

Proceedings of the New York State Communication Association

Volume 2017 *75th Proceedings of the New York State Communication Association*


Article 11

November 2021

“Don’t Touch My Hair”: An Examination of the Exercise of Privilege and Power Through Interracial Hair-Centered Communication Interactions

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Recommended Citation

Collier, Zakiya (2021) "“Don’t Touch My Hair”: An Examination of the Exercise of Privilege and Power Through Interracial Hair-Centered Communication Interactions," *Proceedings of the New York State Communication Association*: Vol. 2017 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://docs.rwu.edu/nyscaproceedings/vol2017/iss1/11>

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“Don’t Touch My Hair”: An Examination of the Exercise of Privilege and Power through Interracial Hair-Centered Communication Interactions

Abstract:

The black body, including skin color and hair texture, has served as markers of Otherness separating Black people from people of other racial groups. Because of this, the black body especially that of the female, is frequently subjected to the interrogation by non-black people. This study examines the effects of that interrogation as it relates to black women’s hair. Two critical questions are explored: 1) What role does white privilege play in the questioning and touching of Black hair? and 2) Do these questions signify the innocent quest of information for understanding and coexistence or are they assertions of power and privilege concealed within seemingly trivial personal communication interactions? The following narratives of black women’s experiences of hair interrogation highlight the complex effects associated with seemingly harmless interracial communication interactions.

Introduction:

There is a difference between knowledge of other people and other times that is the result of understanding, compassion, careful study and analysis for their own sakes, and on the other hand knowledge—if that is what it is—that is part of an overall campaign of self-affirmation, belligerency, and outright war. There is, after all, a profound difference between the will to understand for purposes of coexistence and humanistic enlargement of horizons, and the will to dominate for the purposes of control and external enlargement of horizons, and the will to dominate for the purposes of control and external dominion.

Edward Said, *Orientalism* 2003

The black body, including skin color and hair texture, has served as markers of Otherness separating Black people from people of other racial groups. Because of this, the black body especially that of the female, is frequently subjected to the interrogation by non-black people. That interrogation sometimes includes interruptions of one’s activities and the intrusion into one’s space and is often accompanied by the assumption that the black addressee is obligated to respond as in any other communication interaction. However, there is something specific to the interracial interactions in which black hair interrogation occurs often resulting in misunderstood hostility from the black participants. This paper serves to illuminate the experiences of black women regarding their hair in order to illuminate and validate their indignation and hopefully bring an end to the dehumanizing practices of unwelcomed interrogation and touching. This

paper is a written argument against the omnipresent, privileged White person. The author (a Black woman) along with other Black women is fed up with the unwarranted comments and gestures towards her hair. By writing this paper, this Black woman is leaving a state of victimhood and deciding to reclaim her agency by validating her own experience.

Methodology

The findings of this study are an attempt to become aware of how the “politics of racial domination” are made manifest in the everyday personal interactions between White people and Black women. They demonstrate that Black women are confronted daily with unwarranted questions, comments, and touches from white people regarding their hair that evidence the desire to dominate through the nonreciprocal desire for interracial interaction and consumption. Data were collected from audio-recorded focus groups discussion collected in November 2016, and the collected discussions will serve as data for investigating the domination and commodification of Black women’s hair through interracial communication interactions. “Whiteness is often discussed as a social structure that manages human interaction rather than the reverse, a communicatively driven entity translated, shaped, reified, and concretized by interaction” (Jackson 1999:52), but I am particularly seeking to explore how whiteness is used communicatively by examining the following research questions: What role does white privilege play in the questioning and touching of Black hair? Do these questions signify the innocent quest of information for understanding and coexistence or are they assertions of power and privilege concealed within seemingly trivial personal communication interactions? Because this line of research has an exploratory nature, it presupposes an inductive methodology. The methods of this study “assume a first-person point-of-view of how a person relates to the lived world that she

inhabits and follows the three-step phenomenological procedures of description, reduction, and interpretation as Lanigan and Nelson describe, respectively (Camara 2010:50).

First, data were collected from two focus groups of Black female students at New York University. Recruitment was conducted by advertisement through the Organization of Black Women on the campus of New York University. The focus groups were organized through the organization's regularly scheduled meetings and were separated into graduate and undergraduate solely due to the participants' varying schedule availability. The first consisted of 3 graduate students and the second of 6 undergraduate students, with a total 9 participants. A questionnaire was used to gather demographic information including age and identified race. All participants self-identified as Black and or African-American, and ages ranged between 18-24 with a mean age of 20.7. All interviews were audio-recorded face-to-face and later transcribed and coded for analysis. There were approximately six questions or discussion prompts, not including those generated organically by the participants, and the length of the discussions were approximately 30 minutes. Among the prompts were questions of questioning/touching/commenting of one's hair, being the center of white scrutiny, psychological/social impacts, and cultural appropriation. The participants were able to answer the questions in any way they elected and several of them chose to return to previously asked questions or respond to another participant's response. This contributed to the breadth of the data as responses led to mini-discussions relevant to the topic. As Alexander and LeBlanc note, the use of narrative forms revealed the complexity of our experiences and "allowed our voices, experiences, and thoughts to be the center of the analysis" (Diggs and Clark 2002:375).

The second step involved a reduction of the descriptions of lived experiences into thematic insights addressing the research question. The third step of the research process focused

on producing an interpretation of these themes, which was facilitated by both the participants' own interpretations of their experiences, as well as the author's self-identification as a 22-year-old Black woman.

Thematic Insights:

Descriptions of interracial encounters provided insight into some of the realities of Black womanhood and Black hair politics. Within the discussions I have identified four essential themes with accompanying subthemes: 1) White questions or touches as unwarranted, including the subthemes: boundary/personal space violation, tactless curiosity, and the lack of acknowledgement or permission; 2) White privilege as the authority to touch or address Black hair including sub-themes: ability to do anything, dominating conversation, and assumed position or influence; 3) Psychological and social identity negotiations, which includes sub-themes: "avoiding interaction and confrontation, uncomfortability/self-hatred, and intentional resistance; and 4) Objectification/Erasure of Black women, including the Othering/Exoticizing, infatuation/fetishization, the desire to embody, and the reaffirmation of power through successful appropriation.

Unwarranted White Questions or Touches

The first theme that emerged from this study focused on the unwanted and unwarranted interactions with white people regarding their Black hair. Participants characterized these interactions as boundary/personal space violation, tactless curiosity, and noted the lack of acknowledgement of their personhood and their right to grant permission before being addressed

or touched. One of the participants, Jane*, recounted an unwanted interaction that interrupted her activity:

I was at the store, at the grocery store, minding my own business with my nephew and some white man was like, "I love your afro." I was like my hair is not even out today, it's not in an afro. It's in a ponytail with some hair sticking out and a little puff. What are you saying to me right now? It was like so unwarranted.

Not only do these interactions interrupt one's activities, but can also intrude upon one's personal space. Ola, one of the participants, recalls her sense of amazement when a white student described to her an encounter with another Black woman:

She was saying how she was so amazed by it and how she had a classmate who also had similar hair to me and she just touched it even though the classmate said she couldn't, she did it anyway. And I was like amazed by the lack of boundaries that people have and also, the way she talked about it.

Another participant, Faith, recalls a similar experience in which she and other students were actually the ones whose personal space was frequently violated:

In high school I had this one math teacher and I've had him for 11th and 12th grade and any time I changed my hair, a weave, or different weaves, he would always come around and touch Black girls' hair. So he'd be showing you something then he'd pat on your head and say oh... I didn't know that this wasn't *your* hair. He would do it all the time. The one time that I didn't have a weave, he was like "oh". He was a great teacher but it was just that one thing with him being so curious about Black people hair. I was like why didn't you just ask me instead of touching my hair.

She briefly addresses the white curiosity that led to touching the students' hair, but also points out that he did not ask the students directly about their hair, nor did he ask to touch the hair. In this case, questions about her hair are preferred to unwelcomed touches. Stacy also tells a similar story, however, with an unknown individual, as opposed to a teacher:

One day I wore it out at some bar and we were walking in and someone just came and just sticks their hand fully inside my hair, like nails to scalp. And I couldn't believe it and I turned around and it was a white girl and she said, "I'm so sorry, your hair is lush and like gorgeous!" And I was like, "why would you do that?"

Another respondent, Mari, actually regrets not addressing someone who touched her hair:

In 7th grade I remember my teacher just coming up and touched my puff and I didn't say anything to her but looking back I wish I did.

* All names were changed

This reflection also proves to be especially meaningful because even though this incident happened several years ago when Mari was in 7th grade that violation proved to be so significant that she still remembers it to this day.

These examples highlight several key factors in the experience of Black women regarding their hair. First, most participants suggested that they did nothing to invite the questions or feels of/about their bodies. In other words, they were unwanted, unprovoked, and unwarranted. Because of the unwelcome characteristic, the respondents considered these interactions a violation of their personal space and were shocked by such violation. This shock was also accompanied by confusion and misunderstanding as to why someone would so purposefully violate bodily boundaries. Some of the participants recognized the sense of curiosity from the white participants, but noted that there were better ways to address that curiosity. For example, some of them mentioned that they would appreciate being asked either about their hair or asked to touch it before the intrusion occurs. However, that acknowledgement of their ability to answer about themselves or their ability to give permission to touch their body is never present in these interactions. In their work on communicating across race and class, Wood and Houston (1995) they assert:

Members of each social group communicate in some ways that aren't shared by people outside that group. Although individual variations exist, most of us tend to adopt much of our groups' perspectives. Standpoint theory doesn't deny individuality, but it does contend that social groups influence how we view ourselves and others and how we act in the world. This implies that how any individual acts and thinks is not purely personal, since each of us is situated within and shaped by broader horizons of cultural life that make disparate experiences available to different groups. (42)

,they go on to say “White middle-class groups in the United States admire people who assert their individual rights over those of others. Yet many other groups don't admire, and may actively disapprove of, self-advancement” (45). While this may offer somewhat of an explanation of why white middle class persons may feel that they can assert their individual rights in some interactions, which may not be understood by persons of other races or economic

classes, but it does not address why white persons feel that it is their 'individual right' to touch or question a Black woman's hair, which leads us to the next thematic insight.

White privilege as the authority to touch or address Black hair

Although there may be conflicting communication styles or moral values that cause difficulties in interracial interactions, in addressing Black women's hair, there is an apparent authority that grants white people the right to question or touch Black women's hair. The participants have identified that authority as 'white privilege.' Historically contextualized,

Although the United State became a biracial nation when the first European colonists arrived in the 16th century, and is now a multiracial nation, throughout most of this country's history whites have taken and maintained a position as the socially and economically privileged race. Disparate opportunities and status available to diverse racial/ethnic groups explain many differences in views of money, politics, social life, education, the meaning of race, and the interaction among members of different races. (Wood and Houston 1995:43-44)

When asked, "why do you think they (white people) feel they have the right to ask about your hair or body?" Jane responds:

Jane: I feel like white people feel like they can do anything.

Stacy follows Jane's statement by saying:

It's privilege. They feel like they own the world and all the people that live in it, and they can just do whatever, and even their inquiries are seen as innocent. It's just nosiness, because we don't ask. I don't ask. How is your hair so straight? Like I don't care. Even if I did care I'm not going to ask you every single day.

In other words, as Fanon (2008) argues, "The white man wants the world; he wants it for himself alone. He finds himself predestined master of this world. He enslaves it. An acquisitive relation is established between the world and him. But there exists other values that fit only my forms" (128). I followed up with a question about why 'we' (Black women) don't ask them about their

hair? Sam responds explaining that it's the opposite of being the privileged or dominant population:

That's what dominates the conversation. We've heard and seen it all in the media so we don't have to ask these questions.

Privilege not only grants people the perceived authority to 'know' any and everything in the world, but it also prevents people from seeing how their actions affect other people, because they are not in fact entitled to the world and everything in it. However, this privilege is not always specific to white people as Sam recalls:

I've had a girl who was Asian ask why don't you just wear your real hair. She's the same girl that I hear her talking about micro-aggressions against Asians and I'm wondering how she doesn't consider that a micro-aggression towards me. For me, it upsets me when I hear that people don't consider how they don't want it to be done to them, but they're doing it to other people.

The examples reveal that the respondents feel certain that white privilege plays the authorizing role in the experiences in the questioning and touching of their hair. Jackson (1999) in his inquiry of 'White Space, White Privilege' explains,

Every individual in any given social context must at some point adjust to meet expectations that are the norm; and normal behavior is almost always defined as that which is most reflective of whites. One qualified to be communicatively competent when one utilizes his or her skills, knowledge, and motivation to achieve successful relationships with others. When applied to intercultural encounters, success is unfairly measured by the normativity factor that presupposes that all interactants will meet some unspoken, yet understood standard of normative behavior... Whites have an assumed influence or position in most interactions as a "universal insider". (Jackson 48)

In other words, white people assume their behaviors and knowledge are the norm and therefore, that they are able to inquire and touch whatever they choose and it will be understood and accepted by others. Although that is not the case, "Whites are never in a position where they *must* concede or exchange a part of themselves on any permanent or temporary basis. They always have a choice, which will not affect their well-being or standard of living unless they allow it to do so. That is a given feature of uninterrogatable space" (Jackson 1999:48), inhabited

by white people whereas Black people (women in particular) inhabit a particularly 'hyper-interrogatable' space. The uninterrogatable space prevents the white person involved in these interactions from seeing the lack of reciprocity and the undesirable characteristic of these interactions. "For Whites, not having to negotiate a White cultural identity relaxes the obligation to respond to Others who alter their identities daily. Of course, White cultural identity negotiation may ultimately result in the sacrifice of white privilege" (Jackson 1999:50), ultimately the revelation of how their behaviors demand the daily renegotiation of the Black woman's identity.

Psychological and Social Identity Negotiations

The discussions featured a number of instances in which individuals discussed the psychological and social identity negotiations provoked by the anticipation of unwanted interactions with white people regarding their hair. Clinical psychologist Dr. Julia Boyd argues that for Black women "learning to comply publicly with white standards has not been as much a choice as a dictate necessary for survival" (Grayson 1995:25). Stacy describes how someone had just touched her hair and although she felt violated, she felt that she could not voice her discomfort:

I didn't want to cause a scene because then you're seen as hostile even though someone has just violated your space. So you always have to be.... So when they ask you questions you have to respond, or you have to be jokey about it. And I'm good at that because I don't like confrontation. But I just say, "you're not supposed to ask that" and they're just like "why? It's not even racist."

She also notes the feeling of implicit obligation to respond to questions or touches by white people. In other words, she feels that society requires black women to respond to or answer white people's inquiries in a 'civilized' manner. Grayson (1995) explains the psychological and social negotiations, "because we live in a culture where visual images affect our relations as human

beings, the choices Black women make about hairstyle or body appearance often mean the difference between acceptance or rejection by groups and individuals. Our choices also shape and affect how we feel about ourselves” (13). Other respondents, Jane, Ola, and Amanda, respectively, described not wearing their hair certain ways specifically to avoid the questions and the obligation to answer:

I never wore my hair out. I always wanted a bun or ponytail because it was like not wanting it out to cause more attention. I was already the only black girl in my class, having it out was like woo!

For me, I didn't really feel comfortable having natural hair until high school. I used to always want my hair straightened and I hated my hair. I always wanted it done. I couldn't go out in public if it wasn't done.

Up until the time when I was maybe 18 no one at my school ever saw my hair natural, EVER. I felt like I didn't want to have to go there. I didn't want to have to explain myself. I didn't want to do anything. I used to straighten it everyday and I'm from Florida so it never stayed straight. I remember getting braids to go to a waterpark or something and everyone was like, "oh your hair looks so different." When you take them out they're like, "wait, what happened? Did you cut your hair?" It's always "did you cut your hair?" Like how many times have you heard that and you're just like... you don't want to answer that question. You don't want to deal with that question.

Amanda continues her narrative by describing how that avoidance shifted to form of resistance when it became safe and acceptable to do so:

Then when I started wearing my hair natural in college, I felt like I could do that. I didn't have any issues after that. The natural hair movement really took off. There was a community to do that. In the PWI that I grew up in, there was too much pressure to conform and I didn't find a safe space to wear my hair natural.

Nadia states:

Having natural hair boosted my self-esteem

Most of the respondents agreed that actively resisting the white standard of beauty felt liberating. Although they also agreed that their natural hair wasn't necessarily a political statement, but they noted its potential political message:

There's also the notion of wearing your natural hair as a political statement, which is not the intention, but people always assume you're like super black, black power, Black Panther kind of thing. I think a lot of that happens because we start realizing that our hair can be a political statement without it meaning to be.

Sometimes that perception of a political statement leads to more policing of black hair in public spaces as Samantha describes:

Jobs or schools tell girls they can't have their hair a certain way because it's a distraction or it's unprofessional, so if we were just combatting what people think about you socially, and it didn't even affect possible jobs or school, day-to-day life. I don't think we can forget that it does typically affect it.

New York University law professor, Paulette Caldwell (1991) historically contextualizes this phenomena:

During the 1960s, in the midst of the violent upheaval and the rapid social change that characterized that period, many blacks chose to wear "natural" or Afro hairstyles as a celebration of self-esteem, a rejection of the shackles of racist oppression, or a claim to cultural identity. Those who chose Afro hairstyles faced stiff opposition, similar to the opposition that today confronts those who choose braids, including the loss or refusal of employment. (384)

Even today, perceived resistance to the white standard of beauty that "admires only individuals who approximate Anglo appearance" (Wood and Houston 1995:50) is stigmatized, criticized, and duly noted by white participants in interracial interactions. "When thinking about the visual, cultural, and political re/presentations of Black women's hair it is important to consider the relations of power working obscurely and not so obscurely upon Black women's hair and hair styles. Black women are constantly engaged in a battle of re-creating and re-interpreting cultural signs in regard to our hair" (Grayson 1995:25), especially with our hair being the center of attention for both the purposes of control and appropriation.

Objectification/Erasure of Black Women

Upon approaching this study, I sought to determine if the questions, touches, and interactions signify the innocent quest of information for understanding and coexistence or are they assertions of power and privilege. The participants' responses seem to embrace the latter. In

discussing cultural appropriation, some of the participants highlight the history of the objectification of the black (specifically female) body as Stacy demonstrates:

Black women are always objectified and looked at as other and objects of interest and desire without being humanized, which is crappy.

Ola discusses a white classmate describing another black female's hair:

The way she talked about it, it was exoticized almost and it made me uncomfortable because it shouldn't be a big deal. I don't feel the need to have it validated by you by saying "it's so beautiful, it's so amazing!"

Ola suggests that the questions and touching are not about black women at all in fact it is all about the white person asking the question and their experience in this interaction:

Sometimes I think it's about non-black people just wanting it to be about them. It's like a way for black women to have to teach someone about them and what they've gone through because of their hair. I feel like it's very much about them and their comfort and what they want to know. It's not about someone who has black hair. It's not about them.

Fanon (2008) asserts, "The presence of the Negroes beside the whites is in a way an insurance policy on humanness. When the whites feel that they have become too mechanized, they turn to the men of color and ask them for a little human sustenance" (129). Another respondent suggests that white people tend to other and exoticize black women subconsciously as if they are on some predetermined quest:

I think they just see black people as some form of exotic creatures and I think it's like subconscious. They do it subconsciously. Like they don't realize that that's the direct perception that they have of us, but based off their actions that we are in some form or fashion perceived as being a very different type of individual than them. It's something that they're constantly on the quest to learn about and discover so a lot of the times, most of the times they don't have any tact when attempting to solve this mystery that they have about black people.

bell hooks (1992) attributes this unintentional quest to the "pleasure to be found in the acknowledgement and enjoyment of racial difference" as demonstrated in mass culture (343). Thus, this quest suggest that the interracial interactions are a part of a personal quest of the white participants' pleasure themselves by calling attention to racial differences, (i.e skin color, hair

texture, and hairstyle). The pleasure principle is highlighted not in isolated incidences of hair-centered interactions, but by repeated instances that appear like an infatuation:

When I was in school, in Texas, I was walking with my afro in its full glory and that's when I know I'm going to get the most comments. I only get hit on by white guys when I have my fro.

Not only do the white participants in interracial interactions centering on black hair acknowledge and obsess over the difference, but they also express the desire to embody the hair of the black woman:

I had my hair in twists and I was working as a cashier and this white lady was like, "Oh I really like your hair like that. It really fits your face and everything," I was like "thank you" and she was like "I wish I could get my hair to do that" and then she was like "yeah I bet sometimes you wish your hair was straight" I was like "noo...."

Another participant, Gabbi, recalls a classmate asking her about her hair. While at first it does seem like an innocent search for understanding that quickly changes to a desire to embody:

I used to go to a middle school that was PWI and this one girl was like "how did you get your hair like that? It got so long?" Sometimes it's frustrating to tell them how to do it because I was so young I wasn't taken aback to it, I would just explain that they'll add extensions to your hair. And she was like "Oh I want them to do it to my hair." At a certain point, after it kept going and going, it just felt weird to me.

This can be paralleled to the focus on understanding and manageability of black hair visualized in advertisements for black hair products as Grayson (1995) argues,

Manageability in these advertisements, almost always represented in terms of hair that is straightened, is sold as a necessary attribute in this process. Hair style and hair texture are constructed in very specific and very narrowly defined ways. Lest we forget, all hair is manageable... Hair is usually perceived as unmanageable when it cannot be managed in ways that perpetuate long-established beauty norms. Black people's hair is perceived as unmanageable because it frequently is not or cannot be managed in ways that most beauty standards related to hair dictate. (15-16)

The questions directed to black women about their hair are for the purposes for dissecting the hair in order to take it on for themselves. This is what is meant by the term cultural appropriation, the detextualization or appropriation of the black experience while reinscribing it with a new context or narrative (hooks 1992). Stacy explains the recent appropriation of braids and afros by white celebrities:

They just want to Columbus everything and trademark everything...You can do whatever you want, as long as you're not trying to encroach upon someone's stuff and I think that cultural appropriation in terms of wanting to have an afro in the summer time, or braids in the summer time, it's inappropriate. Some people have an afro or braids year-round and we get criticized for it.

According to Caldwell (1991), "whites make fads of black culture, which, by virtue of their popularization, become-like all "pop"--disposable, vulgar, and without lasting value. Braided hairstyles are thus trivialized and protests over them made ludicrous" (380), which lead to the statements of "it's just hair":

What is the way of thinking? What is the thought process? Like everyone wants to participate in black culture but no one wants to give us credit. To the point where black people can't wear afros and certain styles to work and white people out here wearing afro weaves and braids when they're on vacation, but black people are getting fired because of their hair or little girls getting teased and punished. That's what happens from a young age, but they try to tell us "It's just hair".

"Hair seems to be such a little thing. Yet it is the little things, the small everyday realities of life, that reveal the deepest meanings and values of a culture" (Caldwell 1991:370).

Conclusion

For many of the participants black hair-centered interracial interactions and cultural appropriation are about more than just hair, it is about the denial of their existence and their experience once the hairstyles have been embodied by white persons who gained access to knowledge of the hairstyle from questioning and touching their hair. It completely decontextualizes the hairstyle, ignoring its development, the people who developed it, and the sometimes-oppressive experiences of those who have worn them while the questions and touches on the surface appear innocent as hooks (1992) explicates:

The desire to make contact with those bodies deemed Other, with no apparent will to dominate, assuages the guilt of the past, even takes the form of a defiant gesture where one denies accountability and historical connection. Most importantly, it establishes a contemporary narrative where the suffering imposed by structures of domination on those designated Other is deflected by an emphasis on seduction and longing where the desire is not to make the Other over in one's image, but to become the Other. (347)

Examining the ways in which black women experience, understand, and interpret interracial interactions centered on their hair is essential to revealing the ways that white privilege and power is manifested in seemingly trivial communication interactions. Not only do the unwanted questions and touches lead to psychological and social identity negotiations for black women that are not required for the white participants, but the questions and touches are also presupposed by the white privilege notion that one has power and it should be exercised to know, own, and embody everything in the world. If not careful, one could easily applaud the fact that there is interracial communication and consider the black woman's hostility to be unwarranted. However, interracial communication does not simply "eradicate the politics of racial domination" (hooks 1992:349); on the other hand these interaction can reinforce them. Although standpoint theory recognizes that people of different races and classes may have different values and communication styles so black hair-centered interracial conversations are simply a clashing of different values and styles, however it is more than communication styles. Rather, it is important to interrogate the presuppositions and purposes of the questions and touches of black hair. One may ask if there is any way to have interracial conversations about hair without the assertion of power and privilege and the answer is yes:

I've had non-black friends who were respectfully curious and that's fine because we do switch our hair up often. So I remember the first time I had to explain because I skipped class to get my hair braided and I said that it would take all day and they didn't understand that, so I had to give them a lesson on why it takes all day to get your hair done. It can be little instances like that, when you recognize that there are some holes and you feel willing to fill them in. I don't feel like we're obligated to fill them in, but you know the people that you surround yourself with better than anyone else. So if they have good intentions with their curiosity, I don't have an issue with *briefly* informing them, if I have the time to do it.

To my non-black readers:

For one, the touching of the hair has to stop, but the questions and perhaps asking for permission to touch is permissible if there is time or if it is appropriate for the context. However, one must realize that they do not have any ownership over black women's bodies, therefore, black women

are not obligated to answer their questions no matter how innocent their curiosity. Black people do have the choice to interact or not, even if white privilege makes people blind to that, but ignoring that fact is just as dehumanizing as the objectification itself. “Subject to subject contact between white and black which signals the absence of domination, of an oppressor/oppressed relationship, must emerge through mutual choice and negotiation” (hooks 1992:349), rather than by the implied obligation of an address by a white person, which recalls master/slave relations. Furthermore, the cultural appropriation and commodification of black hairstyles is a form of oppression and erasure when it is decontextualized and no recognition is given to the black women who are still stigmatized for the form in which hair grows from their heads. There is a difference between cultural appreciation and cultural appropriation; the former being the only one that gives recognition to those from whom the design, style, etc. was developed. I would also argue that in order to properly appreciate one’s culture without appropriating and consequently further oppressing, one should be aware of differing stigmas of wearing said style based on skin color and work toward changing that standard.

To my black (women) readers:

I thought this piece of research was needed to fill the gap in communication studies that fails to address the negotiations we must perform daily in order to accommodate interracial interactions involving our hair. We have spent years hating ourselves and our hair because we’ve been told that it’s ugly if it’s not straight, questioned every time it looks slightly different, and even violated whenever someone felt that it was imperative that they know ‘how it works’. However, “If the idea of the black body as despised, diseased, and ugly is a historical idea, it is an idea that can be revised in ways that allow for alternative descriptions” (Griffin 1996:525), and what I aim

to do here is to provide that alternative description, to give voice to our often silenced experiences. I wanted to bring into consciousness our bodily experiences with the hope that our non-black counterparts will begin to see how their whiteness is expressed communicatively and serves to further oppress us though interracial communication seems progressive. I also wanted to follow in the footsteps of black women writers before me: Maya Angelou, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and Zora Neale Hurston, etc. in that I wanted my work to serve to:

let individual black women understand the ideologies and conditions that have led them to feel the way that they do about themselves. In this way it is no longer a case of individuals suffering from their individual dissatisfaction with themselves. By coming to terms with the ways they have been constructed by racist ideologies and historical acts of torture, they can begin to release the elements of those ideologies that they have internalized. This is most definitely an important step toward a political consciousness which in turn is the most necessary step for active resistance. (Griffin 1996:534)

This is for us.

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