popular Black women digital content creators, who utilize their --physical-- homespace as a means of claiming space on the internet to discuss their natural hair. I have argued that these Black women digital content creators use this online platform as a way of testifying about their natural hair journey to inform, inspire, and encourage Black women to embrace their natural hair. Additionally, the very fact that this online community grew out of the homespace, which bell hooks claims is a space where Black women, "...could affirm one another and by so doing heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination"(hooks,1990), speaks to how this community grew founded on notions of self-care and wellness. In regards to notions of self-care and wellness, womanism is grounded in an innate spiritual or "soulful" dimension. As defined by Laylii Phillips, womanism is:

a social change perspective rooted in Black women's and other [non-White] women's everyday experiences and everyday methods of problem solving in everyday spaces, extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people, restoring the balance between people and the environment/nature, and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension. I take the perspective that womanism is not feminism. ...Unlike feminism, and despite its name, womanism does not emphasize or privilege gender or sexism, rather, it elevates all sites and forms of oppression (Phillips, 2006, p. xx).

Using a "womanist" lens, I have detailed how Black women digital content creators communicate about "everyday experiences" with their hair, have employed "everyday methods of problem-solving" by uploading videos pertaining to transitioning, maintaining, and affirmations, in "everyday spaces" -- the homespace (Phillips, 2006). This has, in turn, created a "social change perspective" rooted in self-love, and self-acceptance; empowering Black women throughout the diaspora to embrace their natural

hair in public spaces. This movement is known as the Contemporary Natural Hair Movement.

Within these online natural hair spaces, Black women digital content creators not only resist Eurocentric beauty ideals by (re)theorizing socially constructed notions of beauty, but also cultural notions of “good” hair versus “bad” hair embedded within the Black community. Although, the “good” hair/ “bad” hair dichotomy still exists within the Contemporary Natural Hair Movement, many Black women digital content creators have spoken out about the negative relationship between idealizing certain textures, and having a positive natural hair journey. Unfortunately, because this community is encapsulated within a society that still privileges Eurocentric beauty ideal, complete eradication of these beauty ideals are unlikely.

Additionally, the spaces that these Black women digital content creators occupy are subaltern counter-public to beauty salons. Black beauty salons, which were originally created as counter-publics to the main public sphere --mainstream media-- have mostly replicated white hairstyling practices. On the other hand, the Online Natural Hair Community is a parallel discourse arena to beauty salons because Black women digital content creators perform hairstyles on their natural hair as a way of teaching Black women how to care for their hair. In addition, these Black women digital content creators “invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (Fraser, 1997). In fact, as many of these Black women digital content creators continue creating videos about their natural hair journey, they also have been including videos about other paths their journey has taken them on such as: healthy eating, exercising, skin care, and even mental illness. Actually, the critical issues

that these Black women digital content creators are tackling within these spaces really speak to the power that these “online beauticians” hold within the Black community to affect cultural and social change, but also to the value that hair still holds throughout the Black diaspora. Moreover, it speaks to the womanist spirit of traditionally capable, as in, “I am going on a journey (to self -discovery) and I am taking a bunch of other Black women with me.”⁵ What is motivating these Black women digital content creators to document their journey for other Black women is this innate desire to become whole individuals and a whole community.

This research is significant because Black women have been stereotyped, scripted, or virtually ignored by mainstream media. However, online media has become a space where Black women’s voices, which are usually silenced by mainstream media and the Black community, find a space where they can be heard. These Black women digital content creators testifying about their journey has given them an authoritative voice within the natural hair community, and with their popularity, has forced mainstream media --and big businesses-- to pay attention. Whereas before mainstream media had all the power to dictate truth, online media has enabled Black women digital content creators to supplement mainstream media with alternative messages. Even more, these Black women digital content creators have not only changed the way that these Black women wear their hair, but they have also changed their lifestyle. Above all, Black women feeling empowered to wear their hair in public spaces speaks to the transformative healing power of this journey.

⁵ A quote from the definition of a womanist, “Traditionally capable, as in: “Mama, I’m walking to Canada and I’m taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.” Reply: “It wouldn’t be the first time.”

The way that “culture” uniquely impacts storytelling for marginalized groups is lacking in academia broadly, as well as in the communication field specifically. This research adds to narrative communication by highlighting the cultural differences within storytelling. For example, Testifying is a life-altering methodology germane to Black culture where Black people tell stories which Gloria Hull claims “are funny, some sad; some elicit outrage and praise from the group. It’s a familiar and comfortable ritual in Black culture...” (Hull, 1982). As seen throughout chapter four, Black women’s testimonies are steeped in cultural idioms that speak to the unique communication process amongst Black women as well as, emphasizes the effectiveness of this communication style with the Black community.

Additionally, there are cultural and historical implications underlining the medium that these Black women digital content creators use to testify about their natural hair, known as an oral tradition. Oral tradition, which is cultural information passed down through generations, has always been an essential part of Black life as well as a pertinent form of Black survival. As such, better interpretations of the ways in which marginalized groups communicate not only adds further depth to the study of narrative communication, but also assists in breaking down the monolithic narratives presented within academia.

Similarly, this research adds to the study of technology and interpersonal communication, because online media has enabled individuals to more readily stay in contact (Mitra, 2016). More importantly, online media has equipped individuals with the tools to create communities surrounding similar interests (Mitra, 2016). As such, individuals no longer have to solely stick to their assigned community, but are able to branch out and find communities that better cater to their needs and wants. This is

especially important to the discussion of natural hair because the Black community still largely reinforces anti-black rhetoric surrounding hair, but now, Black women are able to find a sense of belonging within these online spaces.

Likewise, since the texture of Black women's hair is the real marker of Blackness since complexion is fluid (Patterson, 1982), it may be useful to the study of women and gender studies to analyze the intersections between femininity, beauty, and the textures of Black women's hair. As Ingrid Banks notes, "For Black women, hair shapes our relationship to race, class, gender, sexuality, images of beauty, and power" (Banks, 2000). However, this relationship is arguably further complicated depending on the texture of a Black woman's hair, especially since the texture of one's hair allows some Black women to pass as another race. Because the texture of hair allows some Black women to pass as another race, hair is not solely a gender performance -- as in many cultures -- it is also a racial performance.

Also, future research should look into the way that Black individuals who identify as LGBTQA, and are a part of the Contemporary Natural Hair Movement, use their hair as a marker of their gender and racial performance. Additionally, future research should examine the commodification of the Contemporary Natural Hair Movement by big businesses, which has led to cultural appropriation by other races, but particularly Caucasian women who are now claiming to have "natural hair".

Furthermore, according to Design Essentials, "26% of Black women eliminated relaxers in 2010 and that increased 10% in 2011 bringing the new figures to 36%" (Bankhead & Johnson 2011). With the critical mass of Black women transitioning to natural hair, it is useful to the study of Environmental Justice to evaluate the positive

effects that these Black women digital content creators/ “online beauticians” and other beauticians have in promoting healthier hair products. The Founder and Executive Director of Black Women for Wellness, Janette Robinson explains, “Everyone knows these beauticians and hair stylists inside of African-American communities... If this group of professionals is empowered to share health knowledge, it has the potential to disseminate widely inside of our community”(Robinson, 2015). Teni Adewumi, who is conducting groundbreaking research as a Ph.D. student in Environmental Health Sciences in the UCLA Fielding School of Public Health, addresses the harmful chemicals within relaxers; “This is an industry that isn’t regulated, and many of the products include ingredients that are known to be possible carcinogens, endocrine destructors, or allergens... These professionals are exposed both from using the products on themselves and from using them on their clients” (Adewumi, 2015). Additionally, when Adewumi surveyed Black women salon workers in Inglewood, California, she stated that she repeatedly saw the same health concerns: Asthma, Dermatitis, hair loss, Uterine fibroids, and miscarriages (Gordon, 2015). Having a cultural understanding of what hair means, and the value it holds amongst the Black community will help to effectively communicate the health concerns related to relaxers, as well as who are the best individuals --within the community -- to circulate this health information.

Interestingly, during the Black Power Movement Black women and men utilized their hair to communicate cultural pride, and political consciousness, however, the Contemporary Natural Hair Movement is more focused on the inner being. Overall, Black women have always found strategies to resist domination. Moreover, Ntozake Shange states “When I die, I will not be guilty of having left a generation of girls behind

thinking that anyone can tend to their emotional health other than themselves” (Tate,1983), and that is exactly what these Black women digital content creators are doing within the online natural hair community.

Indeed, Black women embracing their natural hair has led to more Black men supporting Black women’s natural hair, and even embracing their own natural hair. As such, future research should examine Black men in the Contemporary Natural Hair Movement, as well as the impact it has on Black men’s identity re-formation and masculinity. Additionally, because Black women typically do Black men’s hair, it would also be interesting, to evaluate the relationships forged between Black women who do Black men’s hair.

Prior to the Contemporary Natural Hair Movement, Black women with natural hair were believed to be of lower social status, because it is assumed that Black women of higher social status or Black women who wanted social mobility wore their hair straight. However, Black women have pushed back against this classist notion, arguing that natural hair is not cheap, so much so, that several memes have surfaced on the internet mocking this idea, claiming that natural hair products are expensive. Conversely, some Black women have argued that having natural hair requires time that they do not have, as well as, requires authority to even be able to dictate whether or not they can even wear their natural hair in public spaces such as their job. It is also important to note that the very fact that these Black women digital content creators are able to create and produce these videos from their homespace that there is most likely -- class privilege. Future researchers should further examine the role that class plays in the Contemporary Natural Hair Movement.

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Curriculum Vitae

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Education

Wake Forest University, Winston Salem, NC, May 2016

Masters of Arts in Communication

Thesis: "Black Women's Natural Hair Journey"

GPA: .3.77

California State University Fresno, Fresno, CA, May 2014

Bachelors of Arts in Africana Studies and Communication

GPA: 3.5

USAC Study Abroad, Madrid, Spain, June 2013

Intermediate Spanish Class

GPA: 4.0

Publications

- Dalton, M. M., Steiner, R., Tate, C., Dillin, K., & Library Partners Press. (2015). *Critical media studies: Student essays on the wire* (First printition. ed.). Winston-Salem, North Carolina: Library Partners Press.

Research Experience

Research assistant, Department of Communication, Wake Forest University, Fall 2015

Research Advisor: Dr. Steven Giles

- Conducted surveys addressing sports involvement and child obesity
- Analyzed how Youth Sports groups hindered healthy eating
- Developed a health campaign that promoted meal planning
- Based on findings, made recommendations for implementing health marketing in youth sports.

Teaching Experience

- *Teaching Assistant*, Communication and Technology, Wake Forest University, Spring 2015
- *Teaching Assistant*, Race, Gender, and Media, Wake Forest University, Fall 2015

Teaching Assistant, Empirical Research in Communications, Wake Forest University, spring 2015

- *Debate Assistant*, Critical and Performance debate, Wake Forest University, fall 2014
- *Afterschool Coordinator*, Teaching Fellows, Joint Program with Fresno State University, Spring 2010 – spring 2014

- Los Angeles Metropolitan Debate League, University of Southern California, summer 2014 and 2015
- Fresno State Summer Debate League, Fresno State University, summer 2015

Community Service

- Lectured at the Eddie Conway Liberation Institute (ECLI), summer 2014.
- Developed and marketed TedXFresnoState, spring 2013
- Conducted an Africana Convention, spring 2012 and 2013
- Lectured at NAACP Africana Week

Awards/Honors

- National Qualifier to the National Debate Tournament
- Octo-finalist at NDT
- Octa-finalist at CEDA
- All-American Debater –
 1. <http://collegian.csufresno.edu/2013/04/09/debate-teams-brings-home-national-awards/>
 2. <http://www.fresnostatenews.com/2014/01/24/barking-bulldogs-debate-team-rises-to-no-11-nationally/>
- UCLA Law Fellow
- 4th Highest GPA in the Africana Department

Social Media

- Generated a Facebook Group that educates Black women on products, tutorials, new, and affirmations of natural hair
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/343947289031607/>
- Created a YouTube channel that educate Black women on care for their natural hair
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V4HTVIY0r3I>