

GETTING HAIR “FIXED”: BLACK POWER, TRANSVALUATION, AND HAIR  
POLITICS

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GETTING HAIR “FIXED”: BLACK POWER, TRANSVALUATION, AND HAIR  
POLITICS

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A Thesis

Submitted to

the Graduate Faculty of

Auburn University

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the

Degree of

Master of Arts

Auburn, Alabama  
May 10, 2008

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THESIS ABSTRACT

GETTING HAIR “FIXED”: BLACK POWER, TRANSVALUATION, AND HAIR  
POLITICS

Monita Bell

Master of Arts, May 10, 2008  
(B.A., Alabama State University, 2006)

46 Typed Pages

Directed by Hilary E. Wyss

The afros that emerged during the Black Power movement of the 1960s and 1970s boldly proclaimed that hair is both important and political. The afro directly challenged the traditional ideal of beauty that devalued natural black features. The politics of “nappy” hair reflected the transvaluation promoted by Black Power activists, which asserted that blacks’ freedom from oppression required a change from a subordinate to a self-determining, self-defining mentality. Black female poets of the era address these politics in their work, in myriad ways, and reveal not only the transvaluative messages of “nappy” hair, but also the contradictions that materialized from a politics that ultimately disavowed a white beauty ideal for a black one.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I must thank Dr. Hilary Wyss for her encouragement and enthusiasm during this project, which served to keep me going when I did not have confidence in my work or my progress. I would also like to thank Dr. Susana Morris and Dr. Trimiko Melancon for their wonderful advice and support, and for their eagerness to participate in this process, all while being completely new to the department. I have learned so much from all three of them, and I really appreciate the time and care they took to guide me through this experience.

I am so grateful to my family for their understanding. They knew what I was doing when we went weeks without talking. I thank them for cheering me on, praying for me, and letting me know that I have made them proud—and for telling me to get off the phone and read when I didn't feel like it.

Innumerable thanks to my dear husband Bedarius, who has tolerated months without home-cooked food and my occasional blues. Even more than that, his unending love, support, and understanding have made all the difference in the world.

Most importantly, I give honor to my heavenly Father, who makes all things possible. I know I could not have done it without You.

Style manual used: MLA style manual, 6<sup>th</sup> edition.

Computer software used: Microsoft Word 2003

## GETTING HAIR “FIXED”: BLACK POWER, TRANSVALUATION, AND HAIR POLITICS

Hair matters. It has always mattered, and the United States learned just how much hair matters when the afro emerged full force during the Black Power movement (BPM) that swept the country between approximately 1965 and 1975. At this unique historical moment, black people’s hair, especially that of black women, became a site for complex social and cultural politics that questioned traditional concepts of beauty and blackness. Indeed, before the BPM, the treatment of black women’s hair in America had resulted in black women devaluing part of their identities as African descendents—their natural hair. Afros clearly undermined the traditional repudiation of black hair in favor of its appreciation. As Byrd and Tharps put it, “In the mid-sixties, Black hair underwent its biggest change since Africans arrived in America. The very perception of hair shifted from one of style to statement. And right or wrong, Blacks and Whites came to believe that the way Black people wore their hair said something about their politics.”<sup>1</sup>

Hair does *say* something, whether a person intends to or not. The significance of hair politics’ position in the Black Power movement is that, for generations, natural black hair, which is what an afro is, said “unacceptable,” “ugly,” and “undesirable.” It is important to note, however, that afros are one type of natural hair. Ingrid Banks’s

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<sup>1</sup> See Ayana D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharps, *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America*, 51.

definition of “natural” is useful here: “hair that is not chemically altered or straightened by the pressing comb or blow dryers.”<sup>2</sup> While nappy hair, or the coiled, kinky hair characteristic of many people of African descent, is natural hair, natural hair may not be tightly curled. In our post-BPM world, *nappy* is a very complex term that raises very sensitive issues. Some people still view it in light of historically negative connotations, while others reappropriate it and use it in celebratory terms. When I use the term outside of my discussion of its use by others, I am using it in a way that simply refers to tightly curled hair texture and that does not honor its derogatory meanings. I also use *kinky*, a term with equally complicated meanings, as interchangeable with *nappy*.<sup>3</sup> “Nappy” more specifically refers to what is traditionally considered “bad hair,” and afros are placed in the nappy hair category, which is why the Black Power afros—the wearer’s intentions notwithstanding—represented such a bold political statement. During this era, black women who wore afros subverted the historically negative implications of *nappy* for a proud reclaiming of the term.

Because of the Black Power afros, natural hair was saying something new, something that contradicted the more acceptable straightened styles that black women had been conditioned to don for decades. Banks explains the historical connotations of “nappy” natural hair and its contrast with a white aesthetic, or mainstream beauty ideals that privileged long, straight hair:

For black women in this society, what is considered desirable and undesirable hair is based on one’s hair texture. What is deemed desirable

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<sup>2</sup> See Banks’s “Table 3: Popular Black Hair and Hairstyling Glossary of Terms” in Appendix II of *Hair Matters: Beauty, Power, and Black Women’s Consciousness*, 172.

<sup>3</sup> My uses of *nappy* and *kinky* only refer to their negative connotations for specific explicatory purposes. *Nappy* itself is relative, as some people consider curly hair, not necessarily tightly curly hair, to be nappy.



is measured against white standards of beauty, which include long and straight hair (usually blonde), that is, hair that is not kinky or nappy. Consequently, black women's hair, in general, fits outside of what is considered desirable in mainstream society.<sup>4</sup>

For blacks to forsake the perms, relaxers, wigs, and pressing combs that made their hair more socially desirable, then, was to blatantly reject a fixed aesthetic that devalued their natural hair texture. Because this white aesthetic historically represented the norm for beautiful hair, afros represented its direct opposite. And because hair is something that can be seen and *read* immediately, especially if it does not meet mainstream standards, afros brought the politics of hair to the forefront, conspicuously proclaiming the value of natural black hair and thereby denying the primacy of white features over natural black features.

Those politics fell in line with Black Power politics in that “Black Power,” for all its various interpretations, effectively stood for black self-determination, self-definition, and the active pursuit of freedom from oppression. It meant transvaluation, or, “a fundamental psychological and cultural conversion from [black people's] socialization as a subordinate people to a self-determining nation.”<sup>5</sup> Transvaluation necessitated a realization that blacks could and should define themselves for themselves, and it declared autonomy that previously had been lacking. The incorporation of hair politics into this movement reaffirmed the self-definition and agency of the BPM's call for transvaluation.

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<sup>4</sup> Banks, 2. I should point out that when I use the terms *white aesthetic*, *mainstream ideals*, *traditional beauty standards*, or their variants, I do realize that not all white women have long, straight, blonde hair. To be sure, women of all races, including many white women, have struggled with this standard. However, the racial element is also important here. Black women have a historical position as degraded, dehumanized people in this country, and their natural hair is part of that negative history. Thus, black women struggle along gendered and racial lines, and thereby struggle disproportionately.

<sup>5</sup> See Eddie S. Glaude's introduction to *Is It Nation Time?*, 4.

With respect to hair, a fusion of Black Power politics and hair politics posited that natural black hair was just as worthy a standard of beauty as the mainstream ideal. The place of hair in this movement, then, functioned as an outward show of transvaluation, forming the nexus between the development of a politics concerning hair and the Black Power movement. And at this historical moment, literary creations illustrated the complexities of these politics. It is useful to explore some of these pieces as documentation of the complications that resulted from a movement that hoped to redefine blackness and perceptions of beauty by replacing the traditional white standard with a black one. The hardline definition of blackness and liberation politics represented by the afro caused a significant separation in the black community, which ran counter to the politics of black unity the movement represented, and literature by black women at this moment demonstrates the anxieties in these politics.

In the midst of a movement in which blacks were advocating transvaluation and using hair as a means of promoting that cause, black women writers were certainly addressing those concerns in their work. Lucille Clifton, Nikki Giovanni, Carolyn Rodgers, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Willie M. Coleman joined many other artists in expressing the various nuances of black hair politics in their writing. They extolled the beauty of natural hair, directly challenged white beauty standards, and openly attacked the notion that black women's natural hair needed to be "fixed." At the same time, in their respective ways, their works also communicated the inherent contradictions that lay in a politics that ultimately invalidated one standard of beauty by imposing another. Yes, natural hair was an outward show of the transvaluation promoted by the Black Power movement. However, with the embrace of natural hair—and nappy hair in particular—as

the standard for blackness and black pride, natural hair that was not nappy became a badge of shame. This privileging of certain types of natural hair resulted in a reversal of the oppression the movement was meant to combat, undermining the goal of self-determination. Black women's literature during the era portrays the celebration and privileging of *nappy* hair as represented in the afro, as well as the tensions that result from replacing the paradigm of whiteness with a similarly fixed paradigm of blackness.

### **Black Self-Love and Self-Definition**

Certainly, white features as the benchmark for ideal beauty has a very long and firmly ingrained history of devaluing black physical characteristics, black hair in particular.<sup>6</sup> Byrd and Tharps explain that, as far back as the early eighteenth century, some whites asserted that blacks grew wool on their heads instead of real hair.<sup>7</sup> According to Joy DeGruy Leary, who has studied African Americans' "transgenerational trauma" caused by their enslavement, slave owners intentionally conditioned their slaves to view their "dark skin and kinky hair" as inferior to a white aesthetic.<sup>8</sup> This conditioning, part of the intricate dehumanizing process of slavery, typifies the very old binary in which white is "good" and black is "bad," and while black men are also included in this binary and have been moved to straighten their hair for decades—think of the conks and pompadours of the first half of the twentieth century—black women have been subject to the most pressure because of traditional links between long, straight hair

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<sup>6</sup> In her review of literature on hair studies, Banks identifies Willie Lee Morrow, author of *400 Years Without a Comb* (1973), and Orlando Patterson, author of *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (1982), as two black hair scholars who contend that Africans' kinky hair was the primary marker of their servitude in North American and Caribbean slavery. It was the most powerful symbol of their inferiority. See Banks, 7-8.

<sup>7</sup> Byrd and Tharps, 14.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* Leary was a doctoral candidate at the time of publishing (2001) and is the author of *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing* (2005). She is now an assistant professor in Portland State University's School of Social Work.

and femininity. For women, this white-black duality was very much reinforced by advertisements for beauty products, which straightforwardly posited their natural features as antithetical to white ones. In *Hair Raising: Beauty, Culture, and African American Women*, Noliwe M. Rooks's thorough and insightful study of *fin-de-siècle* beauty ads, Rooks delves into the manifestations of this binary. Describing ads for skin lighteners and hair straighteners, Rooks asserts that "the advertisements relied heavily on 'before' and 'after' photographs that promised to change African American women from beasts into close approximations of white women, or beauties."<sup>9</sup> Black women were expected to accept that their natural features were ugly, or beastly, thereby to accept that their best options for improving those features required imitating white features.

The psychological, emotional, and cultural exploitation that Rooks underscores here is a clear example of what Black Power artist and activist Amiri Baraka called "tokenism": a system of beliefs that presumes blacks' internalization of inferiority and acceptance of oppression.<sup>10</sup> Complete freedom, with respect to hair, would mean an equal treatment of black women's natural hair as acceptable aesthetically, socially, and professionally, which surely was not the case when the Black Power movement got underway, much less at the turn of the century. Baraka places tokenism in the context of slaveholders' distinguishing house slaves as superior to field slaves, linking that assumed

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<sup>9</sup> Rooks, 119. Skin lighteners, or skin bleaching creams, are "beauty products" designed to literally lighten and *whiten* the skin. Rooks names two skin lighteners advertised between 1866 and 1905: Black Skin Remover and Black and White ointment. See Rooks, 27. According to Margaret Hunter's study of colorism, or classification based on skin tone, skin bleaching is "one of the oldest traditions" of attempts to attain whiteness. See Hunter, "The Persistent Problem of Colorism: Skin Tone, Status, and Inequality," 248.

<sup>10</sup> Baraka defines tokenism in these terms: "that philosophy (of psychological exploitation) which is supposed to assuage my natural inclinations toward complete freedom." See LeRoi Jones, "Tokenism," 80. "Tokenism" was published under Baraka's birth name, LeRoi Jones, and is cited by that name in the Works Cited listing.

superiority to whiteness in house slaves' blood that often translated into such obviously more Eurotypic features as lighter skin and straighter hair.<sup>11</sup> To be sure, Baraka's analysis presumes that all house slaves were fair-skinned, curly- or straight-haired blacks, which is certainly not accurate. Such a suggestion oversimplifies a very intricate system of enslavement and treatment of African Americans. However, Baraka's overall point about the psychological and cultural harm inflicted by tokenism's diminishing of nappy black hair is well taken. The psychological exploitation inherent in the "superiority" given "whiter" features manifested itself by ostensibly linking straight hair with advantage or higher status.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, from a Black Power perspective, which denied the validity of dominant culture-imposed definitions of black beauty, straightened hair signified a colonized or enslaved mentality by seemingly admitting the inferiority of natural black features. Hence, some Black Power proponents interpreted a desire to straighten out the naps as playing into white standards of beauty and contributing to a perpetuation of racial ideologies that assigned value to white physical characteristics and not black ones.

Given this longstanding history of a white-black beauty duality, and that black women could effectively alter their hair in order to approximate white beauty, the explosion of afros turned the standard on its head, not only in mainstream society but in the black community as well: "Prior to the mid-sixties...to be told that your hair was nappy was akin to having someone talk about your mama."<sup>13</sup> Therefore, to believe that "black was beautiful" was truly revolutionary and exhibited a transvaluative process that

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<sup>11</sup> Baraka, "Tokenism," 73. For more on slaveholders' privileging of lighter-skinned slaves, see Walter Johnson's *Soul by Soul*. Johnson describes whites' common association of fair-skinned slaves with good breeding and character, 154.

<sup>12</sup> Rooks explains that white beauty companies' marketing of skin lighteners and hair straighteners centered on the products' facilitation in "class mobility within African American communities and social acceptance by the dominant culture," 26.

<sup>13</sup> Byrd and Tharps, 52.

BPM proponents believed was necessary in order to achieve freedom from both oppression and an oppressed *mentality*. An afro, so divergent from the established norm, was a clear sign that rejected tokenism and openly proclaimed the value of natural black beauty. Bell hooks recalls the significance of the afro as a Black Power liberationist trope: “Large numbers of black women stopped chemically straightening our hair since there was no longer any negative stigma attached to wearing one’s hair with its natural texture.”<sup>14</sup> And as Byrd and Tharps note, “A people wanting to assert their pride and unity needed to have pride in how they looked.”<sup>15</sup> Blacks were beginning to define their own standards of beauty and loving it.<sup>16</sup> Self-love and self-definition emerged from a black cultural revamping, transvaluation, which allowed them to appreciate what was once deemed valueless: their own black features, especially their hair.

Lucille Clifton’s pithy “Homage to My Hair” is an enthusiastic celebration of kinky, as opposed to simply natural, hair. This kinky hair is personified as vivacious, dancing, and feisty: “when i feel her jump and dance / i hear the music! my God / i’m talking about my nappy hair! / she is a challenge to your hand / Black man...” (lines 1-5). Without explicitly depicting nappy hair as antithetical to whiteness or repudiating straight hair, Clifton’s speaker simply appreciates her natural hair in itself. In this piece, nappy hair signifies a respect for the natural texture of black hair, which the “Black is beautiful” mantra inspired during the Black Power era. Yet, by addressing her celebration to the “Black man,” the persona implies that he too should notice and celebrate the beauty of

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<sup>14</sup> hooks, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*, 122.

<sup>15</sup> Byrd and Tharps, 52.

<sup>16</sup> Black women’s embracing of afros during the BPM was not the first instance of their loving their own features, however. In contrast with turn-of-the-century hair product ads by white manufacturers, ads by black female manufacturers did not compare or contrast black women’s hair with that of white women. Instead, they used their own bodies as models for “before” and “after” images and advocated “healthy hair,” as opposed to straight hair. See Rooks, 42-43.

her nappy hair: “she is as tasty on your tongue as good greens / Black man, / she can touch your mind / with her electric fingers...” (lines 6-9). Not only should he notice and celebrate it, though, but also he should recognize it as appealing to his tastes and as part of his own milieu. This man already knows the taste of “good greens.” The speaker is attempting to convey to him that a black woman’s nappy hair is just as familiar and just as desirable. Thus, if both black men and women can love and appreciate the woman’s natural hair texture, then the more unified they will be. This appreciation and unity were both significant aspects of the BPM and its emphasis on transvaluation.

Indeed, black women were held to mainstream notions of beauty within the black community; black men were just as conditioned as black women to privilege a white aesthetic. While the natural hair movement implied racial unity, for women it also bore gendered implications. After all, the standard for beautiful hair, a marker of femininity, was long straight hair. Therefore, black women’s wearing their hair natural rejected not only notions of racial superiority but also ideals of femininity, to which many black men subscribed. Maxine Craig addresses the particular repercussions of black women’s going natural by comparing their experiences with that of black men who ceased conking their hair. She writes, “It was easy for a man to give up processing his hair. In doing so he was moving from a marginalized black masculinity toward a more conventional form of black masculinity.”<sup>17</sup> A black man’s natural hair was more socially acceptable, as opposed to a black woman’s natural hair. She was moving from conventionality to rebellion, directly challenging feminine norms. Clifton’s piece speaks to these contrasting implications by

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<sup>17</sup> Craig, “The Decline and Fall of the Conk; or, How to Read a Process,” 411. Robin D. G. Kelley also addresses the contrasting implications of black men and women’s going natural in “Nap Time: Historicizing the Afro.”

valorizing the femininity and beauty of black women's kinky hair. By addressing a transvaluative message to the black man, then, Clifton's persona involves him in the movement to advance a black aesthetic as valid. "Homage to My Hair" clearly refutes tokenism by expressing the freedom in a black woman's loving her own natural body, as well as a black man's love for that natural body.

### **Nappy Hair Equated with Black Power**

As the afro's popularity increased, the meaning of nappy hair came to mean more than a celebration of natural black beauty and more than a conspicuous marker of the transvaluation espoused by the Black Power movement; it was increasingly becoming *synonymous* with Black Power. According to Robin D. G. Kelley, BPM group the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) believed that a complete denial of "western" values in favor of traditional African values was necessary in order to achieve liberation. Among the western values that liberationists were encouraged to reject was a white aesthetic as the beauty ideal. Kelley illustrates that RAM's push for a denial of cultural and ideological oppression "also meant an end to processed hair, skin lighteners, and other symbols of parroting the dominant culture. Indeed, the revolution targeted not only assimilated bourgeois Negroes but their accomplices—barbers and beauticians!"<sup>18</sup> The advocacy of natural hair during the BPM, in correspondence with the movement's transvaluative messages, encouraged a renewal of the mind in which blacks no longer believed their natural hair inferior to the standard of straight hair. If natural hair was an evident symbol of transvaluation, from a Black Power perspective, straightened hair represented and validated the familiar white/good-black/bad binary. Those who wore

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<sup>18</sup> Kelley, "Stormy Weather: Reconstructing Black (Inter)Nationalism in the Cold War Era," 85-86.



straightened hair and those who straightened that hair—barbers and beauticians—became involved in Black Power and hair politics in such a way that questioned their loyalty to the cause of black self-determination, as their hair-straightening seemed in direct opposition to the movement.

Nikki Giovanni's "Of Liberation" confronts this apparent danger of straightened hair to the liberationist cause. While the poem does not specifically address hair politics as its main subject, it does include it as a point of liberation politics. For instance, she associates "straightened hair" with hypocritical, dangerous, calculating white supremacists: "The most vital commodity in america / Is Black people / Ask any circumcised honkie [...] / Honkies tell niggers don't burn [...] / But they insist on straightened hair / They insist on bleaching creams" (lines 16-23). While recalling the suffering of blacks at the hands of white domination—black people are America's most vital *commodity*—she links this supremacy and ill treatment with the dominant culture's contention that blacks are better served by imitating whiteness instead of resisting oppression, or "burning." More than being commodities, though, Giovanni's assertion that blacks literally want to fight back addresses the reality of outright violence against blacks during this period. The platform of the Black Panther Party (BPP), arguably the most notorious BPM organization, offers an excellent example of violence against blacks by law enforcement. The BPP identified "an immediate end to POLICE BRUTALITY and MURDER of black people" as one of their foundational points. They considered Oakland, California, the BPP's home base, a veritable police state.<sup>19</sup> In many cases, black

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<sup>19</sup> See Foner, Philip S., ed. *The Black Panthers Speak*, 7. See pages 10-11 for a facsimile of an issue of the BPP's newspaper, *The Black Panther*, which lists several men, women, and children murdered and beaten

people were being brutalized and killed at the hands of white supremacists, so an assertion that blacks straighten their hair and bleach their skin in attempts to approximate the ideals espoused by those supremacists stems from more than beauty ideals. The history of humiliation and violence against blacks is also part of the historical context of natural hair's function in the BPM, so this context is important to understanding the politics of natural hair.

Additionally, Giovanni's lines speak to blacks' historical lack of autonomy in general, precisely what BPM activists and proponents were resisting. They were fighting to control the way they lived, thought, and defined themselves.<sup>20</sup> Hence, blacks' adherence to white beauty ideals impeded the fight for liberation and exacerbated the status quo that both denied black beauty and dehumanized black people as commodities. Giovanni details some of these historical commodities: "3/5 of a man / 100% whore / Chattel property" (lines 12-14). Each of these descriptors bears a connection with blacks' enslavement, emphasizing a correlation between blacks' attempts to meet white standards and their historical positions as inferior, oppressed, and owned. Moreover, she insists that two necessary steps toward blacks liberating themselves from oppression are to "get the white out of your hair" and "out of your mind" (lines 39-40). On one hand, she is blatantly calling for the self-definition and psychological overhaul of transvaluation.<sup>21</sup>

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by Oakland police. Of course, Oakland is just one example of brutality that was occurring elsewhere during this period.

<sup>20</sup> Baraka's definition of Black Power is insightful here, as it highlights the agency BPM activists were calling for, that had been historically repressed: "Black Power, the power to control our lives ourselves. All of our lives. Our laws. Our culture. Our children. Their lives. Our total consciousness, black oriented....Power of the majority is what is meant." In essence, blacks should be able to control what happens in their neighborhoods and homes. See Baraka, "The Need for a Cultural Base to Civil Rites & Bpower Mooments," 41.

<sup>21</sup> Several figures posit similar ideas. Marcus Garvey and Frantz Fanon, considered two of the "fathers" of the BPM, each warned of the dangers of colonized mentalities to healthy black identities and self-

She contends that blacks must wear their hair naturally in order to achieve liberation; *hair* is an integral part of the revolution. But on the other hand, she is equating straightened hair with a subordinate mindset, or a “white mind.” By linking natural hair with Black Power, Giovanni suggests that women with straightened hair are anti-liberationist. While “Of Liberation” demonstrates the transvaluation implicit in “black hair,” it ignores the possibility that women with straightened hair may have embraced transvaluation as well, potentially threatening the solidarity of the BPM by dividing blacks based on hair texture.

That nappy hair and Black Power were becoming interchangeable signaled the beginnings of a new binary, however, one that stood to hinder the unity the BPM was meant to foster among blacks. The connection of nappy hair with black liberation disregarded the actuality that many BPM activists were involved with international liberationist causes and interracial anti-oppression efforts in the States.<sup>22</sup> The life of world-renowned Black Power era activist Angela Davis provides one example that complicates the fixed image of nappy hair as indistinguishable from black liberation politics. From Davis’s standpoint, *liberation*, and not just *black* liberation, was the key idea represented by her large, trademark natural. Writing in her autobiography about her attendance at a 1967 London conference themed “The Dialectics of Liberation,” Davis

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perceptions. Garvey addressed straightened hair when he declared that blacks should “take these kinks out of your mind, instead of out of your hair,” decrying the idea that “looking white” made blacks better people. Not addressing hair in particular in his *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon emphasized the need for black Africans to completely overturn the colonized identities instilled in them and to begin to conceptualize themselves as human beings with inherent dignity in order to attain freedom. Malcolm X explicitly connects hair-straightening with an enslaved mentality when he describes his pride in his conked hair in his *Autobiography*, and Alice Walker suggests that processed hair is “oppressed” hair in “Oppressed Hair Puts a Ceiling on the Brain.”

<sup>22</sup> The BPP, for instance, openly advocated working with any people or group “who were prepared to move against the power structure.” They allied with Puerto Rican political group the Young Lords, the Mexican-American Brown Berets, the white Young Patriots, and the Chinese-American Red Guards. See Foner, 219. Interestingly, the differences between Stokely Carmichael and BPP leaders that led to his defection from the party were rooted in his disagreement with the party’s interracial alliances. BPP leader Eldridge Cleaver discusses this defection in “An Open Letter to Stokely Carmichael.” See Foner, 104-108, esp. 104.

states, “My natural hair style, in those days still a rarity, identified me as a sympathizer with the Black Power Movement.”<sup>23</sup> Indeed she was, but this statement implies that an automatic association of her natural with Black Power was a hasty assumption. She cautioned blacks and their leaders—Stokely Carmichael, one of the conference speakers, was one of them—against “indiscriminantly” naming “white people...as the enemy” because such a view made it “virtually impossible to develop a political situation.”<sup>24</sup> Along that vein, she considered some of the black leaders’ dismissal of Marxism and socialism as a “white man’s thing” to be a large detriment to the movement; she was concerned with inhumanity at all levels and the disfranchisement of “all working people” and believed that socialism provided an appropriate vehicle for liberation struggle.<sup>25</sup> To assume that her afro was inextricably linked with *only* black liberation was to discount the full breadth of her activism. Even to this day, she is noted primarily for her afro and not her politics, and certainly not all of her politics.

The experiences that led to her later push for prison reform offer great insight into the range of her concerns and show that her afro did not represent only black liberation. For instance, captured in 1970 in New York after spending two months as a fugitive, she was placed in the psychiatric ward of the New York Women’s House of Detention, during which time she witnessed the unjust treatment of several inmates, black and white, who were kept constantly sedated, “even if they were completely sane.”<sup>26</sup> The more she observed the institutionalized abuse of these women, the more she resolved to help

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<sup>23</sup> Davis, *Angela Davis: An Autobiography*, 150.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 31-32.

reform such a broken system.<sup>27</sup> In another example from her detainment, she used the jail administration's unjust, discriminatory isolation of her from the general population as grounds for suing them in federal court in order to expose "the precedent the jail administration and government were trying to set in the treatment of political prisoners."<sup>28</sup> She and her legal team kept in mind future political prisoners in their efforts to right her situation. These examples from Davis's life point out one complication that was developing during the movement, that the afro necessarily symbolized a concern for black liberation. The problem here is that such an assertion then assumes that straightened hair means a lack of concern for black liberation. While the afro was indicative of transvaluation, it also denoted a trend toward assigning value based on physical characteristics, just as the historical binary had done, lowering the social standing of blacks who did not wear afros.

### **Nappy Hair Equated with Blackness**

Along with the notion that the afro necessarily meant Black Power was the notion that it necessarily meant *black*, and this is where a central complication of the afro-as-symbol comes into play. The strong association of the afro with Black Power translated into an equally strong association of straight hair and straightened hair with the status quo, or the continued dominance of the white power structure. Just as importantly, the increasingly rigid definitions of blackness posited women with straight or straightened hair as resigned to inferiority, without transvaluation. Given the narrower standard for *nappy* as *black*, straightened hair moved beyond being merely anti-liberationist, however. For blacks who subscribed to the notion that "real" blackness was marked by nappy hair,

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 42.

straightened hair conveyed an absolute desire to *be white*: “Now that Black was beautiful, straightening one’s hair in the image of White beauty was seen as blasphemy.”<sup>29</sup>

Byrd and Tharps sum up well the “moral policing that was taking place over hair.”<sup>30</sup> Some activists in the movement, such as Professor Charles V. Hamilton and author John O. Killens, cautioned against stringently defining blackness and linking natural hair with a politics of liberation, as such definitions reduced a politics of transvaluation to physical appearance.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, this policing, which made nappy hair “good” and straight hair “bad,” reversing the historical dichotomy, resulted in veritable competitions of blackness, forsaking the transvaluative ideas behind symbols of black pride like dashikis and afros.<sup>32</sup> For some black people, nappy hair was *not* their natural texture, so rhetoric equating nappy hair with blackness marginalized or completely ignored these individuals. As a result, the pressure to show one’s blackness through the afro caused many of these nappy-less people “to chemically kink [their] hair into an Afro” or to use other means to simulate the afro they could not naturally achieve.<sup>33</sup> Thus, this new dichotomy pushed an unnatural assimilation on those black people who did not have naturally nappy hair, incorporating similar means of prejudice inherent in turn-of-the-century beauty ads, and invalidating the transvaluative and unifying goals of the Black Power movement.

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<sup>29</sup> Byrd and Tharps, 58.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* Hamilton is perhaps most famous for his book *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (1967), with coauthor Stokely Carmichael.

<sup>32</sup> Dashikis, ornate garments worn by men over the top half of the body, originate in West Africa. They became very popular during the Black Power movement as a symbol of rejecting the dominant white American culture in favor of identification with traditional African culture.

<sup>33</sup> Byrd and Tharps, 58-59.

Carolyn Rodgers' poem "For Sistuhs Wearin Straight Hair" offers an example of this inversion of the traditional white-black duality, though it may not seem so on an initial reading. It is rife with anti-tokenist and transvaluative messages, and the speaker clearly learns to appreciate the natural texture of her hair. Published halfway through the Black Power era, "For Sistuhs Wearin Straight Hair" offers a humorous take on the difficulty of black women's nappy hair becoming completely straight, even with perms and relaxers. More importantly, though, this piece rejects tokenism by glorifying natural hair and denying the superiority of straightened hair. The speaker opens, "me? / i never could keep my edges and kitchen / straight" (lines 1-3).<sup>34</sup> Edges are simply the very small hairs around a woman's hairline, and the kitchen is a colloquial term for the very small hair at the nape of the neck. It is this very small hair on the fringes of the speaker's head that can never stay straight. As the poem progresses, her edges and kitchen are personified: "my edges and kitchen didn't / ever get the message that they / was not supposed to go back home. / oh yeah. edges and kitchens / will tell that they know where / they nat'chal home is at!" (lines 7-12). In these lines, Rodgers links natural hair with domestic spaces: the home and its kitchen. Characterizing natural hair as a black woman's "home," she evokes everything one associates with home: love, comfort, and acceptance. And in this case, home is not only the natural state of a black woman's hair, but more specifically *nappy* hair. Not only do edges and kitchens belie the appearance of straightened hair by representing "home," but also they rebel against the notion that

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<sup>34</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr. writes similarly about edges and kitchens in his short essay "It All Comes Down to the Kitchen." Fondly reflecting on his mother's days styling her hair and other women's hair in the Gates family kitchen, he explains that many women cut off their kitchens with scissors because it simply could not be straightened: "The kitchen was permanent, irredeemable, invincible kink. Unassimilably African. No matter what you did, no matter how hard you tried, nothing could dekind a person's kitchen," 25.

nappy hair is unacceptable by consistently remaining kinky. In this sense, the “home” of nappy hair also connotes authenticity, as opposed to a measure of falsity that is implied by trying to live somewhere else, or straighten the hair. In this piece, it is the hair itself that rejects tokenism by refusing to stay straight, thus participating in revolutionary politics, even when the woman wearing straight hair does not, or when she attempts to run away from home.

Yet, this poem presumes that edges and kitchens embody every black woman’s home, which is not the case. Not all black women have naturally kinky hair. This piece provides an excellent example of the contradictions that arise when the terms *nappy* and *natural* are conflated, which is what happened during this period. Some black women with straight and curly hair who wore their hair natural during the Black Power era were ashamed of their natural features, when the aims of the movement—and natural hair’s place in it—were to encourage pride in natural black beauty. For instance, in her essay “Straightening Our Hair,” bell hooks relates her disappointment with her natural hair: “it wasn’t naturally nappy enough to make a decent Afro...”<sup>35</sup> Even while wearing her hair natural, she felt it was not good enough because it did not look enough like a “real” afro. Journalist and author Jill Nelson offers another example. Writing in a 1987 *Washington Post* article that, during the BPM, her “once... ‘good’” hair “was now ‘bad,’” she “had to have a natural” because of the disdain she received “from brothers in dashikis and sisters with gelées wrapped around their Afros.” In order to solve the problem, she cut her hair

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<sup>35</sup> See this essay in *Tenderheaded: A Comb-Bending Collection of Hair Stories*, 116.



and washed it in laundry detergent to create an afro.<sup>36</sup> Nelson felt she *needed* an afro in order to feel, and be treated by fellow blacks as, authentically black.

The texture of the hair, which formerly led many black women to assimilate in order to survive in mainstream society by linking straightened hair with advantage, now led some black women to assimilate in order to survive in a revolutionary culture by linking afros with blackness. If afros were meant to outwardly show transvaluation, how else could a person with straight hair join this movement but chemically create an afro?<sup>37</sup> Herein lay the problem of relying on a style as the standard not only for Black Power, but also for blackness. Perhaps the difference in Rodgers' piece is *imitation*, which is probably what she was addressing, as opposed to naturally straight hair. Still, the atmosphere had become such that it did not matter simply that hair was natural, but that it was a nappy natural, as hooks and Nelson demonstrate. Along this vein, it is important to note that the afro's association with a "real" type of blackness seemed to imply a purity of blackness that recoiled against signs of miscegenation, or straight and loosely curly hair. When Rodgers writes, "supercool/straighterPerm had burned / whiteness onto my scalp," she does not consider those women with naturally straight or curly hair (lines 5-6). Do they somehow have whiteness "burned" into them? The tacit suggestion that straight hair is associated with miscegenation or diluted blackness exemplifies the increased privileging of nappy natural hair. With time, the fact that hair was just one way to show outward resistance began to get lost. Demonstrations, protests, and marches were

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<sup>36</sup> Quoted in Byrd and Tharps, 59.

<sup>37</sup> See Byrd and Tharps for more on the chemically created afro phenomenon, 58-59. Afro wigs offered another option. Robin D.G. Kelley discusses the variety of afro wigs that attracted some women who did not have hair nappy enough for an afro. See Kelley, "Nap Time: Historicizing the Afro," 347.

other methods of outwardly fighting for liberation. Hair fit right in with those, until it became a sign of blackness.

Gwendolyn Brooks's was another voice that declared the beauty and validity of natural black hair, but also equated it with blackness and marginalized women with naturally straight or curly hair. Clearly addressing what Brooks perceives as the depoliticizing of naturals, "To Those of My Sisters Who Kept Their Naturals" (1980) is reminiscent of the fervor of the Black Power era. Opening her poem with, "Sisters! / I love you. / Because you love you," she equates the wearing of natural hair with black women's self-love and self-respect (lines 1-3). Conversely, she associates hair-straightening with self-hatred, assimilation, and "want[ing] to be white" (line 25). In addition, she connects this desire to assimilate with the influence of the media and consumer culture: "You have not bought Blondine. / You have not hailed the hot-comb recently. / You never worshiped Marilyn Monroe. / You say: Farrah's hair is hers. / You have not wanted to be white" (lines 21-25). Brooks links hair-lightening and hair-straightening and even attempting Farrah Fawcett's trademark feathered hairdo completely with imitating whiteness and thus shunning blackness. In contrast with hair-altering techniques that approximate whiteness, black women's natural hair is "the Real, / the Right" (lines 32-33). By extension, she contends that straightened hair is "false" and "wrong." Brooks praises those black women "who kept their naturals," presumably in spite of the decline of the Black Power movement, when so many women did not keep their naturals, but she presents no middle ground. Black women either wear their hair naturally, or they are wrong. Such extremes were contrary to the transvaluation and unity

advocated by the BPM, pitting black women with different hair textures against one another.

As with Rodgers' poem, this piece marginalizes the experiences of black women who do not have naturally nappy hair and illustrates rifts among black women who are either "real" or not. Descriptions in the first stanza simultaneously describe black women's collective character and the nature of nappy hair: "you are erect. / [...] you are also bent. [...] / Crisp, soft—in season. / And you withhold. / And you extend. / And you Step out. / And you go back. / And you extend again" (lines 4-12). This metaphor exemplifies black women's experience as resilient, though scorned, and like a lock of coily hair that has been pulled, black women have continued to stand stress and return to themselves. Yet, by ignoring black women with naturally straight or curly hair—who love their natural hair and themselves—Brooks implies that they have a different experience, which is not necessarily true. Again, the notion of a pure blackness, as opposed to an adulterated blackness, is present here. Black women with nappy hair, who have presumably endured more struggle, are somehow blacker than those with straighter hair. By linking black women's character with nappy hair, Brooks sets these women apart as "real" black women and relegates those without nappy hair to a lesser status.

While women with straight or curly hair may have more easily met the white ideal because their hair was not kinky, they were still black. Even women who wore wigs, perms and straightened hair were still oppressed. Similar to Rodgers, Brooks's celebration is transvaluative, but it is at the expense of alienating her other "sisters." In Brooks's case, this is probably her point. Given the audience indicated by the title—which implicitly targets those who did not keep their naturals—this poem is meant to

shame those who straighten their hair. Also like Rodgers, she is probably directly addressing those who straighten their hair in imitation of white beauty. Nevertheless, her stance is dangerous to the movement; it totally precludes real black unity by classifying some black women as somehow superior to others based on whether they wear their hair natural. As Rodgers' and Brooks's pieces illustrate, there was the semblance of black unity under the afro, but the lack of unity inspired by it, by placing higher value on kinky natural hair, began to contradict it and the transvaluation it once stood for.

### **Contradictions in Haircare**

Nappy hair once symbolized Black Power's transvaluation, a mental conversion from subordination to self-determination. It then transitioned to signifying blackness, and the terms *nappy* and *natural* were viewed interchangeably. Hence, the black haircare business during the BPM was also changing and embodying its own contradictions. It certainly reflected the times: "By 1971 the Black Power movement was losing momentum, and Black hair's natural reign was undergoing a change. The Afro had become a hairstyle, plain and simple. It was no longer a matter of what your 'fro stood for but of how high your 'fro stood. Afros were everywhere, and they were increasingly unconnected to Black Power."<sup>38</sup> A 'fro did not automatically equate with transvaluation, and some haircare companies capitalized on this change in the meaning of the afro. For instance, Rooks contrasts two early 1970s ads for afro products, one by black-owned Afro Sheen, the other by white-owned Clairol. In a 1971 Afro Sheen ad, the marketers use a slogan in Swahili—"Watu Wazuri [beautiful people] use Afro Sheen"—not only to tap into the nationalist and internationalist black politics of the time, but also to highlight

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<sup>38</sup> Byrd and Tharps, 63.

“an existent African American female beauty.”<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, Rooks interprets a 1970 Clairol ad—its slogan “Free the ‘fro”—as indicating a need to somehow right the natural texture of black hair:

Clairol...emphasizes the need to have hair that is “high, wide, and easy to comb.” It points to the necessity of utilizing a product to make the “natural” bigger and better, that is, unnatural. Nowhere in this ad do we see an acknowledgement of African American female beauty; we see only that there is something “naturally” lacking that these products will fix.<sup>40</sup>

The Clairol example typifies the complexity of hair politics at this historical moment; furthermore, this complexity hinges on the politics of the previous half-century and more. Clairol’s claim to improve the afro is reminiscent of the traditional binary that the natural texture of black people’s hair needs to be fixed, even in the process of advertising a product for a “natural” hairstyle. To further complicate the situation, this idea of making hair natural by using unnatural products was similar to the use of chemicals to make naturally straight hair kinky. In all this confusion, transvaluation was becoming increasingly insignificant on a large scale. Style was taking precedence over politics.

To be sure, Afro Sheen’s appeal to Black Power acknowledged the politics of natural hair, but it is clear that the haircare business profited greatly by manufacturing products for naturals, with no concern for politics. Companies manufactured products along with the changing politics of hair during the Black Power era, and as the politics weakened, these companies smartly developed products accordingly. Johnson Products, the home of Afro Sheen, and Soft Sheen Products offer excellent examples. Both

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<sup>39</sup> Rooks, 129-30.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

Chicago-based and black-owned, these companies were among the top in black haircare manufacturing for decades.<sup>41</sup> Founded in 1954, Johnson Products boomed with the emergence of its Afro Sheen products in the 1960s.<sup>42</sup> Yet, the insignificance of the politics linked with naturals for these companies is evident in the *hair-straightening* products they also manufactured. For instance, as Tonia L. Shakespeare writes in *Black Enterprise*, “Soft Sheen saw its sales soar due to the [Jheri curl’s] popularity and its Care Free Curl product line.”<sup>43</sup> Moreover, both companies ended up being sold to the majority-owned SoftSheen-Carson, a subsidiary of L’Oréal USA.<sup>44</sup> Beauty products came full circle: the white ideals promoted by *fin-de-siècle* advertisements, after yielding to a moment during which many blacks expressed their transvaluation with their hair, reemerged with a new way of “fixing” the natural texture of many black women’s hair.

### **Politics Give Way to Style**

Still, even with the transvaluation that the afro was meant to embody, it was a *hairstyle* that was meant to make a statement. As any style goes, and certainly one as major as the afro in the 1960s and 1970s, it becomes trendy and fashionable, the thing to do. It follows that some women during the Black Power era wore afros because they were in style. For example, Rose Weitz interviewed a woman, Norma, who was unfamiliar with the “race politics” linked with the afro and wore one “because it was fashionable at

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<sup>41</sup> See “About SoftSheen-Carson,” “Johnson Products Co.,” and Tonia L. Shakespeare’s “Is Soft Sheen Products Being Sold?” 16.

<sup>42</sup> “Johnson Products Co.”

<sup>43</sup> Shakespeare, 16. While the Jheri Curl grew popular in the 1980s, Willie Morrow, author of *400 Years Without a Comb* and first major manufacturer of the afro pick, began experimenting with such a process for black hair as early as 1966 and gained some success with it in 1977, inspired by a product created for “straight (i.e., Caucasian) hair” by a white man named Jheri Redding. See Byrd and Tharps, 89.

<sup>44</sup> See “About SoftSheen-Carson” and “Johnson Products Co.”

the time.”<sup>45</sup> The hairstyle was ubiquitous in the black community, whether tied to politics or not. Byrd and Tharps even declare that the afro became mainstream in the 1970s. After repelling many whites and conservative blacks early on, the afro became an everyday fashion statement across the board, popularized by the likes of Pam Grier and Thelma on *Good Times*: “By the mid-seventies, many major Black leaders were dead, exiled, or in jail, Pam Grier was in Hollywood, and Barbra Streisand had an Afro.”<sup>46</sup> In essence, the afro was becoming less a revolutionary symbol of black self-determination, a challenge to dominant beauty standards, and a signifier of transvaluation, and more a popular fashion statement instead. The sheer popularity of the afro hairstyle contributed to a muting of its politics and the emphasis of its fashion.

As Adolph L. Reed Jr. puts it, the popularization of naturals—among other nationalist cultural efforts—as signifiers of Black Power and blackness aided in the depoliticizing of the movement:

First, abstracted from its concrete historical context, black culture lost its dynamism and took on the commodity form (e.g., red, black, and green flags, dashikis, *Afro-Sheen*, “blaxploitation” films, collections of bad poetry). Second, while ostensibly politicizing black culture by defining it as an arena for conflict, black nationalism actually depoliticized the movement inasmuch as the reified nationalist framework could relate to the present only through a simplistic politics of unity.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Rose Weitz, “Women and Their Hair: Seeking Power through Resistance and Accommodation,” 680.

<sup>46</sup> Byrd and Tharps, 67-70.

<sup>47</sup> Reed, “Black Particularity Reconsidered,” 52, my emphasis.

Reed's criticism is strikingly accurate. The prevalence of naturals as symbols of blackness, devoid of actual transvaluation, explains the wane of its relation to politics, which was signaled by its commodification in films and in the haircare industry with the dawn of the 1970s. It is not merely the popularization of the afro as apolitical that is implicit in his Afro Sheen reference, however. Staking liberation politics so heavily in any cultural product that could be commodified—the flags, the clothes, the movies, and the hairstyles—opened those politics up to being defined, not symbolized, by those products. The danger of equating the politics of transvaluation with these *things* simplified a very complex social, cultural, and psychological process.

What Angela Davis perceived as a generational misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the politics of her afro by younger people today was actually related to the prevalence of a “simplistic politics of unity” in her own generation. As she details in her 1994 article “Afro Images: Politics, Fashion, and Nostalgia,” she laments the fact that the liberation politics behind her trademark afro have been morphed simply into a hairstyle, but those politics had morphed by the time she was fighting her legal battles in the early 1970s. Recounting an incident in which a young man does not recognize her name, Davis is shocked that he ultimately remembers her as “the Afro.”<sup>48</sup> “It is humiliating,” Davis writes, “because it reduces a politics of liberation to a politics of fashion; it is humbling because such encounters with the younger generation demonstrate the fragility and mutability of historical images, particularly those associated with African American history.”<sup>49</sup> To be sure, Davis is invariably linked with her hairdo, not her politics. She cites as an example a 1993 *New York Times Magazine* article in which

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<sup>48</sup> Davis, “Afro Images: Politics, Fashion, and Nostalgia,” 37.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.



she was identified “as one of the fifty most influential fashion (read: hairstyle) trendsetters over the last century,” noting that the photography caption, while linking her hair with “black pride,” also claims, “Politics became fashion.”<sup>50</sup> She contends that the widespread media attention given to her image—starting with her image on the “Wanted” posters distributed by the FBI and branching out to her photos in magazines and on television—played a major role in depoliticizing not only her actions but also her natural hair. While her image, and thus her large afro, meant “danger” and “criminality” to mainstream society at the time, those meanings have been diminished to the background in favor of a meaning that praises her hairstyle as revolutionary fashion.<sup>51</sup>

It is telling that Davis was inspired by other black women to wear her hair natural, just as she inspired many other women to do the same.<sup>52</sup> In this case, women were not drawn simply by the fashion but by the politics behind wearing natural hairstyles. Thus, a process of transvaluation was transmitted from one person to another. Because of the prominence of Davis’s criminalized image, however, other black women who wore their politics on their heads were subjected to the negative stereotypes that media and law enforcement ascribed to the afro through their characterizations of Davis:

From the constant stream of stories I have heard over the last twenty-four years (and continue to hear), I infer that hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of Afro-wearing Black women were accosted, harassed, and arrested by police, FBI, and immigration agents during the two months I spent underground. One woman, who told me that she hoped she could

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 37-38. See Davis’s first footnote.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 40-41.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 37-38, 42.

serve as a “decoy” because of her light skin and big natural, was obviously conscious of the way the photographs constructed generic representations of young Black women. Consequently, the photographs identified vast numbers of my Black female contemporaries who wore naturals (whether light- or dark-skinned) as targets of repression. This is the hidden historical content that lurks behind the continued association of my name with the Afro.<sup>53</sup>

The image of the afro, and Davis’s association with it as dangerously militant, caused black women with afros to be pigeonholed in very certain, negative terms. It is also important to note that the afro’s role in challenging dominant beauty standards probably would have been weakened while Davis was in hiding and engaging in her legal fight because of its strong link with Davis’s subversive and allegedly criminal activities. Hence, the afro’s political symbolism as a mark of transvaluation and appreciation of black beauty would have been undermined. These are the complex historical issues Davis considers hidden in contemporary remembrances of the afro.

However, she is not merely concerned with the fact that the afro has been relegated to a hairstyle devoid of politics; she takes issue with the fact that her image is being used to *sell products*, touted as revolutionary fashion, yet empty of revolutionary politics. She refers to a fashion spread in the March 1994 issue of *Vibe* magazine in which actress Cynda Williams portrays Davis while modeling clothes reminiscent of the Black Power era. The fashion emphasis leaves out the history of the afro as conveying a dangerous militant message that resulted in the mistreatment of so many black women:

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 42.

“The way in which this document provided a historical pretext for something akin to a reign of terror for countless Black women is effectively erased by its use as a prop for selling clothes and promoting a seventies fashion nostalgia.”<sup>54</sup> Additionally, the weight given to fashion over the politics of natural hair diminishes the fact that part of those politics was meant to resist imposed standards of acceptable and desirable physical appearance. Praising Davis’s hair as a fashion milestone, then, denies an important part of the social and cultural political struggle related to it. She is arguing that historical images, that of the afro in this case, be used to assert the significance of certain aspects of black national political memory and not co-opt them in a way that weakens the memory or depoliticizes its transvaluative foundations.<sup>55</sup> Her afro in particular and the afro in general should be remembered in its complete historical context.

Considering Rodgers’, Brooks’s, Reed’s and Davis’s takes on the ways in which the natural hair facet of the BPM was depoliticized as simply a style, it is important to take into account the role of straightened hair—as distinct from naturally straight hair—in this discussion. While straightened hair was deemed blasphemous at one point, it certainly became more acceptable in time. After all, styles, national politics, and BPM politics were changing in the 1970s and into the 1980s, and the meanings of Black Power itself became muddled. Consequently, the significance placed on the afro as revolutionary diminished in some ways along with the increased uncertainty of BPM politics. For one thing, BPM groups began to undergo sectarian clashes over their political beliefs. As Komozi Woodard explains, some of the conflicts within BPM organizations, over such disparate leanings as Marxism and black nationalism, led to their

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 45.

collapse and “also weakened the movement’s major publications, institutions, and a number of the Black Studies programs in colleges and universities.”<sup>56</sup> Moreover, while Black Power activism was responsible for the increase in black political power in such urban centers as Newark and Los Angeles in the 1970s, political discord among many BPM groups and continued struggles for black self-determination signaled the decline of the movement.<sup>57</sup> Fashion trends—of which the afro was one—were shifting, many BPM activists had diverging and often conflicting interests, and many blacks were still fighting oppression. The afro’s association with transvaluation had become further muddled in the ‘70s. With such upheaval concerning BPM politics, afros certainly were not stringently linked with any one ideal or set of politics, and straightened hair no longer necessarily signified a colonized mentality.

Aside from the changes in fashion and BPM politics, though, growing career opportunities and black political strength—some via Black Power activism—indicated the return of more straightened styles as well. According to both Tracey Owens Patton and bell hooks, the acquisition of more rights, access, and privileges in mainstream society prompted black women to dismiss their naturals and return to straightened styles.<sup>58</sup> Hooks further observes that “if a black person wanted a job and found it easier to get it if he or she did not wear a natural hairstyle etc. this was perceived by many to be a legitimate reason to change.”<sup>59</sup> Also addressing black women’s careers and their hair, Patton intimates that black women, in the wane of the Black Power era, understood the

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<sup>56</sup> Woodard, “Amiri Baraka, the Congress of African People, and Black Power Politics from the 1961 United Nations Protest to the 1972 Gary Convention,” 76.

<sup>57</sup> See Peniel E. Joseph’s introduction to *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era*, 20.

<sup>58</sup> See Patton, “Hey Girl, Am I More Than My Hair?: African American Women and Their Struggles with Beauty, Body Image, and Hair,” 40-41, and hooks, *Killing Rage*, 122-23.

<sup>59</sup> hooks, *Killing Rage*, 123.

professional success related with appropriating more conventional appearances, most notably with their hairstyling choices—“don[ning] wigs, weaves, or undergo[ing] expensive chemical processes in order to replicate mainstream hairstyles.”<sup>60</sup> Patton and hooks seem to interpret this return to straightened hair as a renewed acceptance of tokenism and a regression from transvaluation in favor of upward mobility. Byrd and Tharps, however, propose an alternative explanation that hinges on survival:

For some blacks the reason for getting rid of the Afro was less dramatic and more pragmatic [than the afro’s popularity in Hollywood and mainstream culture]. Many brothers and sisters of the revolution had to get a job. With drastic cutbacks in state and federal aid to cities and social programs, many of the jobs available to people who had stayed on the fringe of the mainstream were now shutting down. It was time for many to go to work with “the Man,” and as in the past the Man most often required a “well-groomed” haircut.<sup>61</sup>

From this perspective, straightened hair was not so much anti-liberationist as a necessary step toward maintaining well being. Even the most radical Black Power proponent had to take care of her family and pay her bills. Both Patton and hooks’ and Byrd and Tharps’ interpretations indicate that there is no definite meaning here. Another viable possibility is that many black women simply continued to follow the trends and processed their natural hair when the afro was no longer the ubiquitous fashion statement it had once been. In any case, there was no clear way of determining the meaning behind these hairstyles, nor had the way ever been clear. While straightened hair could signify an

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<sup>60</sup> Patton, 40-41.

<sup>61</sup> Byrd and Tharps, 70.

oppressed mentality, it could mean otherwise. Straightened hair did not necessarily mean self-hatred or a lack of transvaluation.

Women “who kept their naturals” learned the import of their decisions as well, and that import reinforced the power relationships embedded in the politics of natural hair. Just as wearing more mainstream styles seemed to aid in attaining professional success, the decision to wear non-mainstream styles could preclude success. In the late 1970s and into the 1980s, some employers still linked natural hair with rebellion.<sup>62</sup> For example, Norma, Weitz’s interviewee who wore her afro for fashion, later comprehended the politics behind her afro and decided to keep it for precisely that reason. Wearing her afro, she “interview[ed] for a job and the guy wouldn’t hire me because I had an Afro. He said, ‘It’s your hair. I don’t like your hairstyle. You’ve got to do something about your hair.’”<sup>63</sup> Gibson offers another illustration of such discrimination in *Nappy*: “In 1981, Dorothy Reed, a popular Bay Area television personality was suspended from her job as a local T.V. anchor for wearing her hair in braids. ...she’s been on the radio ever since.”<sup>64</sup> The unacceptability of natural styles lingered on as inferior for many Americans, and that unacceptability still concerned the texture and the *look* of the hair. As these examples demonstrate, the appearance of success continued to discount natural black hair, and therefore perpetuate mainstream standards, into the 1980s and beyond.

It is also important to reassert the gendered nature of these standards, as some black men denigrated black women’s close cut naturals as “man-hating” as well.<sup>65</sup> As

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<sup>62</sup> Kelley addresses employers’ conception of natural hair in the wane of the BPM as still militant. See “Nap Time,” 349.

<sup>63</sup> Weitz, 680-81.

<sup>64</sup> Aliona L. Gibson, *Nappy: Growing Up Black and Female in America*, 12.

<sup>65</sup> Kelley, “Nap Time,” 349.

Kelley points out, despite the afro's role in rejecting traditional ideals of feminine beauty, the afro became strongly associated with black militant machismo in the 1970s.

Therefore, "the masculinization of the Afro in the aftermath of its depoliticization contributed to a backlash against black women with 'natural' hair."<sup>66</sup> Such treatment of black women's natural hair at this time served to rework the notion of black women's racial and gender inferiority, the very notions the transvaluative afro should have countered. Although natural hair had become wildly popular and increasingly fashion forward in a variety of media, its conception as antithetical to the traditional white ideal—by both some in the black community and in society at large—remained.

### **The Intersection of Black Hair Complications**

America's memory of the meaning of the afro during the Black Power movement likely does lie in a vague conception of Black Power and in the image of the afro as a very trendy hairstyle. As the strength of the movement declined, questions on the political nature of the natural continued to be raised. Willie M. Coleman's "Among the Things That Use to Be" offers an excellent example of this questioning, depicting the conflict in making a hairstyle the primary symbol for resistance to the status quo and illustrating that transvaluation is lost in the process. Describing the unity, bonding, and sharing intrinsic to black beauty shops, Coleman conveys a sense of loss for that environment, with the growth of the Black Power movement. While black women did gather in salons with a "mutual obvious dislike / for nappiness" at one time, they also gathered to "learn / a whole lot about / how to catch up / with yourself / and some other folks / in your household. / Lots more got taken care of / than hair..." (lines 22-23, 14-

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 347.

21). Women joined together in these spaces and united as women, sharing their experiences and learning from one another.<sup>67</sup>

With the advent of the political natural, though, the speaker explains, there is no longer a site for such feminine bonding, “Cause with a natural / there is no natural place / for us to congregate / to mull over / our mutual discontent” (lines 37-40). Interestingly, what could be considered merely a capitalistic haircare business really was a location for a politics of unity, which faded with the popularity of the afro. Coleman suggests that a revolution could have been established without revolutionary hair, so to speak. While these women wore their “naps full of pride” (line 31), they lost their cohesiveness; wearing one’s politics was clearly insufficient to sustain a united front. The final stanza implies that there is still a need for revolution, and that the gatherings of those dissatisfied women in beauty shops “could have been / a hell-of-a-place / to ferment / a.....revolution” (lines 42-45).

While seemingly a lament for the diminishing of beauty salons as community spaces during the BPM, this piece reveals an intersection of the complications inherent in equating afros with Black Power and blackness, as Reed argues, and in fusing transvaluation with a hairstyle. The rigid association of blackness and liberation politics with the afro resulted in a profound rift in the black community, contradicting the politics of black unity that the movement stood for, as we see in Rodgers’ “For Sistuhs Wearin Straight Hair” and in Brooks’s “To Those of My Sisters Who Kept Their Naturals.” The

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<sup>67</sup> The bonding and sharing Coleman describes in the salon exemplify Vorris L. Nunley’s theory of “hush harbor rhetoric,” a tradition in which African Americans gather in safe spaces, or hush harbors, to communicate freely and openly in ways they cannot in dominant culture or in white or racially mixed settings. Beauty shops, barbershops, black sororities and fraternities, and churches are just a few examples of hush harbors. See Nunley’s “From the Harbor to Da Academic Hood: Hush Harbors and an African American Rhetorical Tradition.”



forming of this disunity leads Coleman to question the goal of the movement: was it to mandate blackness or to free blacks from racial oppression? They are not synonymous. When Coleman writes of the salon-goers' "mutual obvious dislike / for nappiness," it is perhaps not the naps themselves these women dislike, but the traditional negative meaning placed on naps by society that the women want to distance themselves from. Proudly wearing nappy hair was a conspicuous way to reappropriate the historical meanings of nappy hair for a liberationist cause, of which hair was a part. However, hair did not comprise the whole of the movement. For that matter, "nappy" was not universally equal with a consciousness of tokenism, and straightened hair did not necessarily imply a lack of transvaluation, as the discontent women left in Coleman's beauty shop demonstrate. Transvaluation required a *mental* transition from a colonized mindset to one that recognized blacks' inherent dignity and the worth of their features, and no outward show guaranteed that conversion one way or the other. Coleman takes a very similar position to Reed's in this respect. While she asserts that blacks should be proud of their kinky hair, thereby renouncing tokenist mentalities, she also posits that the politics should lie in more than natural hair; *transvaluation* is needed to sustain a politics of liberation, and transvaluation necessarily includes a unifying liberationist principle and that psychological overhaul.

Yes, the wearing of nappy hair offered a clear way for many black women to resist decades of the degradation of their natural features; it was a strong way to blatantly protest racially biased beauty ideals and to discover how to love their natural selves. However, as Lucille Clifton, Nikki Giovanni, Carolyn Rodgers, Gwendolyn Brooks, Willie M. Coleman, and the incomparable Angela Davis show, the disparate

interpretations of *nappy*, *natural*, and *liberation* actually reveal one thing: a true politics of liberation and transvaluation is rooted in a psychological revamping that unifies a people. Clifton's "Homage to My Hair" is a great example of the kind of self-value that transvaluation promoted, but works like those presented by Giovanni, Rodgers and Brooks, while certainly transvaluative in some ways, define too narrowly a benchmark for blackness and black beauty that not all black women can meet without altering their natural attributes in much the same way that dominant beauty standards required. Coleman's "Among the Things that Use to Be" complicates considerations of the political implications of black people's hair and their means of liberation politics, and serves as a warning to many Black Power advocates who set about subverting a wrong by refashioning it. The transvaluation of the Black Power movement and natural hair's place in it was the most important element of its politics, nappy or straight.

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