Getting Straight to the Roots, No-Lye: Engaging Black Women in an Exhibition About Their Hair

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my mother and father, Linda and Larry. Your love, sacrifices and support did not go unnoticed. Thank you for everything you both have done and continue to do, to ensure that I can comfortably pursue my dreams. I love you both.
Acknowledgements

I would like to use this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to my thesis advisors Clare Brown, Nigel Briggs, and Cory Bernat for their guidance through this process. Cory, I want to especially acknowledge and thank you for your encouragement to defend my choices and to keep this work what I truly wanted it to be.

I want to thank my content mentor Professor Yaba Blay, for taking time to give me her invaluable insight and guidance.

To my best friend Brittany, I could have not made it through this journey without your love and support.

Last but not least, to my family, friends, and colleagues, your support and enthusiasm of my work motivated me on the many days when I needed it most.

Thank you to all the above for showing your belief in my work, and me when at times I did not believe in myself.
Abstract

Getting Straight to the Roots, No-Lye: Black Hair in White America

*Getting Straight to the Roots, No-Lye: Black hair in White America,* is an exhibition designed for Black women that is designed to educate on the history and culture of black women’s hair. Through photos, objects, and personal stories it will examine historical trends and styles, and the deep-rooted emotional and social factors that influence hairstyle choices, including European beauty standards, popular entertainment and media, toys, and workplace environments and polices. The exhibition will encourage an open, yet personally relevant dialogue between women within the Black community and will foster understanding and acceptance among different perspectives on how Black women wear their hair. Before leaving the exhibition women will be presented with the opportunity to enter a working salon and change their hairstyle.
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Glossary of Terms

Term 1: **Natural**- hair whose texture has not been altered by chemical straighteners, including relaxers and texturizers. An Afro hairstyle is sometimes referred to as "a natural," but natural black hair can be worn in many other styles besides a short 'fro. Pressed hair may still be considered natural because once washed, the texture returns to its unaltered state. Colored hair is sometimes considered natural, sometimes not, depending on who does the defining -- some people believe that repeated hair coloring alters the texture, even in a slight manner.¹

Term 2: **Relaxer**- a chemical treatment that turns kinky or tightly curled hair permanently straight. Results last generally for six to eight weeks, and then a new relaxer must be applied to the newly grown-in hair. Also colloquially referred to as a perm.²

Term 3: **Lye**- a strong alkaline liquor rich in potassium carbonate leached from wood ashes and used especially in making soap and for washing; broadly: a strong alkaline solution (as of sodium hydroxide or potassium hydroxide).³

Term 4: **No-Lye Relaxer**- the main, active ingredient in a no-lye based relaxer is calcium hydroxide or guanidine hydroxide.⁴

Term 5: **Nappy**- a word used to describe tight kinky Black hair. Each individual kinky curl is considered a nap, thus a head full of Black hair is considered nappy.⁵ Many Black women feel that this term has negative connotation and consider it degrading.

Term 6: **Cornrows**- a hairstyle of African origin achieved by sectioning hair and braiding it tightly against the scalp.⁶

Term 7: **Dreadlocs**- what happens when nappy hair is left to its own devices. Sometimes achieved by twisting the hair first, then leaving it alone until the individual strands of hair begin to loc around each other to form a ropelike appearance.⁷

Term 8: **Eurocentrism**- is a political term coined in the 1980s, referring to the notion of European exceptionalism, a worldview centered on Western civilization, as it had developed during the height of the European colonial empires since the Early Modern period.

Term 9: **White Supremacy**- also known as racism, is the belief that white people are superior to those of all other races, especially the black race, and should therefore dominate society.

Term 10: **Afrocentric**- emphasizing or promoting emphasis on African culture.

¹ (Sandeen 2014)
² (Tharps 2001)
³ (Merriam-Webster, Incorporated 2014)
⁵ (Tharps 2001)
⁶ (Tharps 2001)
⁷ (Tharps 2001)
Hair all over the world is one of the main outlets people use to make a statement about who they are. The style, length, color, cut, or the lack of any hair, can have many different interpreted meanings depending on your gender, race, religion, nationality and economic class. This exhibition will focus on the meanings (sometimes hidden) behind the hairstyle choices of Black women in a society dominated by white supremacy and images of beauty that value a European beauty aesthetic.

Through this exhibition I seek to educate Black women on the history of Black hair in America, and how society has programmed Black women to think that they have to conform to European standards of beauty to feel accepted by society. I am extremely passionate about this topic because being a Black woman myself; I have dealt with and know several other Black women who have also dealt with many of the topics I seek to cover in my exhibition. These topics will include content on issues such as: the meanings and traditions of hair in early Africa; the role hairstyles played in slavery; new and controversial hair regulations targeted towards Black women in the United States military; images presented to kids, teens, and adult Black women that influence their perceptions of beauty; and the beauty of Black hair and Black hair as a medium for art.

I myself was raised to believe that I had to chemically straighten my hair in order to be seen as presentable or acceptable to others. It was not until I attended Howard University, a historically black college/university, that I was presented with the kind of information and perspective that I plan to offer through my exhibition. During my time at Howard University I realized that I too had been conditioned to believe that European standards of beauty were the standards of beauty to aspire to. After coming to the realization that accepting my hair in its natural unaltered state
made me no less of a person, I made the decision to chop off my chemically straightened hair and embrace my hair in its natural state.

The topic of Black hair can be described as complicated, controversial, mysterious, and often misunderstood. This exhibition seeks to create clarity and understanding on the topics and issues surrounding Black hair. This exhibition will be a safe place to start the conversation with and amongst members of the Black community.

"A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin, and culture is like a tree without roots."—Marcus Garvey

Relevancy and Historical Overview

An exhibition about hair is relevant because hair in general, in the past and today continues to be an element that people style, observe, and judge on a daily basis. Hair is one of the many factors people use to make initial determinations about one another. In Black culture, hair is extremely significant and is often synonymous with identity. The importance of hair in the Black community can be traced back to the ancestors of Africans.⁸

African Roots

In early West-African societies, hair was used as a means of communication. The way in which an African woman styled her hair almost always communicated a message and hair was an essential part of the African language system.⁹ Hairstyles in West-African cultures communicated a woman’s age, martial status, religion, and

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rank with a tribe or community. The people of these West-African communities, are the very people that would become enslaved, and fill the ships that sailed to the “New World.” As the slaves arrived to work on plantations in the mid-Atlantic and southern states, due to inhumane and unhealthy conditions Africans had little time or inclination to care for their hair.

In 1905 Madam C.J. Walker also known as Sarah Breedlove, popularized the use of a metal comb that when heated, transformed Black women’s hair from tight curls into smooth straight hair. Madam C.J. Walker became a millionaire from the iron-comb and from the hair pomades that were used with it. She went on to develop a line of hair pomades that promoted hair growth.

The size and rapid growth of the black hair industry speaks to its relevance. In 2012 market research firm Mintel estimated the size of the 2012 Black hair-care industry at $684 million, with a projection of $761 million by 2017. These figures do not include general market brands, weaves, supply, stores, distributors, e-commerce, styling tools and appliances. If all of those were taken into consideration, the $684 million in expenditures could reach a half trillion dollars.

**In the Public Eye**

Public outcries involving the subject of Black hair have begun to make the topic of Black hair approachable to a larger audience. The subject of Black hair has


recently been discussed in the news. In March of 2014 the United States military released controversial new regulations, which appeared to be targeted towards Black women. In the updated policy on appearance and grooming, titled AR 670-1, the military limited and banned many hairstyles including braids, twist, cornrows, and dreadlocs. All of the aforementioned hairstyles are inimitable to Black women.\(^\text{14}\) The release of the new regulations sparked outrage amongst many Black women serving in the United States military.

In the summer of 2014, one of the largest stories shared on social media, and other entertainment websites was the condition of Beyoncé’s daughter, Blue Ivy’s hair. Many black women began to publicly bash the celebrity because they considered the natural style that Beyoncé chose to style her daughter’s hair to be neglectful actions and lack of grooming by the celebrity mom. The outrage reached its tipping point and resulted in someone created a change.org petition entitled “Comb her hair”, on June 10\(^{th}\) 2014.

The petition created by someone whom is only described on the website as JT, of Brooklyn, N.Y., states the following:

“As a woman who understands the importance of hair care. It’s disturbing to watch a child suffering from the lack of hair moisture. The parents of Blue Ivy. Sean Carter A.K.A Jay-Z and Beyoncé has failed at numerous attempts of doing Blue Ivy Hair. This matter has escalated to the child developing matted dreads and lint balls. Please let’s get the word out to properly care for Blue Ivy hair.”\(^\text{15}\)


The creation and signing of this petition outraged not only Beyoncé’s numerous fans famously known as the “Bey-Hive”, but many other people black, white, relaxed, and naturals alike. For many, the audacity of someone to shame a two year old based on her hair was appalling.

In a conversation that I had with Yaba Blay, a professor of Africana Studies at Drexel University, she had the following response to my question on her opinion of the relevancy and importance of this issue.

“This topic is important because it comes to inform how we see ourselves and how others see us. What others group of people look in the mirror and believe that something about them is bad and needs to be tamed? Across the board, not just a few here and there but the large majority” – Yaba Blay

Precedents

You Can Touch My Hair

In the summer of 2013 in New York’s Union Square, Antonia Opiah, founder of Un’ruly, extended an open invitation to all curious passers-by for an exhibition called, You Can Touch My Hair. The exhibition explored the fascination that people have in regard to Black women’s hair. The exhibit consisted of a trio of women with different hair textures and styles, allowing strangers the chance to touch their hair. The ladies held signs that read, “You can touch my hair.” The ladies made their manes available for tactile exploration for two hours to anyone with the courage to take them up on the offer.  

During this two-hour exhibition, approximately 75 to 100 people stop to touch the trio’s hair and engage in deep dialogue about Black hair. Surprisingly, White people were not primarily the ones doing the touching. The majority of people doing the hair touching were described as women of color.  

The exhibition elicited strong opinions on social media, with some comparing the exhibition to a slave auction block and others to a “petting zoo.” The backlash

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that this seemingly harmless exhibition received speaks to my point about Black hair being a controversial and touchy subject. The exhibition sparked a spin off exhibition that consisted of a group of women holding signs that read, “You cannot touch my hair.” The argument that these women wanted to make was that Black women are not circus freaks to be placed on a pedestal for other to poke and prod.

Figure 2: You Cannot Touch My Hair, New York
Good Hair

The 2009 film titled Good Hair is a film staring and produced by actor and comedian Chris Rock. In this film Chris Rock visits beauty salons and hairstyling battles, scientific laboratories and Indian temples to explore the way in which hairstyles impact the activities, pocketbooks, sexual relationships, and self-esteem of the Black community. His young daughter coming to him and asking him why she did not have good hair sparked his inspiration for the film. This film documents his journey as he tries to figure out how to respond to her question.

While the film often takes a more comedic look into the topic of Black hair, it also has some very eye-opening moments that help viewers understand the significance of hair within the Black community. One of the most compelling moments of the film is when Chris Rock visits a scientific laboratory and stands next to a chemical scientist who demonstrates the power of sodium hydroxide, the main ingredient in many chemical relaxers. The scientist placed aluminum cans in the toxic solution and demonstrated how the powerful solution has the ability to completely breakdown the aluminum structure of the can. A look of shock appears on the scientist face when he is told this chemical is applied to Black women’s hair. The scientist immediately responds with, “Sodium hydroxide...why would they do that?” To which Chris Rock responds, “To look white.”

The Origins of the Afro Comb

The Fitzwilliam Museum and the Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology have mounted a joint exhibition on the extraordinary 6,000-year history of African hair combs. The exhibition looks at the persistent forms and striking diversity in design and scale - originating in Africa and spreading to the African Diaspora – and brings the story into the present with a demonstrative investigation of current hair styling practices in Jamaica. As well as examples of Afro combs, the exhibition will also
include oral histories and personal testimonies that will document attitudes towards hair and grooming in the present day.¹⁹

**Feasibility**

This topic is feasible as an exhibition because a subject matter involving hair needs to be presented in a way in which people can interact and engage with the information on multiple levels. For the audience to get a true understanding of the various topics I plan to cover, the information will have to be presented in an environment where individuals can have a tactile experience with the main subject, and engage in dialogue with other visitors of different backgrounds and cultures.

**Audience**

The target audience for my exhibition is Black women ages 13 and older. The primary audience within this group is teenage Black women based on my audience research and from the responses I received during my one-on-one interviews, this is the age when young Black women are given more freedom to make decisions on how they choose to wear and style their hair. I have also chosen to try and reach older women as a secondary audience. Through my research I have found that they too have many of the same questions, concerns, and thoughts in regards to the issues surrounding Black hair.

Within the Black community there is often an unspoken conflict between women who choose to relax and chemically alter their hair and those who choose to embrace their hair in its natural state.

Audience Research Findings

The main sources I used to gain insight on my audience were one-on-one interviews and surveys. The surveys were created and administered through the SurveyMonkey.com website. After collecting and analyzing the data retrieved from this audience research, I began making content and design choices to accommodate the needs of the targeted audience.

During a one-on-one interview with Ariel Alford, a senior Africana Studies and History major at Howard University, she stated that her hair was relaxed for the first time when she was in the fifth grade. It was not until the end of her eleventh grade year that she began to transition to natural hair using Senegalese twist. Ariel is now completely natural and still chooses to occasionally style her hair in braided and twisted styles.

“I feel like others don’t understand the natural hair movement” – Ariel Alford

During another interview I spoke with a young woman named Sydney who is a sophomore and Health Management major at Howard University. Unlike Ariel, she chooses to relax her hair. She expressed to me that relaxing her hair provides her with ease in maintenance because she is a part of a swim team and is frequently in and out of water. She also stated that she believed natural hair was harder to maintain than relaxed hair. In what I found to be an eye-opening part of our conversation, she stated that she herself did not feel that natural hair was unprofessional, but has heard many others refer to natural hair and traditional African hairstyles as unprofessional.

“I think you should wear it however you want.” – Sydney

I took this opportunity to ask all of the women during these one-on-one interviews about the things they would like to see within an exhibition about Black hair. Some of the responses to this question included: inspirational images of natural
Black hairstyles, information on why women choose to go natural, the evolution of Black hair through history, and information on the discrimination of naturals. I used these responses as a guide towards shaping the content and the narrative plan.

**Challenges**

**Challenges of Exhibition Topic**

Creating an exhibition on Black hair and being a Black woman myself, was surprisingly one of my biggest challenges. I found myself struggling with how to shape the content and design of the exhibition without overly inserting my personal biases while at the same time not wanting to stay so neutral that the impact of the intended message falls flat. As I stated in my introduction, I have chosen to embrace my hair in its natural state and wear my hair in dreadlocks. Through my own experiences during my transition to natural hair, I understand the anxiety, fear, and backlash that Black women who are non-natural face when transitioning to natural hair. Also, I admittedly acknowledge that I too can be judgmental of women who choose to style their hair in certain styles. Having personal experience from all sides of the Black hair debate has helped me to be more considerate in my content and design choices. In an effort to acknowledge this bias, it is important this exhibition foster communication and acceptance. The importance of encouraging dialogue and creating a safe space to foster it is an essential element of the exhibition.

**Challenges of Audience**

During my research I encountered several challenges that caused me to redirect how I approached my audience research. When I initially began my audience research I wanted my target audience to be primarily middle school aged Black women. I found it difficult to find access to large numbers of young Black women that I could approach responsibly. I reached out to local area schools and inquired as
to whether or not I could set up within the schools to conduct one-on-one surveys with their female students. School office staff informed me that I had to contact the Board of Education before I could conduct any questioning of students on the schools premises. I resolved this challenge by expanding my target audience to include a larger range of ages. The current target audience for this exhibition is Black women ages 13 and older. This allowed me to not exclude the middle school aged girls but gave me greater range and freedom to collect valuable one-on-one audience research.

**Challenges of Site**

I faced challenges in regards to site selection as well. I initially wanted to propose the National Museum of African American History and Culture as the site for my exhibition. The mission statement for this museum is as follows:

> In many ways, there are few things as powerful and as important as a people, as a nation that is steeped in its history. Often America is celebrated as a place that forgets. This museum seeks to help all Americans remember, and by remembering, this institution will stimulate a dialogue about race and help to foster a spirit of reconciliation and healing.

> There are four legs upon which this museum will stand:

> The first is to create an opportunity for those that care about African American culture to explore and revel in this history.

> Equally important is the opportunity to help all Americans see just how central African American history is for all of us. The museum will use African American history and culture as a lens into what it means to be an American.

> Additionally, the museum will use African American culture as a means to help all Americans see how their stories, their histories, and their cultures are shaped and informed by international considerations and how the struggle of African Americans has impacted freedom struggles around the world.

> Finally, as a 21st century institution, the museum must be a place of collaboration. We must be a truly national museum that reaches beyond Washington to engage new audiences and to collaborate
with the myriad of museums and educational institutions, both nationally and internationally.

Ultimately, the National Museum of African American History and Culture should be a place of meaning, of memory, of reflection, of laughter, and of hope. It should be a beacon that reminds us of what we were; what challenges we still face; and point us towards what we can become.²⁰

After reviewing this mission statement, I had to examine whether or not an exhibit intended for such a select audience would be appropriate for the expansive and broadly focused Smithsonian Institution. I determined that I did not want to make adjustments to my exhibition target audience to fit within this site, so ultimately I decided to change the proposed location of my exhibition.

A very integral part of the exhibition requires the component of a full service hair salon in which women can actually change hairstyles. This poses certain challenges in regards to layout and conservation and preservation of the objects and artifacts within the exhibition. Special considerations have been taken to ensure the safety of all the artifacts and objects within the exhibition space.

**Site**

The current proposed location for my exhibition is the Howard University Gallery of Art, located in Lulu Vere Childers Hall on the campus of Howard University in Washington, D.C. I have chosen this site because Howard University is a historically black college with a sixty-seven percent female population.

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Figure 3 Exhibition Location

Howard University setting is urban, and the campus size is 258 acres. The university is dedicated to attracting and sustaining a corps of faculty who are, through their teaching, research, and service, committed to the development of distinguished, historically aware, and compassionate graduates and to the discovery of solutions to human problems in the United States. The campus is a fascinating blend of cultures, customs, and languages said to be unequalled on any other college campus in the world.\(^{21}\)

The exhibition would take place during the busy University homecoming weekend. Howard homecoming takes place every fall and attracts thousands of alumni back to the campus. The buildup of excitement and festivities lasts several weeks and attracts not only Howard University alumni, but also residents from the

local Shaw neighborhood, other neighborhoods throughout D.C., and the surrounding area. The campus’ main entrance is located off of Georgia Avenue, which is a major thoroughfare connecting D.C to the Maryland line. Metro bus stops are conveniently located at many of the campus entrances, and there is a metro train stop with shuttle service just a few blocks away. Other local hotspots in the immediate area include the Howard Theater, U-Street corridor, and Adams Morgan.

The exhibition at this location will serve as a pilot for an expanded exhibition in the future at larger mainstream venues such as the National Museum of African American History and Culture. This location is ideal because the conversation about hair needs to be addressed amongst members of the Black community before moving to a larger audience.

**Precedents of Proposed Site**

The Howard University Gallery of Art was established in 1928 by action of the Board of Trustees to “make revolving exhibitions of contemporary arts and crafts available for visitation and study to students.” The Howard University Gallery of Art was formally opened with a traveling exhibition of oil paintings, watercolors, and drawings assembled and circulated by the College Art Association of America on April 7, 1930.  

Previous exhibitions in the Howard University gallery of Art include 'Reflections: African American Life’ from the Myrna Colley-Lee Collection. Reflections celebrates the diversity of African American identity; a story of self, place and time, shaped and influenced by people and event of the past. The exhibition was comprised of select works from the private collection of Myrna Colley-Lee. The exhibition included paintings, collages, photographs, textile pieces, and works on

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paper that provided insight into the lives, traditions and environments of African Americans from the 20th century to present. 23

**Exhibition information**

**Mission**

This exhibition seeks to educate visitors on the culture and beauty of Black women’s hair. It will examine historical trends and styles, and the deep-rooted emotional and social factors that influence hairstyle choices, including European beauty standards, popular entertainment and mass media, toys, and workplace environments and policies.

The exhibition will encourage an open, yet personally relevant, dialogue between women within the Black community and foster understanding and acceptance among different perspectives on how Black women wear their hair.

**Teaching Points and Goals**

This exhibition seeks to achieve the following outcomes:

- Visitors will develop the understanding that choices about how to style hair have social and psychological implications; hair is not merely fashion or superficial.
- Visitors will learn the history and culture of African hair.
- Visitors will learn that Black hair in America has a history from slavery to present day.
- Visitors will explore the role popular media, entertainment, and white supremacy (racism), play in the choices Black women make in regards to their hair.

• Visitors will confront their own choices about their hair and have the opportunity to take action.

**Summary of Exhibition Content**

The exhibition will be divided into four thematic sections that will lead the visitors through the hair story of Black women through the use of objects, graphics, biographical stories, and interactives. Each of these four thematic sections will present compelling content that will encourage visitors to think critically and discuss the information presented.

The sections of the exhibition are broken down as follows:

**Intro & History Timeline**- upon entering the exhibition space visitors will see a timeline that spans the length of the entry wall and will incorporate objects, images, and video clips of many important milestones in the history of Black hair.

**History & Culture**- the timeline leads into the next section of the exhibition, which will cover the history of hair in Africa, and explore the meanings that hair and various hairstyles held in different West-African cultures.

**Childhood**- the childhood section explores the main influences on the ways in which Black girls think about their hair. This section will cover the impact that dolls as well as cartoons, and peer relationships have on Black girls.

**Adolescence**- this section will focus heavily on how media impacts the way young Black women feel about their hair. This section will display large images and graphics of Black celebrities whose personal hairstyle choices have over time, become increasingly in favor of Eurocentric beauty standards.

**Adulthood**- workforce pressures and personal relationships are the focus of the adulthood section. This area will examine the influence that corporate America has on the way in which Black women choose to style their hair. The controversial changes to the military hair regulations will also be covered in this section.
**Salons**- two full service salons will be centrally located in the childhood and adolescence section of the exhibition. These salons will provide an opportunity for those who have been truly inspired and changed by the content of the exhibition to take the first steps in changing behaviors that do not favor the embracing of their natural hair. Visitors will be allowed to cut off relaxed hair or explore a transitional style in preparation for converting their hair to its natural state. The salon spaces will be highly visible from the other sections of the exhibition to maximize its impact.

![Content Diagram](image)

*Figure 4 Content Diagram*

**Interpretive Plan**

**Narrative Voice:**

The narrative of this exhibition will be told through the voices of several different Black women at many critical points in life. Theses women’s voices will be used to present key areas of content. The use of biographical stories will be used throughout the exhibition to reinforce the content and information being presented.
For example, in the childhood section visitors will learn about the story of a white thirteen-year-old schoolgirl Olivia Acton. Olivia returned to school from a holiday in the Canary Islands with her hair braided in cornrows. The head teacher of the school removed her from classes, stating that her braided hair did not conform to the school’s code of dress. ²⁴

An example of the biographical stories within the adolescence section of the exhibition is the story of seventeen-year-old Michelle Barskile. In 1998, her Black sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha, told Michelle of North Carolina that because she wore her hair in dreadlocks, she would not be allowed to attend the debutante ball. She was told that if she wished to attend the ball, she would have to pin her locks up on the top of her head so that they would be out of sight. Michelle ultimately refused to alter her hair and opted not to attend the ball.²⁵

In the adulthood section of the exhibition visitors will learn the story of Susan L. Taylor. In April of 2006, Susan Taylor, Executive Editor of Essence Magazine learned that a department at Hampton University in Virginia, a historically Black university, had a strict-no-braids, no dreadlock policy for its students. After hearing this Susan promptly cancelled her speaking engagement with the university. The school later confirmed that the school did in fact have this policy in place for the students in its business program.²⁶ This story reinforces one of the overarching messages within the adulthood section, that being, there is pressure to conform to a certain “polished” appearance within corporate America.

The story of congresswoman Cynthia McKinney, who became involved in an incident with a police officer at a Capital Hill security checkpoint. The officer

disqualified the congresswoman from entering the building because her previous Eurocentric hairstyle had changed drastically and was currently in a more traditional African hairstyle. The officer later stated that he simply did not recognize the congresswoman because of the drastic new hairstyle. This story presents an opportunity to start a dialogue amongst visitors as to whether or not the style of someone’s hair is justification for preventing access into certain places.

These stories are just a few of the biographical accounts of women whom have been confronted with conflict based on the nature of their hair as it relates to traditional African hairstyles. The book, *The Politics of Black Women’s Hair*, by Althea Prince, is where these stories are pulled from. This book contains many other biographical stories of women dealing with the pressures associated with having Black hair in White America.

**Communicating with Audience**

The use of popular and iconic imagery will be used to communicate with the audience. The exhibition is designed to resonate with a wide age range of women. Throughout the exhibition there will be objects and images that will be recognizable by all age groups. These objects, images, and graphics will also be another key element in helping to facilitate dialogue between different groups of visitors. For example, a grandmother who has brought her granddaughter to the exhibition can compare and contrast dolls that are reminiscent of those that they played with as a little girl. Some spaces of the exhibition will feature projected text on wall surfaces. The projected text would be questions to help facilitate conversation between different groups of visitors. For example, in the interactive boardroom area of the exhibition one of the questions projected ask visitors if they think Afrocentric hairstyles are viewed as unprofessional in the corporate workplace.
Audience Engagement

Audience engagement will be executed through the use of interactives that will encourage and often require open dialogue between visitors. In various spaces, visitors will be presented with questions and prompted to speak to visitors within that same space about their personal responses to these questions. For example, visitors within the adulthood section of the exhibition will have an opportunity to sit down around a corporate style conference table. The question, which may be a decal, adhered to the table, will ask visitors whether or not at anytime in their professional career they have felt pressure to conform to a certain grooming standards to obtain or maintain employment.

The use of interactives will also be utilized to engage visitors within the various section of the exhibition. Some of these interactives will be recreations of tests or activities conducted by other professionals to examine feelings about Black hair. An example of one of these recreations is the doll test. Dr. Kenneth Clark originally conducted the doll test in the 1950’s. The test was administered to children and involved placing two almost completely identical dolls on a table and asking the children participants to select the doll that they liked the best. The only visible difference between the dolls was the color of their skin. One doll was white and one doll was black. The majority of the children selected the white doll as their favorite.

This test has been recreated by several different people, and was even adjusted to focus specifically on hair. In the recreation examining children’s opinions about hair, two almost identical black dolls were placed on a table before the children. The only difference between the dolls was that one doll had a more kinky and curly texture to its hair than the other doll. The child participants were asked to
select the doll that had "pretty hair." Sixty-five percent of the children identified straight hair as pretty, and natural kinky hair as ugly.27

**Exhibition Look & Feel**

The exhibition will have a modern and edgy look and feel. This will be achieved through the use of sleek furnishings; polished chrome metal finishes, and a variety of exposed textured surfaces. Even though the exhibition will be suited for a wide age range of visitors, one of the primary goals is to capture the attention of the younger visitors who are in the process of developing and defining themselves. Giving the space a modern, urban, and edgy feel, will capture and maintain the attention of the younger visitors.

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**LOOK & FEEL**

### Color Palette

- **Primary Color Scheme**
- **Section Indicator Colors**

### Materials

- Brick
- Leather
- Chrome
- Cherry Wood

### Inspiration Images:

Figure 5 Look & Feel

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A black, white, and gray color scheme will be used throughout the four sections of the exhibition. This not only plays off the title of the exhibition but also is a representation of how many Black women see this topic. You are either pro-black, caving in to White ideals or somewhere in the middle. This color scheme also provides a neutral backdrop for the objects and images being presented.

One of the most memorable and unique experiences of the exhibition is the inclusion of a full service beauty salon. The visitor can enter the salon in two locations in the exhibition experience. The salons will be placed in a central location that will be visible from all of the other sections of the exhibition space.

Conclusion

Hair in African culture has the tradition for being the carrier of messages.28 This exhibition will continue that tradition by being the medium for carrying the message that accepting and embracing your hair in its natural state is the start of self-acceptance and an affirmation of African self-consciousness.

This exhibit will provide a contribution to the field of exhibition design because although there are many exhibitions about African-American history, culture, and the African diaspora, there is very few that touch on topics that are extremely relevant and personal to young Black women. This exhibit will engage a new audience that is often unrepresented in the museum world. Getting Straight to the Roots, No-Lye: Black Hair in White America, pushes the boundaries of exhibition design and provides Black visitors with relevant and transformative experiences.

"Remove the kinks from your mind not your hair”-Marcus Garvey

Bibliography


Appendix 1
Process Diagrams

Figure 6
Figure 7
## Appendix 2

### Resource Matrix

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