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**MORE THAN JUST HAIR TALK: THE KINKS, CURLS AND DUELING  
FEMINISMS IN YOUTUBE'S NATURAL HAIR COMMUNITY**

A Thesis in

Media Studies

by

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## ABSTRACT

Natural85, BeautifulBrwnBabyDol, MyNaturalSistas, MahoganyCurls, HairCrush; these are five of just a few of the thousands of Black natural hair channels on YouTube. Self-professed *natural hair gurus*, these curly-haired experts have impressive Black female fan bases that range from 10,000 to 400,000 subscribers. With tag lines like, “Natural hair with flair,” “Simple. Natural. Hair care,” and “Natural Hair, Health, Beauty, and Fashion Tutorials with a Sprinkle of Love here and there,” vlog channels like these have created spaces for millions of Black women to discuss views and tips about the grooming practice of natural hair. By examining how the meaning of wearing natural hair is represented in YouTube’s natural hair community, this research identifies ways that Black women’s self-value and its connection to ideas of hair have evolved. I argue that the current natural hair movement as it is represented in YouTube’s natural hair community sits at the intersection of Black feminism and postfeminism. These coinciding feminisms create discourses in the community that are highly contradictory. Values continuously teeter between acceptance versus judgment, loving one’s authentic Black hair versus having hair envy and empowerment versus disempowerment. The complex inconsistencies and surprising collaborations of Black feminist and postfeminist discourses in YouTube’s natural hair community help shape the kinks and curls of how African American women grapple with ideas of Black beauty and its connection to hair aesthetics.

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**Styling My Hair in the Mirror**

Coil it. Curl it. Twist it. Twirl it. Plait it.

Flat it. String it. Ring it. Wrap it. Rock it

Maybe Lock it.

Coil it. Curl it. Twist it. Twirl it. Plait it.

Flat it. String it. Ring it. Wrap it. Rock it

Maybe Lock it.

Style it lush. 'Fro it free. Let it bush.

Call it nappy.

**By Sharon Harvey Rosenburg, 2009**

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

In 2008 during my freshman year of college I found myself contemplating new ways to style my hair. I was 18 years old and wanted to reinvent myself. I took my hairstyle search to YouTube where I found videos that featured African American women with *natural hair*, hair that is in its biological curly or kinky state without the treatment of chemicals to make it straight. The images of afros and curly locks fascinated me. After spending several hours browsing videos of Black women embracing their kinky/curly tresses, I decided to stop receiving chemical treatments on my hair and to join the many women who had chosen to wear their hair in its authentic texture. My reason for this alteration started off as simply something new to change my appearance aesthetically. However, as I continued to watch more and more women share their personal natural hair journeys via YouTube, the idea of natural hair became so much more than just a trend for me. For the first time in my life I was proud to have Black kinky hair and felt empowered when I wore my hair in natural styles.

Throughout that year of college I watched women share their personal natural hair journeys via YouTube and I noticed what seemed to be a connection between viewers and the kinky-haired women who provided information on how to style natural hair and suggested certain products to assist in retaining hair growth. Through comments, subscriptions, and the ability to create video responses to other YouTube users and uploaders, users seemed to be forging relationships in what many users have coined the “YouTube natural hair community.” This YouTube community provides a platform for African American women to showcase a variety of natural hairstyles that include

dreadlocks, afros, twists, and short kinky cuts. The site that urges its users to “Broadcast Yourself” houses more than 100 hours of video uploaded every minute and over one billion users visiting the site each month (YouTube, 2013). With a billion people leaving comments, sharing, and “liking” video clips, it is not surprising that scholars consider YouTube to be a platform for virtual communities (Burgess & Green, 2009; Parks, 2011). As Michael Strangelove argues, people “develop relationships through it” (Strangelove, 2010, p. 105). These communities which attract billions of users have also made YouTube into a commercial. Concepts of community and commercialism in the YouTube natural hair community are the focuses of this thesis.

Natural85, BeautifulBrwnBabyDol, MyNaturalSistas, MahoganyCurls, HairCrush; these are five of just a few of the thousands of Black natural hair channels on YouTube. Self-professed *natural hair gurus*, these curly-haired experts have impressive Black female fan bases that range from 10,000 to 400,000 subscribers. With tag lines like “Natural hair with flair!” (Mahogancurls, 2013), “Simple. Natural. Hair care.” (Natural85, 2013), and “Natural Hair, Health, Beauty, and Fashion Tutorials with a Sprinkle of Love here and there” (MyNaturalSistas, 2013), vlog channels like these have created space for millions of Black women to discuss views and tips about the alternative—perhaps even feminist—grooming practice of natural hair. Although African American women have long struggled with the acceptance of their natural manes, YouTube’s natural hair vlogs act as a platform for Black women to rearticulate Black beauty criteria and foster environments of empowerment and pride.

Thousands of videos and vlogs (video blogs) feature hairstyling tips, hair maintenance advice, and hair product reviews for African American women who choose

to wear their manes chemical free. The popular African American publication *Ebony Magazine* suggests that the current popularity of natural hair has created a “re-modernized” way of living in the Black community and credits YouTube’s natural hair community for helping to make Black natural hair care a focal point in the mainstream beauty industry (Hawkins, 2013). *Ebony* writer LaParis Hawkins states, “With all the progress of hair companies catering to our ‘natural needs,’ we can also thank the various naturlistas online for creating a space of accessibility to informative tips, reviews and styles, leading us all to gorgeous natural locks” (Hawkins, 2013). The presence and popularity of this community points to a change in the ways that African American women are wearing their hair and a change in the attitudes that African American women have about beauty, femininity, and cultural politics (White, 2005). But are these changes all positive changes in the attitudes that Black women have about Black hair and beauty?

For women of all ethnicities appearance is highly important. Murray (2012) links this perspective to a “gendered dualism” that suggests women are associated with the physical (the body), while men are associated with the psychological (the mind) and culture (p. 91). Hair, more specifically, is a physical attribute that plays a role in how female beauty is perceived. Despite this some women use hair practices as feminist representations of power and choice. For African American women, however, hair has always been perhaps an even more complex signifier than for White women. As an African American woman who was born and raised in South Carolina, I grew up viewing hair as a defining aspect of Black femininity and as a reflection of one’s self-value. But in researching natural Black hair from a scholarly angle, I have learned that a history of racism, self-identity, culture, and femininity is woven into each strand of a Black

woman's mane. Many African American women believe that no matter how smart, educated, or "pretty" a Black woman may be, those who possess features that are traditionally African—such as dark skin, kinky hair and full lips—are considered inferior to their lighter, straight-haired counterparts and to White women (Collins, 1991). As Patricia Hill Collins argues (borrowing from W.E.B. DuBois), externally defined standards of beauty have long been applied to African American women, causing them to adopt a dual-consciousness in which one publicly conforms to the mannerisms, aesthetics, and language of the oppressive culture, while "hiding a self-defined standpoint from the prying eyes of dominant groups" (Collins, 1991, p. 91). However, through safe spaces like YouTube Black women are finding ways to construct new self-definitions. The question is what influences these new self-definitions? Do they represent a mix of cultural resistance and pride or self-surveillance and commodification? Can natural hair be feminist?

Thus, this research investigates the following:

RQ1: What does natural Black hair mean to members of YouTube's natural hair community?

RQ2: Who represents natural hair in YouTube's natural hair community?

RQ3: What do recent YouTube natural hair vlogs suggest about relations between natural hair's political and commercial meanings?

RQ4: Is natural hair feminist?

Through an analysis of natural hair YouTube vlogs from recent years, this research explores how ideas that have influenced natural hair practices have evolved. This research is significant because it contributes to the growing body of knowledge surrounding African American female identity and its connection to certain hair practices.

By examining how the meaning of wearing natural hair is represented in YouTube's natural hair community, this research identifies how Black women's sense of self-value and its connection to ideas of beauty have evolved. I argue that the current natural hair movement as it is represented in YouTube's natural hair community sits at the intersection of Black feminism and postfeminism. The comforting nature of YouTube's natural hair community provides a platform for African American women to speak candidly about how their physical features have been viewed historically by the dominant society, and to consider how adopting natural hair practices enables Black women's redefinition of beauty standards. Simultaneously however, the movement embodies elements of postfeminism, as natural hair followers embrace a culture of consumerism and self-surveillance. Such ironies and surprising collaborations of Black feminist and postfeminist discourses in YouTube's natural hair community shape the kinks and curls of how African American women grapple with ideas of Black beauty and its connection to hair aesthetics.

## **Method**

Because I am interested in the representations and meaning of natural hair, I engage in a thematic textual analysis to examine themes about natural hair found in the sample of natural hair vlogs. I borrow from William Foster Owen's (1984) method for thematic analysis because it allows me to closely examine themes while attending to their influence as texts. Owen pays special attention to themes based on three criteria: "recurrence," "repetition," and "forcefulness" (1984, p. 275). Therefore, as I watched

and re-watched the fifty natural hair vlogs in my study, I documented how and when certain words, phrases, and ideas appeared.

According to Stone (1997) one of the limitations of conducting thematic textual analyses rests in researchers' lack of consideration of the polysemic nature of the text that is being examined. The capacity of a text to have multiple meanings and understandings can result in an individual's interpretations differing from that of the text's producer (Hall, 1980). However, the purpose of a textual analysis is not to distinguish the dominant or producer's intended interpretation of a text, but "to try and obtain a sense of the ways in which, in particular cultures at particular times, people make sense of the world around them" (McKee, 2001). Therefore, explaining the relationship between a text and its meaning necessitates an understanding of the social and political context in which it is created and distributed (McKee, 2001).

To prepare for this analysis, I familiarized myself with the ways in which beauty standards and ideas surrounding various hair textures have evolved historically among African Americans, paying close attention to the values of Black women. I also learned about the marketing of beauty to African American women. I read about the Black Power Movement, elements of Black history that have assisted in influencing the cultural identities of Blacks and how certain hair styling practices have been perceived over time. As I examined the natural hair vlogs, my intention was not to condense the vlog content to one overarching theme, but rather to document the similarities, inconsistencies, and nuanced ideas about natural hair found within the vlog videos while attending to the historical, social, and political context of African American hair.

I chose to examine vlogs because the YouTube website acts as what I call a “virtual greenhouse” that provides the needed atmosphere, characteristics, and tools necessary for communities to flourish. In recent years YouTube has acted as a virtual greenhouse for women with natural hair. Black women around the world have logged on to the content sharing site and “through the activities of uploading, viewing, discussing, and collaborating— the YouTube community forms a network of creative practice” (Burgess & Green, 2009, p. 61). This network of kinky/curly users has established a culture of support, criticism, and inspiration. It has created a safe space for African American women to negotiate a Black feminist aesthetic of beauty—focused around hair. Thus, YouTube vlogs are key spaces that represent the new natural hair movement. I selected for analysis vlogs that demonstrate the significant themes surrounding African American women who wear natural hair. With Collins theory of Black feminism (1991) and Gill’s theory of post feminism (2008), this analysis examines the sample of natural hair vlogs for an understanding of how the history surrounding Black hair stigmas coupled with contemporary ideas of Black hair have influenced the way that African American women of YouTube’s natural hair community have created identities surrounding the practice of having natural hair.

I consulted the natural hair community to create my sample. I chose those vlogs listed on “The Top Natural Hair Vloggers of 2013” published by the social media site for natural hair, 4CHairChick.com.<sup>1</sup> The site determines its ranking by consulting vloggers’ number of YouTube subscribers, Facebook page fans, Twitter followers, and Instagram followers. Thus, this ranking list is credible for its consideration of multiple platforms. I

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<sup>1</sup> The report from 4CHairChick.com was chosen as a reference because the website is a popular resource for natural haired women across several mediums. Along with the website, it has over 200,000 followers on its Facebook page and over 19,000 subscribers on YouTube (4CHairChick.com, 2014).

viewed 10 vlogger YouTube channels. Each vlogger YouTube channel includes videos that have been uploaded by the vlogger. I analyzed five videos from each vlogger channel, including the earliest uploaded video, the last uploaded video (as of December 14, 2013), and three additional videos in between the date of the first uploaded video and the last uploaded video. I created my sample in this way to observe how video topics and vlogger views surrounding natural hair have evolved from the start of their natural hair vlogging webcasts to the present. I also analyzed the video descriptions by the channels owners and the comments that viewers left under each video. The number of comments left on the videos I analyzed range from the least being approximately 50 comments to the most being approximately 2000 comments. I watched five vlogs a day for a span of 10 days between December 14, 2013 to December 24, 2013. In total, 50 natural hair vlog videos and approximately 15,000 comments were analyzed. Comments where viewers share personal experiences, views, and their feelings towards vloggers in full sentences were chosen for close examination. YouTube channels of hair product companies Cantu Shea Butter and Miss Jessie's were also analyzed to assist in understanding how YouTube's natural hair community influences the marketing of Black hair products.

<b>YouTube Vlog Channels Analyzed</b>
<b>Natural85</b>
<b>Taren Guy</b>
<b>Colouredbeautiful</b>
<b>SimplYounique</b>
<b>Beautifulbrwnbabydol</b>
<b>Nikkimae2003</b>
<b>Mynaturalsistas</b>
<b>MahagonyCurls</b>
<b>Haircrush</b>
<b>AfricanExport</b>

*Figure 1-1. Vlogger channels analyzed in this study.*

## Chapter Outline

Chapter 2 provides a review of relevant literature surrounding natural hair and African American hair politics. In order to understand how contemporary Black women define beauty and identify with their hair, one must look at how what is considered “beautiful” in African American culture has evolved throughout history. For this reason the chapter explores the historical construction of African American beauty ideas and hair values, including the Black Power era and the role of natural hair during that era. It also discusses previous research about the implications of virtual communities like the one analyzed in this study. Finally, the chapter contains a review of theoretical literature including Hall’s theory of cultural identity that my study assumes, Black feminist thought and postfeminism that constitutes my conceptual framework.

The third chapter, “YouTube: A Safe Haven for Black Feminist Aesthetic Negotiations,” explores YouTube’s natural hair community as a feminist safe space where African American women can negotiate new self-definitions through natural hair practices. This chapter discusses what the discourse observed in YouTube’s natural hair community reveals about the current political meaning of natural hair and examines how the ideas expressed in the sample coincide and contradict political and cultural connotations of hair that were expressed in earlier periods of African American history. The fourth chapter, “A Postfeminist Journey of Business and Betterment” further pushes the idea that natural hair is political by examining how the natural lifestyle and its commodification may disempower and empower Black women.

Finally, the fifth chapter concludes the project by reflecting upon the contemporary political and commercial meanings of natural hair that were revealed by

the analysis, how identity and hair values are negotiated within YouTube's natural hair community, and what these findings suggest about the new natural hair movement taking place in America. Given the results of this thesis, I reflect upon the extent to which natural hair is feminist.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Contextualizing YouTube's Natural Hair Community**

African American women and the connection that they have with their hair is a complex and multifaceted subject. Several scholars have written about the role of hair in Black history, detailing the political and cultural factors that have influenced the standards of beauty and “good hair” that exist within African American culture. This review of literature provides a background into the major discourses that surround Black natural hair and how its meaning has been transformed through different eras in American history. Along with a discussion of YouTube's role in the natural hair community, this chapter also details the theories that will provide the framework for analyses in chapters three and four.

#### **Early Black “Hairstory”**

In order to understand the ways in which African Americans have defined beauty and connected hair with Black identity, one must look how what is considered “beautiful” in the Black community has changed over time. Various historical incidents have influenced the values that persons of African descent have adopted concerning their appearance. The meanings behind hair and different hair styling practices are multifaceted in Black communities globally, particularly among women. Hair has long fulfilled a symbolic role in Black culture. This symbolic role is seen especially in how hair is socially constructed in societies where colonial and other political connotations of hair remain. Thompson (2009) argues that Black women are connected to their hair emotionally in a way communicates women's lived experiences. With histories of

colonialism, slavery, and politics of race entangled in these experiences, discussions of hair provide a window into how Black women construct ideas of beauty.

Black cultures around the globe have their own unique histories involving racial hierarchy, standards of beauty and ideas about femininity. Imperialist beliefs that European culture was superior to African culture have influenced the elevation of European aesthetics and the vilification of natural African features (Lake, 2003). African American women are no different. Thus, for centuries, African Americans have employed a plethora of skin-lightening treatments and hair straightener. They have altered their physical features as a way of disassociating themselves with markers of their African lineage.

According to Stuart Hall (1990), the ideas of visual representation and beauty that Whites upheld during times of colonialism, purposefully positioned Black people's perceptions and thus performances towards dominant regimes of beauty (Hall, 1990). European colonial structures created expectations of beauty that were widely followed. Thus, these structures of beauty influenced Black people to assume identities similar to Whites. Hall argues that cultural identities have been, and continue to be shaped by historical and cultural discourses. Therefore identities are irrevocably linked to politics and "positioning the Black self in this political culture is constant" (Marco, 2012, p. 30).

One beauty standard derived from the Northern European look is hair follicles that grow from a rounded shaft that causes the hair to grow flat and have a straight appearance. However, women of African lineage usually have hair that emerges from an oval-like shaft which causes the hair to curl and fold into a loose or tight spiral shape (Wilson and Russell, 1996). Racialized hair differences caused more than visual divides,

“unfortunately, in a society with a strong history of racial prejudice, such differences are not without social and even economic consequences” (ibid, p. 78). Because of this, one of the main features that blacks altered was their hair. A common notion among African Americans was that women’s hair that was straight or wavy like Europeans, was considered more attractive and had “good hair,” while those who had tightly coiled and kinky had “bad hair” (Banks, 2000, p.85). Black female slaves would even use pig lard to help their hair lie flat. Signifying its service to racialized hierarchy, hair texture was considered the most telling characteristic of Black status. Byrd and Tharps write, “the rule of thumb was that if the hair showed just a little bit of kinkiness a person would be unable to pass as White” (2001).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries African Americans’ kinky tresses were considered to be obstructions to their ascending the social hierarchy of American society. This led to the popularity of the “process” or “relaxer,” terms for chemicals used to alter hair from a curly/kinky state to silky straight strands. Tools like the hot comb and curling iron that used heat to straighten hair promised to fix “bad hair.” The process of treating kinky hair with a relaxer, hot comb and curling iron comes with some risk. Relaxers often leave women with chemical burns on their scalps, while hot combs and curling irons sometimes leave Black women with painful burns on their foreheads, ears, and along the nape of the neck. In spite of the discomfort associated with these straightening practices, the desire to obtain straight and silky hair has kept these styling techniques staples in African American hair care.

In *Hair Raising: Beauty, Culture, and African American Women* Noliwe M. Rooks (1996) discusses the political and social meanings that hair has had for African

American women and how the beauty industry has profited from these ideas. After examining hair and beauty advertisements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Rooks argues that White-owned beauty companies used commonly held ideas about racial hierarchy and disseminated these ideas throughout their advertisements. As Rooks puts it, “Advertisements for skin lighteners and hair straighteners marketed by White companies suggest to Blacks that only through changing physical features will persons of African descent be afforded class mobility within African American communities and social acceptance by the dominant culture” (Rooks, 1996, p. 26).

Rook’s argument is that through the images and techniques used for marketing beauty products to African American women, manufacturers emphasized that the primary means for social advancement was by changing the texture of one’s hair to appear “Whiter.” Rooks suggests, “An acceptable appearance means ridding oneself of ‘short, matted un-attractive curly hair’ and replacing it with hair that is long, silky, and straight. Acceptability means ridding one’s self of natural hair” (1996, p. 33). Beliefs such as this led to psychological, emotional, and cultural corruption that caused Blacks to internalize feelings of inferiority and to accept repression (Jones, 2009).

Some scholars trace the internalization of Black inadequacy to how beauty products have been sold to Black women. In *Style and Status: Selling Beauty to African American Women, 1920-1975* Sussanah Walker chronicles the history of African American beauty products and the culture it spawned. Black Beauty culture “encompasses treatments for women’s hair, skin, and bodies, as well as the employment of women who work as beauty culturists” (Walker, 2007, p. 3). Advertisements between the years 1920-1975 contained shifting and contested notions of what beauty meant for

Black women in the context of African American political, social, racial, and economic history (Walker, 2007). Accounts throughout history suggest how beauty connects with race, how status is associated with hair, and how personal and professional advancement is tied to the embrace of consumer culture for African American women (Walker, 2007). The oppression of African American women became commodified through these beauty products and the standards of beauty they promoted.

To fully understand Black beauty culture, one needs to explore how representations of Blackness and Black beauty in the media have shaped the attitudes of African Americans. Cheryl Thompson's "Black Women, Beauty, and Hair as a Matter of Being" examines how media and social interactive practices contribute to people's grooming decisions while assigning aesthetic worth to one's body (2009, p. 831). There is no doubt that Black women have been internally conditioned to fashion themselves and their hair in ways that allow them to have more in common with Whites than with each other. Unless they adopt Northern Eurocentric beauty values, Black women may feel that they are at a disadvantage in the workforce, in forging romantic relationships, and in fitting within the norms of society in general (Thompson, 2009). Using social comparison theory as a framework, Thompson argues that the Eurocentric beauty standard of straight, long and flowing hair seen in the media has a sociocultural effect on Black women's notions of physical attractiveness, self-esteem, courtship, and identity (2009). Thompson suggests that African American hair is a threat to the dominant hegemonic values of beauty and concludes that some Black women who choose to not wear natural hair "fear of societal reprisal—i.e., limited employment opportunities; lack of male interest (courtship); and, the possibility of their sexuality being questioned" (2009, p. 855). These

are just a few of the stigmas that come along with natural hair. While time and trends have granted some acceptance, these stigmas still plague kinky hairstyles.

### **The Black Power Era and its Natural Hair Revolution**

The late 1960s was a time that challenged these stigmas. In the late 1960s African Americans were struggling nationally and culturally. While America as a nation was dealing with the Vietnam War, Blacks were facing a war of their own. In 1966, two years after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 had been passed, many African Americans had grown impatient with the slow pace of integration and equality throughout America. Notable civil rights activists believed that the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) and other Black leaders had made too many compromises with White leaders, which led to the advancement of the idea of “Black Power.”

Some historians attribute the Black Power Movement’s inception to 1966, when James Meredith, a veteran of the Civil Rights movement, was shot while attempting to complete what he called “The March Against Fear” in which he planned to walk across the state of Mississippi (Lester, 1968). Civil rights activists Martin Luther King Jr. and Stokely Carmichael were sent to finish the march. However, once the march arrived in Greenwood, Mississippi, Carmichael was arrested for trespassing on public property. Carmichael issued a call to action to the crowd that gathered upon his release. He told them to fight for “Black Power.” The Black Power Movement of the 1960s and 1970s was a defining moment for African American identity. It gave birth to the idea that “Black is Beautiful.” The Black Power Movement sought to ensure that Blacks achieved full

equality with Whites and offered a philosophy of racial pride in the process of struggle. In *Black Power* Stokely Carmichael asserts, “It is absolutely essential that Black people develop an awareness of their cultural heritage” (Carmichael, 1967, p. 37). The Black Power Movement called on African Americans to become more militant (to vigorously support the cause of racial equality), to create their own culture, and to abandon efforts aimed at Black integration into White culture.

Black Power also marked a period of limbo in which Blacks struggled to define “Blackness.” Clenched fists, colorful dashikis, sky-high afros, and Black berets signify the period. Among the many criteria that African Americans were using to determine Blackness (values, speech, political stance, etc.) were visual signifiers. Blacks, moreover, developed what we could call an authentic “Black aesthetic.” Blacks were constantly asking themselves what beauty standards were acceptable in terms of what was “Black?” They asked themselves what “look” was politically correct? What appropriately represented the identity of what it meant to be an African American in the late 1960s? Several scholars have written about the significance of certain elements of the cultural nationalism of the 1960s, particularly the adoption of natural hair and the common dawning of African prints and garbs (Austin, 2006; Brown, 2003; Van Deburg, 1992). For some, hair became one of the defining characteristics of Blackness (hooks, 1997).

Within this era the afro and natural hair became fashionable and hair became inextricably bound to African American politics. While some Blacks adopted the style simply because it was becoming fashionable, in doing so, African Americans liberated themselves from oppressive standards White America had placed upon them. Past historical and cultural research suggests that natural hair, also referred to as wearing hair

in its “happy state,” the “freedom cap,” and the “nappy explosion,” represented more than just an aesthetic trend (Llorens, 1967, p. 137). It was an embodiment of liberation (Davis, 1994). In the 1967 *Ebony* article titled, “The Search for Identity: Quest of Younger Negroes Underlies Major Thrust toward Social Change,” Kenneth B. Clark, a psychologist, professor, and civil rights activist, discusses the trend of natural hair as a development among Negro youth and referred to it as “the cult of Negritude” (1967, p. 39). He describes the choice for African Americans to wear their hair in its natural state was an action of revolt against the norms of mainstream society. Clark writes:

The cult of ‘Negritude’ the fad wherein Negro females refuse to straighten their hair as a protest against imitating the hair texture of Whites; the tendency of some young Negro males to effect the African haircut must be seen as part of the larger pattern of the present struggle for positive racial identity. (Clark, 1967, p. 40)

As this passage suggested, in its earliest stages of popularity natural hair was seen as something “bigger” than just a style for the many Blacks who wore it. Kinky hair and afros challenged this “hair is only a style” concept. They showed that Blacks who wore their hair in its authentic state could exist comfortably within society. Bell hooks, an African American professor and scholar in race and gender studies, recounted her experience with hair during this era stating, “Exposing the myriad ways White supremacy had assaulted our self-concept and our self-esteem, militant leaders of black liberation struggle demanded that black folks see ourselves differently—see self-love as a radical political agenda” (hooks, 1994, p. 173).

### **Black Feminist Thought and Natural Hair**

For many African American women in this era, adopting natural hair practices and rejecting hair-straightening practices were ways of resisting oppressive standards of beauty and embracing aesthetics that encouraged pride in authentic Black features. Black feminist thought challenges Black women to develop redefinitions of beauty (Collins, 1991). Collins states that a Black feminist aesthetic means that for women, “beauty is not based solely on physical criteria because mind, spirit, and body are not conceptualized as separate, oppositional spheres. Instead, all are central in aesthetic assessments of individuals and their creations” (1991, p. 89). When this concept is applied to hook’s discussion of natural hair as being a part of the Black Power movement’s political agenda of self-love, natural hair communicates a Black feminist aesthetic. Afros and other kinky styles that were symbols of Black pride during this period drew from traditional African aesthetics that challenged the era’s dominant standards of ornamental beauty.

As African American women and men began wearing their hair in kinky styles natural hair became more than a political statement; it was also a popular trend among Blacks who did not associate the hair practice with politics. The cover article for *Ebony*’s January 1969 issue, “The Natural Look: Is it Here to Stay?” discussed how for many African American women the natural hairstyle and the afro was not so much a “statement of protest,” but simply a fashion choice not meant to have any political significance. The article said, “In most instances, it is an extension of the racial pride that motivated the intrepid few of the early period, but for others, it is primarily a matter of achieving a certain cosmetic effect” (“The Natural Look,” 1969, p. 104). The article gave an example of this by detailing how Bernice Kerr, an elementary school teacher who taught a class

via a television broadcast, went natural simply because she thought it would make her look better on TV (ibid, p. 108). The article went on to say that in late 1966 and early 1967 it was almost possible to determine the degree of a woman's militancy by the style of her hair because mostly naturals were the ones encountered at civil rights meetings, picket lines, and protest demonstrations. At the time of this article's publication, however, natural hair had become a norm. A de-politicization of natural hair seemed to occur.

The article also discussed how kinky-curly hair had become popular among Whites, touching on how African Americans responded to the crossing-over of this trend. It said:

Just as the lighter nine-tenths of the nation annually spends hours baking in the sun, trying to transform pallor into 'tan,' some are now seeking to emulate the noble 'kink' through artificial means. Some of the largest department stores now carry natural wigs and they have become a popular item at 'in' boutiques which feature them in shades ranging from black to platinum blonde. ("The Natural Look," 1969, p. 104)

This article invited readers into a conversation of "They're stealing our *thing!*" (ibid, 1969, p. 104), an aesthetic that had originated in Black culture was now being adopted by Whites. A discourse that was prominent among African Americans during this age of black pride. With internalized feelings of inferiority in a nation dominated by Whites, blacks took pride in customs that they felt were authentically "theirs." This particular article explained how natural hair, a style that White culture had once shunned, suddenly

became popular among them and had started being featured in mainstream magazines like *Women's Wear Daily* and *Life*.

This “revolution,” however, slowly faded. Afros and natural hair soon lost both its popularity and its feeling of liberation. Although some African Americans continued to adopt this aesthetic, even more went back to relaxers and endured the stigma surrounding natural hair (hooks, 1994). Black feminist bell hooks argues that the fade of natural hair popularity and the meaning behind it is due to African Americans’ and Black activists’ never truly being able to accept values of black self-love and an end to internalized racism. She says, “Even during the most militant stages of black power movement, they had never really stopped allowing racist notions of beauty to define female desirability” (hooks, 1994, p. 177). Hooks argues that this hypocrisy created a framework that allowed hegemonic ideals of Northern Eurocentric beauty to become accepted again.

The natural hair aesthetics that were prominent during the Black Power movement have gained popularity once again. Perhaps, one reason for its reemergence is because of the presence of new “safe spaces” for African American women (Collins, 1991, 91). Collins describes a safe space as “this realm of relatively safe discourse, however narrow [that] is a necessary condition for Black women’s resistance,” (1991, p. 95). The Black Power movement was grounded in goals of resistance and the African American women of this movement sought to redefine ideas of Black womanhood through aesthetics. In safe spaces Black women,

observe the feminine images of the ‘larger’ culture, realize that these models are at best unsuitable and at worst destructive to them, and go about the business of

fashioning themselves after the prevalent, historical black female role models in their own community. (O'Neal, 1986, p. 139).

O'Neal's explanation of this space positions YouTube's natural hair community in the category of safe space. The concept of YouTube's natural hair community as a Black feminist safe space will be explored further in Chapter Three.

### **The “Natural Hair Movement:” A Black Feminist Post-Citizen, Postfeminist Movement**

In many ways the present postfeminist natural hair movement works as a post-citizen rather than a citizen movement. The Civil Rights movement and the Black Power movement of the 1960s and 1970s are both what can be considered citizenship movements. According to Jasper (1997) citizenship movements are "organized by and on behalf of categories of people excluded in some way from full human rights, political participation, or basic economic protections" (p. 7). During these eras African American men and women sought to gain equal rights in the areas of education, employment practices, and citizenship rights like the opportunity to vote. Citizenship movements make their demands principally against the state, which generally serves as the original granter and primary enforcer of rights and other protections (Jasper, 1997). Claims can also be made against other large bodies that grant rights or protections.

Post-citizenship movements, in contrast, are initiated by those who already enjoy most, or even all, of the standard rights of citizens (Jasper, 1997). Post-citizenship movement members participate within a social movement based largely on their ethical and moral beliefs. Jasper contends that the members of post-citizenship movements seek

changes that will not necessarily benefit them politically, but instead seek to “realize a moral vision” (p. 9).

Based on these criteria, I argue that natural hair constitutes a post-citizenship movement. Coined by several media outlets as the “natural hair movement” (Muhammad, 2012; “We aren’t all” 2013; Wilson, 2012; ), hundreds of thousands of Black women are seeking to change ideas of “good hair” through the adoption of natural hair practices, the creation of virtual hair communities and the creation of natural hair product lines. Furthermore, following Collins’s (1991) criteria for a Black feminist “safe space,” I contend that YouTube’s natural hair community acts as a safe haven for African American women to speak candidly about Black hair. The natural hair community’s discourse, moreover, negotiates African American beauty standards that hark back to those embraced during the Black Power era. I will elaborate on these arguments in Chapter Three and return to Jasper’s post-citizen movement concept in my discussion of natural hair and feminism in Chapter Five. Today’s natural hair movement, however, also centers itself on female self-empowerment and being “true to one’s self,” with elements of commercialism and a lifestyle that encourages consumerism. These are characteristics widely associated with postfeminism (Gill, 2008; Worthington, 2005), as I will explain in Chapter Four.

Before proceeding, I should define postfeminism. This is no easy task. Over the years postfeminism has had several meanings. Some scholars refer to postfeminism as an “active process to which feminist gains of the 1970s and 80s come to be undermined” (McRobbie, 2004), arguing that gender equality now happens naturally and feminism is no longer needed (Butler, 2013). Others view postfeminism as a sensibility that

“emphasizes the contradictory nature of postfeminist discourses and the entanglement of both feminist and anti-feminist themes within them” (Gill, 2008). This idea of postfeminism as a sensibility is most useful, as it allows scholars to identify certain features that represent postfeminism culture. These themes include:

The notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring, and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice, and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference; a marked sexualization of culture; an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference. (Gill, 2007, p. 149)

Following Gill’s criteria, I identify a text as postfeminist if it encompasses one or more of the themes mentioned. The natural hair movement as it is represented via YouTube’s natural hair community possesses themes of individualism, choice and empowerment as routes to women’s independence and freedom, along with an emphasis on consumerism, features that allow it to be classified as a postfeminist movement. Chapter Four explores the themes of postfeminism in the natural hair vlogs.

### **YouTube as a Platform for the Virtual Natural Hair Community**

Before moving on to analysis of the vlogs, it is worth acknowledging the role that YouTube as a media platform plays in constructing meanings around natural hair.

YouTube, a video sharing website that was established in 2005, has become one of the most popular interactive websites on the internet. Now owned by Google, the site that urges its users to “Broadcast Yourself” has more than 100 hours of video uploaded every

minute and over one billion users visiting the site each month (YouTube, 2013). With a billion people leaving comments, sharing, and liking video clips (YouTube), some scholars describe YouTube as a site that assists in creating community and preserving culture (Burgess & Green, 2009; Parks, 2011; Strangelove, 2010).

Jean Burgess and Joshua Green's *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture* examines the YouTube phenomenon as a "mediated cultural system" (2009, p.7). Burgess and Green's study is guided by a theoretical framework that includes Henry Jenkins (*Convergence Culture*), and Yochai Benkler (*The Wealth of Networks*). The study combines quantitative and qualitative approaches of analysis to understand the cultural participation that takes place on the site and how these practices play a role in cultural politics and digital media's role in everyday life. Results found that the most popular content was user-created. Forty-four percent of the user-created videos were vlogs which consisted of the uploaders engaging in conversational dialogue with their unknown viewers (Burgess & Green, 2009). These findings contribute to the idea that YouTube's popularity stems from its ability to connect users through virtual relationships and community, as do members of YouTube's natural hair culture.

Vlogs and vloggers play a major role in creating communities and fostering cultures on the internet. Because of the comments that viewers can make to uploaders, vlogs act as links in a social network. These connections may form a social hypertext, a network of connected videos. This is one of the ways that communities are formed (Chin & Chignell, 2006). The natural hair culture on YouTube is connected by the many videos about kinky hair that exists on the site and the users that unite through them. In these

videos Black women negotiate ideas of race and femininity. The medium not only sets the stage for relationships to form, but for commercialization to flourish as well.

In the eight years since its establishment, YouTube's popularity and influence has skyrocketed. According to Nielsen, YouTube reaches more US adults ages 18-34 than any cable network (YouTube, 2013). Its audience is not only wide, but is also diverse. Eighty percent of the site's traffic comes from users outside of the United States (YouTube, 2013). YouTube's wide and diverse reach has made it an ideal space for advertisers. Entangled amongst the millions of amateur vlog video channels, companies now have places where they can upload their own professionally created ones, designed to promote particular products and services. Along with their own channels, advertisers are also finding ways to use the relationships formed in these YouTube communities to enhance their marketing efforts. The discourses of community and commercialism in YouTube's natural hair community play an integral role in how the African American women in this space negotiate their identities.

In the section entitled "On Being a Black Woman Online" Strangelove (2010) states that the most interesting videos on YouTube are of African American women grappling with defining themselves. The text goes on to suggest that the Black community on YouTube involved in a debate that questions the correct way to represent and showcase Blackness. The following chapters use Collins's (1991) theories of Black feminist thought and Gill's postfeminism theory to interpret what the themes found in the sample reveal about how Black women identify with natural hair, while interpreting how natural Black hair's social and political history, as well as its commercial meaning, has played a role in these contemporary identities.

### **Chapter 3**

#### **YouTube: A Safe Haven for Black Feminist Aesthetic Negotiations**

"Want freedom? Go natural!" -Curlove935, 2010

Collins (1990) discusses how important it is that Black women have a space where they are able to candidly discuss the discrimination and oppression they come in contact with on a daily basis. Collins argues, more specifically, that there is a need for Black women to develop redefinitions of beauty that place value on classical African American features. This chapter explores YouTube's natural hair community as one of those safe havens; a place where African American women are able to have candid, collective conversations about natural hair and its contribution to a new Black beauty standard without interference from persons outside this culture. I examine meanings of natural hair that vloggers and their audience articulate. I discuss how these meanings coincide and contradict previous political meanings from the Black Power movement. I will be applying Collins ideas of a Black feminist aesthetic to this analysis of YouTube as a Black feminist safe space.

#### **YouTube as a "Safe Space" for the Natural Hair Community**

In the early stages of this research, I noted that YouTube's website acts as what I call a "virtual greenhouse" that provides the needed atmosphere, characteristics and tools necessary for different communities to be created and flourish. Since that day in college six years ago, YouTube has acted as a virtual greenhouse for women with natural hair. African American women across the country have logged onto the content sharing site and "through the activities of uploading, viewing, discussing, and collaborating—the

YouTube community forms a network of creative practice” (Burgess & Green, 2009, p. 61). Before going further it is important that I clarify the ideas this study builds its definition of community from. While the women of YouTube’s natural hair culture are not connected via proximity. They are bonded by their experiences of being African American women with un-chemically relaxed hair. They are not able to provide physical support for one another; however they do offer psychological support. It is a community in the context of self-revelation. Connections between these women may start with hair, but they are furthered through the sharing of feeling and thoughts. It is the self-revelatory nature of YouTube’s natural hair community that allows it to act as a space for African American women to negotiate ideas about beauty, Blackness, and femininity. This community has become a “social space where Black women speak freely” as Patricia Hill Collins describes it (1991, p. 95).

This network of kinky/curly users has established a culture of support, criticism, and inspiration. A vlogger known by the YouTube handle of WonderfullyUntamed created a video titled “Commentary on the YouTube Natural Hair Community” in which she describes her feelings towards this virtual community of Black women,

I’m just really inspired and then also kind of shocked by the culture surrounding the natural hair tutorials and so let me explain. Back more than a year ago when I started looking at the tutorials I was really struck by how supportive most people, and I can probably say all people, have been. They are encouraging each other to try new hairstyles. (WonderfullyUntamed, 2009)

These acts of encouragement occur through various forms of communication. Users exchange information by uploading videos that share knowledge; they leave comments

on videos; they leave responses on channel pages; they send direct messages to uploaders and other users, and they even create video responses to videos uploaded by other users.

Sondra O'Neal discusses the importance of the safe space for Black women, stating:

Beyond the mask, in the ghetto of the black women's community, in her family, and, more important, in her psyche, is and has always been another world, a world in which she functions—sometimes in sorrow but more often in genuine joy...-- by doing the things that 'normal' black women do (1986, p. 139).

YouTube's natural hair vlogs have created safe spaces for Black women to communicate with one another, and share the African American female life experience. Found within these lines of communication are messages of encouragement, the challenge to go against the norms of society and discussions about self-definitions of beauty. Katrina5265 says, "This is definitely the place where sisters come together in true genuineness and give you so much support, encouragement, and inspiration" (2010). This family-like bond shared between vloggers and users allows this community to flourish.

Like family, YouTube's natural hair vloggers encourage one another. While some Black natural hair vloggers primarily focus on teaching about hair growth, other vloggers act as confidants who motivate other African American women who are new to wearing their hair in its kinky/curly chemical-free state. Maeling Tapp, better known by her YouTube handle of Nikkimae2003, has over 140,000 subscribers to her YouTube channel. Tapp created her own YouTube channel after watching other YouTube videos to spearhead her personal natural hair journey. Inspired by other natural hair gurus she followed on YouTube Tapp "wanted to be able to encourage someone else on her journey" (Tapp, 2009). With over 200 video uploads concerning natural hair styling tips

and support, Tapp's YouTube channel has over 12 million video views (Nikkimae2003, 2013). Nine years after creating her YouTube site, Tapp's videos have thousands of comments from women who say Tapp serves as inspiration for them. YouTube user a\_kid writes:

You don't know how much you've inspired me to start my natural journey. I got my first relaxer when I was 21 and now I'm 23 and ready to go back to my natural hair. I miss my natural hair tooooo much lol....I'm doing the bc in September I'm so excited I can't wait to have my afro back!! Thank you for all your tips & documenting your journey. This time around I'll know how to take good care of my natural hair. (a\_kid, 2010)

Along with comments of gratitude, viewers express how they relate to Tapp's experiences as natural-haired women and how Tapp's advice has assisted them in getting through the frustrations that come with having natural hair. As another commenter Traorefatima puts it,

Thanks for your initiative to take us through your journey with natural hair. I wish I had this bravery! I did the BC about two weeks ago; removing the relaxed hair from the texturized hair. I can totally relate to your story with combs breaking when you were little. My hair is actually a lot nappier than yours and really not manageable. But I am learning to like my new afro (texturized though) thanks to your advice. I had no idea until now how versatile natural hair could be.

(Traorefatima, 2010)

Vanisha S, widely known by the YouTube name AfricanExport, has over 130,000 subscribers to her YouTube channel (AfricanExport, 2012). This beauty and lifestyle

blogger joined YouTube in 2008 and over the course of six years produced over 800 videos whose topics range from fashion to makeup (AfricanExport, 2012). However, S's reputation as a natural hair guru generated many of her over 10 million video views (AfricanExport, 2012). Her videos about natural hair have significantly more views than those that discuss other topics. S writes that seeing other women whose hair was not chemically treated influenced her to create her personal YouTube channel. She states:

I always thought YouTube was a place where there were downloads for music videos, or home videos, pretty much idiotic. It was nice to see that there was an array of just valuable information and young women who can give me tips. (S, 2008)

S, like many other Black natural hair vloggers, uses her channel to address sensitive issues that deal with feelings of insecurity and fear that Black women face when choosing to wear their tresses in its natural state. In "Natural Hair Encouragement from a Natural Hair Veteran" S speaks about a direct message she received from a newly natural woman who claimed to be afraid of wearing her short afro out in public,

Love yourself divas. Natural hair is nothing to be ashamed of. The fear of what others may think is common, but you should never let that dictate your own choices. Live for yourself and whatever greater power you pray to. We must also remember that the idea of what is beautiful is so deeply rooted, and European characteristics are commonly used. To embody genuine confidence, especially as a Black woman, you have to gain an understanding of this history and its effects on us, so then you can turn that flaw and become empowered. Understanding and acceptance of what you can't change is the simplest way for me to put it. I had to

learn to love myself and you can too. I will offer you all some information about a book that helped me with self-love. (S, 2010)

S urges her vlog viewers to learn about the history of Black beauty stigmas and to learn to love themselves as they are.

Like S, many natural hair vloggers to use their videos to address the struggles associated with being a natural haired Black woman and many vloggers have multiple videos devoted to encouraging Black women who have chosen to wear chemical-free manes. Vlogger Ayanna Neela, whose username is AyannaNeela, has a video entitled “Love Your Natural Hair-Pt. 1” in which she discusses the challenges that she has faced as a natural haired woman in a society that still caters to Northern Eurocentric beauty trends of long straight and wavy tresses. In spite of these obstacles she encourages her viewers to not be discouraged by the negative connotations that have been associated with kinky, curly hair and says:

This is our hair. Deal with it. For any natural beauties out there, do you. Be proud of who you are. Be proud of your hair. Be proud of everything that God gave you because if God made it, it's beautiful. (Neela, 2009)

Comments left on this video ranged from users who had shared similar experiences to people who were inspired by Neela and expressed their gratitude for sharing her story.

YouTube user Rhema White writes:

Thank you so much for posting this video! I'm 15 years old and I've been transitioning for about a year now. I started wearing my hair in natural styles to school and I've been afraid of how people (ESPECIALLY boys) would react. I

wish my mom had told me when I was little that my natural hair was beautiful.

Thanx for doing that. (R. White, 2010)

Similar comments can be found on the pages of natural hair vloggers throughout YouTube. On Tapp's video "Natural Hair Length Check! Two Years Natural!" Margo2983 writes, "Your hair is beautiful. I have learned to embrace my natural look. Women of color should (as a whole) de-Americanize ourselves. We are programed into thinking that our natural look is ugly. We as a whole can change that" (Margo2983, 2012). These conversations where Black women fearlessly voice their opinions about the stigmas connected with Black aesthetics are what constitute YouTube's natural hair community as a Black feminist safe space.

The millions of natural hair videos and natural hair vloggers on YouTube have created a space where Black women feel comfortable enough to say things about mainstream culture; a culture whose oppressive nature has caused insecurities about the Black female body to flourish. YouTube's greenhouse has kindled a platform where African American women from extraordinarily diverse backgrounds, cultures, and origins are able to speak candidly about their bodies, how society has made them feel about their bodies—hair specifically.

It is indeed a safe haven, and in some ways a hush harbor, for African American women to resist hegemonic ideas of ornamental beauty. Like a safe space, a hush harbor refers to a space where African Americans can interact with one another outside of dominant White culture. Historically a hush harbor refers to a place where Black slaves would gather in secret to practice religious traditions away from the eyes of their masters. Present day hush harbors are described as spaces where Blacks "engage in and deploy

otherwise heavily monitored practices, knowledges, and rhetorics disallowed in the public sphere under the disciplining gazes of Whites and Whiteness,” (Nunley, 2011, p. 23). Like hush harbors, YouTube’s natural hair community allows women to engage in discussions about how changes in their hair styling practices can be used as ways of resisting internalized ideas of inferiority and as a way of establishing their own aesthetic standards. What makes this space truly a modern-day hush harbor is how exclusive it is. In this sample of vlog channels, Black women and women of partial African descent primarily make up the vloggers and commenters. YouTube’s natural hair community seems to be a racialized and gendered space exclusively for Black women of the natural haired culture. In the analysis I did not find any comments from “trolls,” people who leave vile, racist, sexist and other obscene discourse with hopes of sparking arguments and disharmony in online communities. All comments seemed to be from natural-haired Black women. The community even has their own lingo that is specific to natural hair culture. For instance they refer to the action of cutting relaxed hair off, leaving only chemically free hair remaining as the “big chop” or “BC” and they call a short natural haircut the “tiny winy afro” or “TWA.” This community-defined vocabulary assists in preserving the privacy of their natural hair community, allowing them to comfortably renegotiate values of beauty, femininity and Blackness. As a safe space and hush harbor these natural hair’s vloggers contribute to a Black feminist aesthetic.

### **The “Freedom” of Natural Hair**

Natural hair; known as a liberating “freedom cap” during the late 1960s and early 1970s, was a practice of emancipation for many of the African American participants of

the Black Power movement (Llorens, 1967, p. 137). As discussed in Chapter Two, for many, wearing their hair in authentic kinks and curls was not a style trend, but a method of resisting the norms of dominant White standards and a way of embracing Black culture and Black beauty during political struggle. I observed a similar sense of natural hair as resistance to European beauty values among today's natural hair vloggers. There is still an overarching idea of natural hair as "freedom;" freedom from notions of beauty that have been engrained into the values of African American women and Black society in general.

Whitney White, known as Naptural85 and ranked the most popular YouTube natural hair vlogger of 2013, does not directly address relaxed hair as a Eurocentric beauty aesthetic. However, she did allude to this idea in her video titled, "My Natural Hair Journey" (Susan, 2013). The video opens with a quote by pop star Janet Jackson, "We have a special need to feel like we belong" (W. White, 2009). It is followed by a slideshow of images that show White with chemically straightened hair. Under these images is text that describes her experiences with relaxed hair. She says, "I took so much pride in my hair... Then I realized how much I liked it curly... The relaxer game became too much to handle... and I had ENOUGH" (W. White, 2009). After this statement the music changes from the mellow sounds of Janet Jackson's "Velvet Rope" to menacing piano chords that sound as if they belonged on the soundtrack of a horror film. The music is coupled with a high-paced slideshow of images that include: White Barbie dolls with long blond hair, advertisements for chemical straightening products and pictures of African American celebrities Mary J. Blige, Tyra Banks and Christina Milian all wearing their hair in long blond hair styles. The slide show ends in a black screen with red letters

reading, “NO MORE LYES!” (W. White, 2009). With this phrase White is making a pun, suggesting that she is both tired of using chemicals and dominant ideas of beauty to dictate her hair choices. The phrase is then followed by a new image sequence that shows White with natural hair and has texts celebrating her choice to go natural. However, discussions about resisting dominant standards of ornamental beauty were not as subtle as White’s.

A more blunt discussion about the influence of Eurocentric beauty values on African American ideas of hair takes place in the video “The Natural Hair Doll Test” by vlogger Chime Edwards, better known as Haircrush to her 141,000 YouTube subscribers. In this video Edwards recreates Kenneth and Mamie Clark’s Black Doll Experiment of the 1940s where they asked Black children which doll they preferred to play with between a White doll and a Black doll. The results of those tests revealed that the majority of the children chose the White doll. Edwards re-conducted this experiment using a natural-haired doll and a straight-haired doll to see which hair type a group of African American children preferred. The video claims that 65 percent of the children included in the experiment preferred the doll with straight hair (Edwards, 2013). The comments left on Chime’s video reveal the anger that many Black women of YouTube’s natural hair community feel towards negative ideas that still exist about kinky hair. Commenter Janespeaks specifically blames White people for the stigmas surrounding natural hair and the dominant White standards for beauty. She writes:

The GREATEST lie ever told was that Caucasian people are "White." "White" implies that they are faultless, innocent & pure. They not only conditioned the world to believe they were the standard of beauty, but also entitled to privileges

that others would normally have to earn. The conditioning not only harmed African descendants but ALL ethnicities, for different reasons. Many African descendants carry an inferiority complex & "Whites" carry a delusional superiority complex. It's all so sad. (Janespeaks, 2013)

This perspective of White privilege and Black inferiority shows that racialized ideas of beauty and social hierarchy are still major issues of concern among African American women.

Along with Janespeaks' statement of outrage, natural hair vlogs also feature comments in which women share how their personal hair beliefs were formed. YouTube user Laurnea writes:

I am not surprised by this experiment. When I was a kid I wanted straight long flowing hair. None of the beauties on commercials and magazines looked like me. My mom had relaxed hair too. And I learned the "bad hair" concept from relatives. (2013)

Thus, almost 50 years after the birth of the Black Power movement that highlighted the negative influences that hegemonic ideas of beauty have on African American culture, there still seems to be a strong stigma surrounding Black hair textures. However, the natural hair movement, as represented by YouTube's natural hair community, seems to be working to dispatch these ideas by encouraging Black women to embrace their natural curls, kinks and waves.

While resistance to White ideals is a frequent discussion within the sample, resistance to dominant African American culture is also common. In her discussion of Black feminist thought Collins states, "the safe spaces housing this culture of resistance

help Black women resist the dominant ideology promulgated not only outside Black communities but within African-American Institutions” (1991, p. 95). In many of the vlogs and comments relaxed hair is discussed as the Black societal norm. Natural hair, specifically, enables Black women to differentiate themselves from other African American women in their communities. Vlogger Dr. Nina Ellis-Hervey, a professor of Psychology at Stephen F. Austin State University known as BeautifulBrwnBabyDol to the YouTube natural hair community, explains that her need to differentiate herself from other African American women influenced her decision to stop chemically altering her hair,

I dare to be different. I love to be different. That would be another reason. I love for people to see me and be happy about seeing me. Saying, “oh wow you look different. Oh wow you look beautiful. You look eccentric. You look like you’re from another place. Like what country are you from?” I never got that when I had a relaxer. People think it’s beautiful, it’s exotic, it’s different; when actually it’s just me being me. (Ellis-Hervey, 2009)

For Ellis-Hervey the exotic connotation of the hairstyle is what attracted her to going natural.

Ellis-Hervey’s understanding of a natural-haired Black woman’s being more exotic than one who wears her hair straight is interesting considering that people of African descent were have long been considered the “exotic other” (hooks, 2000). In other words, Ellis-Harvey embraces her natural hair because others see it (Whites see it) as exotic. Ellis-Harvey’s desire to appear exotic relates to Collins’ use of “double consciousness,” borrowed from W.E.B DuBois (1903), in her discussion of Black

feminism. It suggests that Black women struggle with seeing themselves outside of how Whites see them (Collins, 1991). Consequently, African American women like Ellis-Harvey employ practices that they believe regenerates the exotic aesthetic, one being natural hair. However, what I found particularly interesting is not how Black women with natural hair view one another.

### **Natural Hair: Straight Hair's Enemy?**

When observing the vlogs and comments of YouTube's natural hair community there are some women who, as they embrace their natural hair, pass judgment on women who choose to relax their hair or wear hair extensions and wigs. These views were primarily observed in the comments of the vlogs in the sample, not by the actual vloggers in their posted videos. In "Hair Politics" Zimitri Erasmus (2000) discusses what she calls the "'natural' vs. 'created' logic" which brings to light "the notion that straightening one's hair is a mark of aspiring towards Whiteness and that we should thus abandon it" (p. 385). Women who display these views have been dubbed members of "The Nappy Mafia" the "Natural Hair Police" and "Natural Hair Nazis;" women who have converted to natural hair and are so "pro-natural" that they at times offend others with their actions, which include criticizing others because they chemically- straighten their hair (Thomas-Banks, 2009; Zedhair, 2012).

Moreover, based on the discourse observed in this sample, some Black women in YouTube's natural hair community consider women's hair choices as revealing of their like or dislike of natural Black hair. White has a vlog titled, "Mission Go-Natural" in which she talks about a friend who is apprehensive about going natural. White asks her

subscribers to leave encouraging comments and advice in the comment section in hopes of inspiring her friend to proceed with her decision to give up relaxers. Many of the comments left coincide with Erasmus' concept of the "natural vs. created" logic. They do not overtly say that relaxed hair is bad; however their statements suggest that natural hair is the "truth" or imply that it is the state of hair that "God intended" for Black women to wear. For example, YouTube user Ssilkmoi88 says, "Your hair is beautiful as it grows out of your head" (2010). User MyBlackisNatural says, "Embrace the beautiful hair that God gave you and enjoy your journey" (2010). User NaturalNori says, "yes permed hair is nice but natural hair is who you are and that's even more beautiful" (2010). NaturalNori's saying to Black women that natural hair is being *who you are* also suggests that relaxed straightened hair is who a Black woman *is not*.

Another interpretation that resonates among women in YouTube's natural hair community is that natural hair embraces Black culture and African American heritage. YouTube user Renbnbe writes, "I went natural to embrace my culture as well, I felt real with the hair that grew out of my scalp" (2012). User Kiaransali writes, "There are days when I feel so connected to my African roots through my hair and I love it" (2013). According to Erasmus (2000), who is a native of South Africa, this stream of thought among some contemporary Black circles fails to recognize the complexity of hairstyling, both natural and straightening, as Black cultural practices. She states that this concept "crudely suggests that one can read another's politics from their hairstyles" (Erasmus, 2000, p. 385). The discourse in the vlogs suggests that wearing chemically straightened hair signifies resistance to authentic African American physical features.

Erasmus (2000) also argues that there is essentialism and elitism in the logic of measuring Blackness by the way people choose to wear their hair. In Maria Lugones' *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition against Multiple Oppressions* (2003) she discusses the issue of ethnic legitimacy and poses the question, "Why do core persons of color, bred in communities of shared traditions and history, subject the less solid to inspections that constitute them as fakes" (p. 162). Lugones argues that this need to validate others of the same race and culture partially stems from the critical role that having a sense of place and heritage holds for those who have been subjects of racism. Like Collins (1991), Lugones also suggests that this has allowed individuals to practice a double vision where one sees "oneself and one's company at once in the racist and the resistant construction" (2003, p. 156). The need for the oppressed to validate one another spawns from a fear that their race, their culture, their people, may become what they are seen as in the eyes of their oppressors and racists (Lugones, 2003).

When Lugones' Dubois inspired theory of double vision is applied to Erasmus' natural versus created logic and placed in the context of YouTube's natural hair community, I question whether this binary stems from Black women's obsession over the "oppressor's perception of their subjectivity" (Lugones, 2003, p. 156). Are some natural-haired Black women so obsessed with resisting historical ideas of "good" and "bad" hair that they end up rectifying the discourses of racial purity that were used to oppress them initially?

What is peculiar about YouTube's natural hair community is that while there are women who express disdain towards those who continue to employ chemical straightening techniques, the practice of straightening one's hair using heat is popular

among YouTube's natural hair community. Seven out of the ten vlog channels that make up this study's sample have produced videos that showcase their heat-straightened hair. The commenters on these videos do not chastise the vloggers for straightening their hair. On the contrary, many of the commenters seek information on how to use heat to straighten their own hair. In the video, "It's Not Easy Being Natural!!!! {Sigh}," vlogger Taren Guy shares the frustrations that she has been having with her hair since she started her natural hair journey. After going through a list of reasons that her natural hair has caused numerous issues in her life, she announces that she has decided to wear her hair straight for a while with the use of heat styling. She says, "This weekend I am getting my hair straightened and I am keeping it straight until dot dot dot. Seriously until I figure some things out because Taren916 is taking a break from her curls" (Guy, 2010). Guy goes on to say:

I do not want to discourage any people who are transitioning or who are not natural to change their minds. I know that you have your own thoughts and your own thinking. I am not discouraging this; however, as the video is title, being natural is not easy. (2010)

Instead of Guy's viewers bombarding her with comments criticizing her decision to wear her hair straightened, many of them offered support for her decision and expressed how they can relate with her frustrations and hair style choice.

This raises the question of what creates the opposition towards chemically relaxed hair by many women in YouTube's natural hair community. Visually, chemically straightened and heat straightened hair are virtually indistinguishable. However the latter seems to be more accepted within the new natural hair movement. Both practices assist in

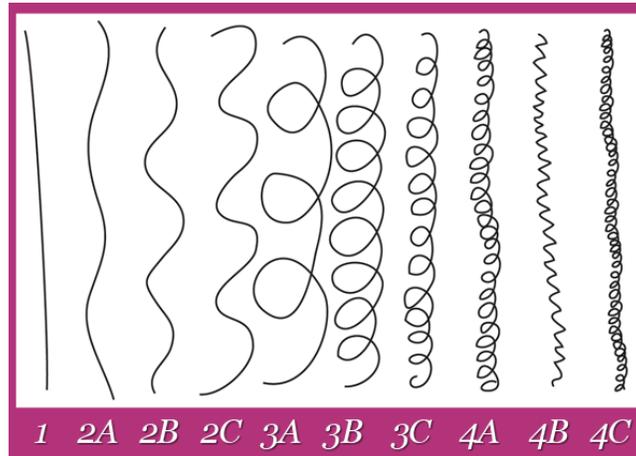
transforming a Black woman's authentically wavy, kinky or curly hair to a straightened state that has historically been linked to Northern Eurocentric beauty values; however, one practice is tolerated while the other is rejected. As discussed previously, the impetus for many Black women who have gone natural is the need to free themselves from societal pressures and an interest in embracing their hair in the state that it grows from their scalp, a hairstyle that can be considered an African American feminist aesthetic, not an oppressive standard of beauty (Collins, 1991). These streams of thought contradict the acceptance of heat straightening. Perhaps, heat straightening is tolerated because in most cases it does not permanently straighten one's hair. In fact, much of the discourse surrounding heat straightening (which includes blow-outs and flat ironing) involves vloggers and commenters sharing ways to protect one's natural hair from heat-damage that can weaken strands to an extent that the hair no longer reverts to its naturally curly, kinky or wavy state.

### **The New "Good Hair": Curl/Length Envy and Ethnic Speculation**

"I have straight nigga naps. I want hair like yours so I won't be so mad all the time and think about putting a perm in it." –Cece Victor, 2013a

During the age of the Black Power movement the most popular style of natural hair was the afro; a style that highlighted the kinks of Black hair. With the emergence of the new natural hair movement there seems to be more emphasis put on the curliness and curl type of one's hair. Just as every person on Earth is different and has unique physical characteristics, the same is true for Black women with natural hair. Everyone has a unique hair texture. In 1997 Andre Walker, a celebrity stylist most known for his role as

Oprah Winfrey’s personal hair stylist, created a hair typing system. He classified hair into four primary categories: Type 1-Straight, Type-2: Wavy, Type 3: Curly, and Type 4-Kinky (Walker, 2012).



*Figure 3-1. Hair Types.* This chart illustrates the various hair types retrieved from [kinkycurlycoilyme.com](http://kinkycurlycoilyme.com).

Within each hair type there are subcategories—a, b, c—that further define the hair texture. As the popularity of natural hair began to grow in the early 2000s, Black women adopted this hair typing system and have used Walker’s hair typing system to choose the best products and hair care methods that work for their specific hair textures. This analysis found that within YouTube’s natural hair community hair type is a highly discussed topic and the concept of “good hair” has emerged and been redefined within the context of the new natural hair movement.

While examining this study’s sample of vlogs and the comments associated with the vlogs, an abundant presence of what has been deemed by natural hair blogs and vlogs as “curl envy” was discovered (Guy, 2010; Happilycurlee, 2010). Curl envy is when someone compares their hair to the texture of another, expressing a desire to have the hair

type of another because they believe their hair type is more beautiful. In “It’s Not Easy Being Natural!!!! {Sigh}” Guys discusses her battle with curl envy, saying:

Now a lot of go through this. We don’t want to admit it about wishing that we had a certain kind of curl. Because going natural you want to send out that message that you embrace who you are and what’s coming out of your scalp, but there are some times when you’re like, “These curls. I can’t do nothing about them. Ughhh” and you know, “I wish. I wish. I wish.” (Guy, 2010)

As previous scholars have written, the idea of “good hair” and beautiful hair has always been a complex topic in African American culture, especially among Black women. Throughout American history Black women have found ways to alter their hair so that it is straighter and silkier, characteristics of their White counterparts who epitomized beauty to dominant American society. Based on this analysis of YouTube’s natural hair community, while straight hair is no longer the definition of “good hair,” there are many women who express a want and employ practices to achieve a looser, shinier curl pattern even if it is not their particular hair type. Expressions of curl envy were found often among the comments of various vlogger videos. In response to Guy’s confessing her battle with curl envy, many of her viewers confessed their desire for Guy’s hair texture. YouTube user Alyssa Smith-Lee writes:

I have corkscrew curls and my hair is super thick and always gets matted and I lose length and sometimes spend an hour detangling. I LOVE your hair so much and have wished for yours many times ha-ha. So it’s nice to know that I’m not the only one feeling hair frustration and curl envy. (2013)

This search for the perfect curl has resulted in many natural Black women seeking out hair products that will help them reproduce the curls that they see on their favorite natural hair vloggers. Many of the comments of the vlogger videos examined were from women asking how to achieve certain curls and wanting to know what products the vloggers used to achieve their curls. Cece Victor, a commented on one of White's videos writes, "I'm starting not to feel pretty. Questions for u: how long did it take u to grow your hair?? What do you use?? Where can I get the product to have gorgeous hair like yours?? (2013b).

The envy does not end at the curl pattern. There are also comments and discussions about hair length and how to grow and retain longer hair. Based on this analysis, vlogger hair length is a major contributor to their popularity. Seven out of the ten women who were ranked the top ten natural hair vloggers of 2013 have hair that reaches the middle of their backs or is even longer. For years it was believed by society that African American women's hair could not naturally grow to long lengths. These natural haired women contradict this understanding. However, the analysis found that ideas of Black women having long hair or a looser curl pattern are still not completely accepted as normal.

In many of the vlogs and in the comment section vloggers found themselves having to clarify their ethnic background after being asked by several of their viewers and subscribers. It seems that because these Black women possess long hair and in some instances very loose curls, viewers assumed that they were not fully African American. In "FAQ 2013" Jessica Lewis, known as MahoganyCurls to her almost 200,000 YouTube

subscribers, answers questions about her background, questions she has received frequently since becoming a natural hair vlogger. She says:

The first question I get a lot is am I biracial. I am not biracial. I am Black. Both of my parents are African American. That's all I know. I don't care about that.

There's nothing wrong with biracial people, but I'm just telling you right now that I am Black. I'm African American. (Lewis, 2013)

White is also asked by her viewers if she is of a biracial background in the comment section of her video "My Top 10 Tips for Growing Long Healthy Natural Hair." Other commenters that saw her being asked this question addressed the issue of it still being taboo for Black women to have long curly hair. YouTube user Măčkěnzî Stěwärt comments saying:

Although people are quick to judge people's race by the length of their hair, let's not be too quick to judge those people. The first thing you might think if you see a darker woman with long hair is, "oh she's mixed." You may not say it, but you may think it. If you don't think that, then good for you, but with the society we live in, let's face it, lots of people with long hair are mixed. (Stěwärt, 2013)

From Stěwärt's response and the many other comments by viewers assuming that African American women with defined curl patterns and long manes cannot be fully Black, one can argue that concepts about what is "good hair" has changed. However, this change still reinforces beliefs that curly, not kinky, long hair can only be achieved by women of ethnicities other than Black, and if a Black woman does have a loose curl and long hair then she must be of biracial descent. It is evident that within YouTube's natural hair

community what are thought to be White or “non-Black” characteristics, like loose curls and long hair, are still the desired characteristics of beauty.

### **Conclusion**

Within this safe haven for natural haired Black women there is a desire to create a standard of beauty that specifically draws from the natural features of African American women instead of continuing to abide by the laws of ornamental beauty that were shaped by the dominant White culture. However within the discourses that discuss natural hair as a liberatory social and political practice, there are also discourses of judgment. Black women who are a part of the community that do not have fully natural hair or are not “natural enough” are met with discriminative attitudes from some of their Black female counterparts, compromising the idea of this community as a safe space. At the same time, there is a presence of texture envy among Black women; establishing what I call a “natural hair texture hierarchy” where curly is the “good” hair and kinks are the least desirable texture. Thus, although this space has all the components necessary for African American women to come together to resist normative ideas of beautiful hair and embrace the natural hair movement as a welcoming sisterhood of Black women, remnants of hegemonically defined beauty standards seep in. This realization leads me to search for the meaning of natural hair in postfeminist critiques of culture.

## Chapter 4

### A Postfeminist Journey of Business and Betterment

For vloggers natural hair is a journey and a business. In one sense it is the impetus for adopting beneficial nutrition and exercise routines. In another sense it represents an opportunity for entrepreneurship and to influence advertising strategies. Understanding natural hair as a journey and a business conjures contradictory ideas of self-acceptance and community on the one hand and of self-monitoring makeover and commodification on the other. This chapter examines how vlogs and comments observed in YouTube's natural hair community demonstrate aspects of the postfeminist sensibility, especially the notion that makeovers specifically and consumption generally empowers women (Gill, 2007). Most texts of postfeminist media culture are critiqued for disempowering women. However, I argue that YouTube's natural hair community both disempowers and empowers African American women. YouTube's natural hair community, as I demonstrate below, promotes self-surveillance and promotes the consumption of beauty products as means for fulfillment. However, it also encourages a healthier, more "natural" lifestyle while giving some agency to Black women in the beauty industry.

#### Postfeminist "Fixing" or Healthy Journey?

Going natural is often described as a journey, one that requires a lifestyle makeover. In vlogger Maeling Tapp's introductory videos she says, "It is a journey for those of you who don't know. It takes some patience" (2009). In the traditional sense the word *journey* refers to traveling from one place to another (Journey, 2013). The natural hair journey signifies the period from which a woman transitions from chemical relaxers to wearing her hair in a chemical-free state. YouTube user LotusBlackwater says, "You

grow with your natural hair. You start to reinvent yourself in the most positive ways” (2010).

This journey of reinvention where women pursue self-transformation aligns with Gill’s concept of the “makeover paradigm” that requires:

people (predominately women) to believe, first, that they or their life is lacking or flawed in some way; second, that it is amenable to reinvention or transformation by following the advice of relationship, design or lifestyle experts and practicing appropriately defined consumption habits. (Gill, 2007, p. 156)

Gill argues that this makeover paradigm characterizes postfeminist media culture.

Postfeminist media culture focuses on the improvement—indeed on the fixing—of one’s faulty appearance and to normatively align with femininity (ex. physique, grooming, manners, etc.).

Gill describes the types of content that have become popular in women’s magazines and talk shows as attempting to fix broken people. Similarly, I argue that aspects of the makeover paradigm are prevalent in YouTube’s natural hair vlogs. Natural hair undoubtedly leads to significant lifestyle changes, changes that emerge from changing attitudes toward natural hair. Other characteristics of the makeover paradigm I observed in the vlogs include participants’ feeling shamed by the inadequacies of their lifestyles but who are then “advised, cajoled, bullied or ‘educated’ into changing their ways and becoming more ‘successful’ versions of themselves” (Gill, 2007, p. 156). While the vloggers in YouTube’s natural hair community use bullying and intimidation sparingly as in the case of the Natural Hair Nazis, they typically assume roles of lifestyle experts and life coaches. Tapp, Ellis-Hervey, Lewis and India of the MyNaturalSisters

channel all assist and influence viewers in the reinvention of themselves by providing fitness, nutrition, natural hair tutorials and natural hair health tips on their YouTube channels. These natural hair lifestyle vlogs “produce ‘new ethical selves’ in which particular forms of modernized and upgraded selfhood are presented as solutions to the dilemmas of contemporary life” (Gill, 2007, p. 156). The vlogs and comments in this community strongly express a need for Black women to transform themselves. They highlight self-renovation by associating African American femininity with certain health and grooming practices. Thus, women who wear natural hair speak with a postfeminist sensibility that encourages self-monitoring and “fixing.”

Natural hair disempowers with one hand and empowers with the other. This makeover sensibility described above disempowers viewers by making them feel inadequate. I cannot ignore, however, that the healthier, more active lifestyles that these makeovers encourage may also empower viewers. Embracing the “natural hair” lifestyles challenges African American women to learn how to properly care for their hair and to adopt practices that promote a healthier self. Several of the vlogs and comments observed expressed health worries regarding the effects that the chemicals in hair relaxers have on the hair and scalp. Several studies claim that over time the chemicals in relaxers irreversibly deteriorate the scalp and weaken the hair shaft (Khumalo et al, 2010; Ruetsch et al, 2009; Shetty et al, 2013). The fear of long lasting scalp damage from the continuous use of chemicals is a common impetus for going natural within YouTube’s natural hair community. Vlogger India, one member of the three sister trio that runs the “MyNaturalSistas” YouTube channel, says a painful chemical burn persuaded her to stop relaxing. She states, “I got a very bad chemical burn. I burned the crap out of my edges

and I was like why am I doing this to myself? Why do I perm my hair?"

(MyNaturalSistas, 2011). Edwards also addresses the effects of relaxers and the rumored connections it has to various illnesses in her vlog "Why I Love Natural Hair." She says:

One thing I love about being natural is I don't have to worry about what relaxers are doing to my body. Nobody really knows the effects that relaxers have on women who relax over the course of their lives and we don't know what it can be doing to our bodies. I'm not saying it is hurting us, but it is a chemical, it is toxic, so we don't know what it could be doing and most likely it's going to be something negative that's happening to us. So there's the worry of what if it causes Cancer. What if it causes this or what if it causes that? (Edwards, 2012)

Edwards is not the only one speaking about the potential dangers of chemical relaxers.

The adverse effects of relaxers in getting publicized more and more in the media, including recent articles by Urban Belle magazine and the International Journal of Trichology that link relaxers to fibroids, hair loss, and scalp damage (Admin, 2012; Shetty et. al, 2013).

The women in YouTube's natural hair community not only celebrate how natural hair relieves them from relaxer-related medical issues, but also revel in how it allows them to participate in activities that enhance their physical fitness. African American women refrain from certain activities if the activity puts their hair style at risk.

Approximately 40 percent of African American women skip exercising because it ruins their hairstyles (Hall et al., 2013). This is understandable because physical activities like exercising and athletics cause participants to sweat. The moisture of sweat on the scalp and on hair may counteract relaxers, causing Black women to lose the silky texture they

achieve through chemical styling. The need to preserve their straight tresses keeps Black women from participating in physical activities. A similar rationale keeps African American women from going swimming. As one New York hair designer, explains, chemicals in pool water may counteract those in relaxers (sodium hydroxide) to make Black hair straight,

A lot of the chlorine in the water, sometimes the salt or whatever works against the actual relaxer that you put in the hair. So over time you end up having breakage or hair shedding, coming out, things like that. (Flanagan, 2010)

In the cases of many African American women who relax their hair, the need to maintain their straight tresses outweighs the need to participate in physical activities, even if it includes refraining from exercise, an activity that is vital to overall health and wellbeing. The cultural importance that silky, smooth, straight hair holds for African American women eliminated the choice of participating in experiences that could compromise that hairstyle. The discourses found within the vlogs and comments suggest that Black women feel emancipated from the confines put upon them by chemical hair styling once they adopt natural hair practices.

In “Why I Love Being Natural” Chime Edwards describes the reasons she enjoys wearing her hair in its authentic kinky and curly state. The ability to go certain places and do certain activities is one of those reasons:

With swimming and working out and things like that, I don’t worry about my hair. But before it’s like if I had my hair done or had just gotten my hair done I would be like, “Oh my gosh. I can’t go swimming.” But now the process is so much different after I swim. I can just wash it or put it in a bun for the next day

and it still looks fabulous. Also with working out. Like if your hair sweats when you work out it doesn't matter because your hair is already thicker and kinkier. You don't have that extra worry. Now I'm not saying that it goes away completely, like you don't have to worry about your hair at all with swimming and working out, but for me it is a little bit easier then when I had a relaxer.

(Edwards, 2012)

Tapp has a workout vlog titled "Working Out with FitnessBody4L" that features various workout regimens that she uses and a tutorial for ways to wear natural hair during workouts. Annissa6543 commented on the video saying, "The best thing about natural hair, you don't have to worry about your hair during work outs! Twist it, puff it, bun it and go!" (2013). White also alludes to the freedom to *do* more that natural hair provides its wearers. In "My Natural Hair Journey" the pictures of White with relaxed hair show her indoors and in the home; however, many of the pictures of her with natural hair show her outdoors doing things like running and rock climbing. There is even a picture of her picking strawberries with the sentence "Feeling free" underneath (White, 2009). The ability to embark on new experiences without the worry of affecting their hair is, for many African American women, what makes natural hair, "the most freeing experience ever" (Ellis-Hervey, 2009).

In addition to encouraging women to participate in activities like swimming and fitness routines, natural hair vloggers also inspire women to improve their diet and nutrition. Vlogger Ellis-Hervey has lost over 70 pounds. Along with vlogging about natural hair health, she creates videos that share dietary plans, demonstrate exercise routines, and discuss her favorite healthy foods. She says, "Being natural leads you to

want to put more natural things into your body” (Ellis-Hervey, 2009). Ellis-Hervey is not alone. Several of the vlogs examined have segments that discuss dietary components that assist in healthy natural hair growth. In White’s vlog video, “My Top 10 Tips for Growing Long Healthy Natural Hair” she includes eating and drinking healthily on her list. She says, “You are what you eat. So if you want long healthy hair eat healthy food. Eat a lot of protein. Your hair is protein. Give it what it needs to grow well” (White, 2012). Along with being conscious of what one puts in the body, YouTube’s natural hair community promotes consciousness of what natural women put on their hair.

YouTube’s natural hair community also emphasizes the use of “natural” hair products, products that do not contain sulfates, silicones, harsh alcohols, or other ingredients that have been deemed detrimental to one’s authentic wavy, kinky or curly hair texture. In “Greetings and Curl Talk!” vlogger ColouredBeautiful shares the products she used to achieve her twist out, a popular style among natural hair wearers. When discussing the products she puts a lot of emphasis on the products’ ingredients. She says, “On the ends I used this Aloe Vera moisturizing gel by Jason. It’s 98 percent Aloe Vera. The first ingredient is Aloe Vera and then water” (ColouredBeautiful, 2012). The desire to only use the purest, most organic products in their hair leads many women with natural hair to create their own mixtures of oils and moisturizers, resulting in the popularity of “Do it Yourself” or DIY, vlogs in YouTube’s natural hair community. In “DIY Natural Oil Spray for Dry Hair & Skin” India of MyNaturalSistas give instructions on how to create a moisturizer using a mixture of essential oils, oils obtained from various parts of plants. She discusses different types of essential oils and advises viewers of the best oils to use on natural hair during the winter. She says:

As far as the oil mixture goes this one is more beneficial for colder weather because I'm going to use heavier oils which will be better for sealing in your moisture. Oil creates a barrier preventing water (moisture) from escaping as fast. So I'm going to go with either castor oil, an olive oil, or avocado oil.

(MyNaturalSistas, 2013)

So it seems "natural" in the context of natural hair and the natural hair movement means not only giving up relaxers that create a contrived hair texture, but it also means giving up what the women in this movement consider artificial aspects of life that can negatively affect hair and body. While these vlogger/"lifestyle coaches" assist women in positively reinventing themselves holistically, the emphasis on hair remains at the forefront. The methods for achieving a healthy "natural hair" lifestyle are deeply rooted in practices of consumption by emphasizing the need for certain products, brands and even services. Thus, the following section explores the role that YouTube's natural hair community plays in the commodification of natural hair. Such commodification also stands to empower and disempower Black women.

### **Commercial or Business Community?**

YouTube's natural hair community has become a popular platform for the Black hair care industry to advertise and reach potential consumers, resulting in the objectification of Black women in some ways in the empowerment of Black women in other ways. The Black hair care market brings in approximately \$684 million in revenue annually and has been a lucrative business area in the United States since Madam C. J. Walker, an African American woman, became the first female American self-made

millionaire with her Black hair care empire in the early 1900s (McKissack and McKissack, 1992). The emerging popularity of natural hair has created a new branch of that industry that specifically targets women with kinky/curly hair. YouTube's natural hair community of hundreds of thousands of Black women's vlogging and discussing all things natural hair has been credited for assisting in the transformation of Black hair care products. As I discussed in Chapter Three, for many African American women natural hair communicates a Black feminist aesthetic of cultural pride, beauty, and difference.

Despite its contribution to a Black feminist aesthetic, YouTube's natural hair community contributes to "commodity postfeminism" (Worthington, 2005). Commodity postfeminism indicates marketing strategies that use postfeminist values like female empowerment and self-surveillance to sell products; associating services and products with lifestyle and values. This is certainly evident in natural hair vlogs. Vloggers, after all, tout products as the key to achieving and sustaining the natural hair lifestyle. In YouTube's natural hair community Black female pride and the natural lifestyle fuel Black women's purchases. Hair companies have taken note of this and use values expressed by women in YouTube's natural hair community to enhance their marketing strategies. BeautyMadameNoire.com, an online lifestyle publication catered to African American women, writes, "More women are ignoring television ads and are now engrossed in YouTube, blogs, and other social media outlets that cater to their natural hair needs... Meanwhile, hair corporations are eavesdropping on the conversation to figure out how to re-appeal to Black women" (Gedeon, 2013). In a paradoxical twist, the characteristics of support, trust and sisterhood that make YouTube's natural hair

community a feminist safe space for Black women are now used by hair corporations to market to these women.

YouTube's format allows consumers to log onto these sites and express opinions about anything and everything, thus making the site attractive to businesses that want to reach both mass and fragmented audiences and gather marketing data about them. In this way, businesses interpellates users-consumers in the marketing process. Marketing is indeed a collaboration that requires "co-creation" (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004, p. 6). In co-creation companies focus on "creating an experience environment in which consumers can have active dialogue and co-construct personalized experiences; product may be the same, but customers can construct different experiences" (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004, p. 8). Spaces emerge where ordinary people hold conversations with other consumers and with hair product companies. The concept of co-creation suggests that in this process the consumers and companies have equivalent power roles. I do not agree that in co-creation consumers have as much authority over a product as the company. This argument, after all, comes from the marketing industry. However, consumers do have some influence. When contributing their "stamps of approval" or "stamps of disapproval," consumers suggest if a product is worth purchasing. Thus consumers participate in the value creation process for a particular product or service. YouTube's natural hair community possesses the ideal atmosphere for this consumer/company partnership.

A common element of the new natural hair movement, especially as it is represented in YouTube's natural hair community, is natural hair product reviews. On YouTube there are thousands of product review videos that feature African American

women with natural hair sharing their personal opinions about various hair care products that are specifically targeted towards women with kinky, wavy, and curly hair. In these vlogs women generally discuss the product's aim—whether it is a moisturizer, hair texture definer, styling gel, or anti-frizz serum— and then share how the product affected their hair and what they feel are the positives and negatives about the product. In the sample, product review videos have the most views out of all the vlogs reviewed. Vlogger SimplyUnique's video, "Uncle Funky's Daughter Curly Magic Product Review" has over 90,000 views while White's (Naptural85) vlog titled "My Favorite Hair Products for Natural Hair" has over 420,000 views. On the one hand this seems like a devastating fact, limiting the counterhegemonic potential of YouTube's natural hair community by suggesting that viewers are most interested in the consumption orientation of the videos. However, this may not necessarily be the case. These reviews are conversational: they take the form of a dialogue between girlfriends (vlogger to viewers). They play into the DIY nature of the community that was mentioned previously and become sisterly "How To" manuals that provide viewers with the product information and techniques necessary to achieve the styles and hair health they desire. Regardless of the reasons why reviews are so popular, these videos have a high potential to reach and influence the purchasing decisions of the many women who watch their favorite vloggers give feedback on certain products. Black natural hair companies have gotten savvy to the marketing potential of YouTube and have found ways to integrate the natural hair community into their promotion strategies.

In Guy's video "Jane Carter and Curl Junkie Product Reviews"--that has almost 42,000 views--she shares her opinions of two hair products. Guy expresses the positive

and negative effects they had on her hair. When discussing a conditioner by the company Curl Junkie, she says:

My hair is amazingly moisturized. This stuff is really moisturizing. This is gonna be a staple leave-in for me I believe because its way more moisturizing than the Curl Enhancing Smoothie so I like it a lot. I'm feeling the Curl Junkie and I definitely would like to try more of their products. (Guy, 2011)

The influence that Guy's review had on her viewers is evident in the comments of the video. Luvmyhair23 writes "Hhhmmmmm! You make me want to go order Curl Junkie" (2011) and Nolakiss writes "Great review, not a fan of Jane Carter products personally for my hair but I might check out Curl Junkie" (2011). The natural hair community's safe, "girlfriends helping girlfriends" culture creates a trusted atmosphere where Black women, who portray to have each other's wellbeing at heart, can share honest opinions about the effectiveness and quality of a product (Clemons, Barnett, and Appadurai, 2007, p. 274). However, the authenticity of YouTube's natural hair community's candid "girlfriends" culture is compromised by the association between popular vloggers and beauty companies. Guy's product review of Curl Junkie and Jane Carter featured her raving about the products and their effect on their hair. The review, consequently received comments from viewers expressing their desire to try the product and statements from women saying they are going to go out and buy the product because of her favorable results. However, if one reads the "About" section of Guy's "Jane Carter & Curl Junkie Product Reviews" video they see a message from Guy saying, "These products were sent to me from <http://NaturallyCurly.com> and I was not paid to do these reviews" (2011). While Guy states that she got the products for free by a hair company,

other vloggers state that they receive monetary payments for recording product reviews. In the “About” section of Tapp’s “GIVEAWAY: TGIN Moist Collection for Natural Hair” she writes:

This is a "sponsored post." The company who sponsored it compensated me via a cash payment, gift, or something else of value to write it. Regardless, I only recommend products or services I use personally and believe will be good for my readers. I am disclosing this in accordance with the Federal Trade Commission's 16 CFR, Part 255: "Guides Concerning the Use of Endorsements and Testimonials in Advertising." (Tapp, 2013)

The revelation that the products were sent to Guy by a product website and that Tapp was paid to do a review of TGIN products compromises the authenticity of the product reviews. This is not to suggest that Guy and Tapp’s reviews are biased, or that other vloggers who are paid or sent free products to review offer misleading feedback.

However, it does show that there is a relationship between the two entities (company and blogger) that throws a kink in the “girlfriends helping girlfriends” culture of YouTube’s natural hair community.

Chapter Three explored the concept of YouTube’s natural hair community as a Black feminist safe space where African American women can congregate together to reject objectification. But does the safe haven aspect of the community hold true when the commercial elements of the community are considered? With the commodification of the natural hair lifestyle and partnerships between vloggers and beauty corporations becoming highly prevalent, the line between a sisterly community and a community based more on commercial benefits becomes blurred. The integration of marketing tactics

into vlogger videos in a way objectifies viewers, positioning Black women who post and create YouTube natural hair videos as potential purchasers and not as members of a community. However, the commercialism of the community has potential to empower the women of the community in yet another way.

### **Vlogger Empowerment**

Although the presence of commercial interests may complicate the nature of a “safe space” for groups, the presence of product promotions in YouTube’s natural hair community can also be considered empowering to natural hair vloggers through the exposure that the channel provides them. While scholars like Cohen (2013) have argued that the use of user-generated content by companies to promote their products and services is in many ways exploitative commodified free labor, I argue that in this context there are opportunities for mutual benefit by the vlogger and the hair care entities they partner with. Although vloggers' free labor may be exploitative, especially when companies profit from their work and the work of their audience members, there is a level of agency Black female vloggers enjoy. African American women, we should remember, have historically lacked influence in determining how hair products are marketed. African Americans were the key stakeholders in Black hair care during the 1960s. Asian companies, however, currently represent 50-60 percent of the Black hair care distribution industry (Byrd and Tharps, 2014; Pettigrew, 2007). By placing the opinions of Black women back at the center, beauty corporations include them in the value-creation process of their natural hair care products. This move suggests that the opinions of these Black women are valuable and that their opinions have clout among major consumer markets.

Vloggers are also able to build upon their cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) within the natural hair community and outside of YouTube. As Duffy (2013) discusses, many bloggers have become highly popular, not only among their virtual community of followers, but also among the market that they address in their blogs and vlogs. As Duffy argues that, “many bloggers now enjoy the perquisites of traditional magazine editors: highly coveted tickets to Fashion Week events, lavish product freebies, and exclusive interviews with high-fashion elites” (2013, p. 230). The same can be said for popular natural hair bloggers and vlogger as they gain followers, enjoy opportunities to expand their personal brands, and partner with companies to provide reviews and viewer contests, all strategies that increase vlogger popularity. Vloggers are empowered by their ability to expand their business and popularity through these partnerships.



*Figure 4-1.* This is a screenshot from vlogger MeechyMonroe’s video where she reviews Cantu Shea Butter products.

Figure 4-1 features a still frame from the video “Cantu Shea Butter- NEW Naturals Collection Demo/Review/Giveaway” in which YouTube vlogger

MeechyMonroe reviews products she received for free by Cantu Shea Butter, a natural hair product line. The catch was that she agreed to review the product. She also discusses contest rules for a giveaway of Cantu Shea Butter products that is sponsored by the company. At the end of the video she says:

Hi guys. I would like to thank you for watching my entire video about using Cantu's new natural hair line. Now I can present the giveaway. This giveaway will go to three lucky winners to receive all six items from Cantu's new natural hair line. The rules are very simple. All you need to do is become a subscriber to my channel, you must go to my Facebook fan page to comment on the post that I have at the very top of my page about Cantu's new natural hair line, and finally go to Cantu's website at [www.cantusheasoft.com](http://www.cantusheasoft.com) and comment on your favorite product and why you would like to use it. (MeechyMonroe, 2012)

In this video MeechyMonroe is not only reviewing the product and acting as a promoter of Cantu Shea Butter hair products, but she is also using the Cantu sponsored giveaway to enhance her personal popularity and brand. This is shown in the contest rules that require those who enter the contest to both subscribe to her YouTube channel and comment on her Facebook fan page. By reviewing Cantu products, being on the Cantu YouTube channel, and participating in the promotional product giveaway, MeechyMonroe is placing herself in the position to gain more followers and attention from the natural hair community. This advance in cultural capital is evident in her over 30,000 YouTube subscribers and the 62,800 views that the "Cantu Shea Butter- NEW Naturals Collection Demo/Review/Giveaway" has received.

Thus, Black hair care marketing in YouTube's natural hair community contributes to postfeminist culture thanks to vloggers' participation in commercial practices that empower them as value creators in the beauty industry. However, the commercialism of YouTube's natural hair community is not wholly postfeminist.

### **Reshaping Representations in Black Hair Marketing**

Gill's concept of postfeminism culture situates modern women as consumers who proudly and unapologetically seek to fit in with historically hegemonic standards of femininity, usually White femininity. In postfeminist culture women feel empowered through the consumption of goods that assist them in fitting the normative mold of White beauty. This is not the case for the Black women in YouTube's natural hair community. African American women in the natural hair community are not empowered through the adoption of traditional Black female aesthetics (and they are clearly challenging White standards of beauty). They are empowered because the large commercial presence in the community has allowed non-hegemonic representations of Black beauty to gain publicity via online product promotions. As the popularity and size of YouTube's natural hair community and vlog culture has expanded, so has the use of non-traditional Black women in product advertising. Traditional Black hair care advertisements include static images of African American women with long, straight and silky hair. As previously stated by Rooks (1996) and Walker (2007), traditional representations of African American women in Black hair care advertisements feature Black women with fair-skin and long straight hair. These advertisements promoted products that are meant to rid consumers of their authentic wavy, kinky, or curly hair. In many ways cultural products

and advertising construct the standards of beauty that the majority believes in. For a long time African American women were underrepresented in the media as beauty standards and it was uncommon to see a dark skinned woman with kinky hair selling cosmetics products dedicated to black women or all types of women.



Figure 1. Vlogger 20pearlsNcurls demonstrates how she uses Cantu Shea Butter products.



Figure 2. Online advertisement for Miss Jessie's hair care line.

The representations of African American women found on the Cantubeauty channel are far from what has until recently been deemed “acceptable” and normalized by mainstream, traditional Black hair care promotions. Figure 4-2 shows a still frame from the YouTube video “Natural Hair: Twist/ Stretched Twists” by vlogger 20pearlscurls. The video, which is among the 40 vlogger videos featured on the Cantubeauty YouTube channel, features a woman who in the past would not have been found in mainstream beauty advertisements or promotions directed towards African American consumers. By featuring videos from real women of all shades of Black skin, all sizes, various hair textures and hair lengths, Cantu Shea Butter provides nuanced representations of Black beauty. The vlogs and professionally created advertisements on the Cantubeauty page feature ordinary women who challenge the societal norms of Black beauty.

Figure 4-3 shows a still frame of the video “Miss Jessie’s Shingling” from the YouTube channel of Miss Jessie’s, a hair care company. It is a professionally created video by Miss Jessie’s that features what can be assumed to be a hired actress or model. In the advertisement the model uses the Miss Jessie product to show the correct way to achieve a shingled style, a popular style among women with natural hair. The model used in the advertisement does not have long flowing hair or bright fair skin, but instead mirrors the images of the “real women” featured in the vlogger testimonies. YouTube’s natural hair community is a community of Black women whose discourses echo ideas that challenge hegemonic beauty standards by suggesting that “good hair” is not defined by its silky-straightness. The YouTube natural hair community has assisted in creating a new understanding of what is beautiful Black hair and what is a beautiful Black woman.

By using members of the natural hair community as a part of their product promotions, and creating professional advertisements that mirror the women of the natural hair community, Miss Jessie's, Cantu Shea Butter, and other beauty companies are embodying the counterhegemonic ideals of beauty that African American women in YouTube's natural hair community are seeking to spread.

### **Conclusion**

The postfeminist attributes of this community both help and hinder the women who are a part of it. On the one hand the makeover characteristics of YouTube's natural hair community encourage African American women to adopt "natural hair" lifestyles that assist in personal wellness and betterment. The discourses of one needing to "fix" and transform one's self are problematic, but are what prompt these Black women to adopt regimens that can ultimately improve their health and wellbeing tremendously. The postfeminist sensibilities of self-surveillance and makeovers actually complement the Black feminist sensibilities of the community by assisting in redefining how African American women distinguish beauty and promoting healthier lifestyle through sisterly coaching. However, there are characteristics of postfeminism in YouTube's natural hair community that combat sensibilities of Black feminism in the community that were discussed in Chapter Three. The potential for commercialism to further objectify the Black women who seek refuge in YouTube's natural hair culture contradicts the characteristics of the Black feminist safe space and the community.

Similarly, the commercialism in YouTube's natural hair community both liberates and limits these women. Many vloggers are now spokespeople for natural hair product companies and use their popularity to influence the opinions of thousands, and sometimes

hundreds of thousands, of viewers. These partnerships between vloggers and companies put the motives of these vloggers in question and compromise the trust that viewers have for the vloggers. Are they reviewing these products because they want to help their natural haired sisters with their hair regimens or are they simply advancing their personal professional agendas? Is this space a bonded sisterly community of Black women or a commercial space for profit-seeking companies and entrepreneurs? However, there are benefits of beauty companies taking such stakes in YouTube's natural hair community. The inclusion of natural hair vlogger videos on company YouTube channels and vlogger involvement in product marketing provides these Black female vloggers with agency to influence the process of product creation and improvement. It also allows them to have a role in how beauty products are marketed to African American women.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Conclusion**

On March 4, 2013, when I logged onto YouTube and typed in the words “natural hair” I found a very different experience from when I stumbled upon YouTube’s natural hair community almost six years ago. As a wide-eyed college freshman I was astounded by the plethora of Black women wearing their hair in styles that I had only seen in old photographs and 1960-70s themed costumes. The videos of women proudly wearing and styling their authentically kinky, curly and wavy locks incited a curiosity in me that led me to begin employing natural hair practices myself and eventually exploring the phenomenon from an academic standpoint. In 2008 the concept of having “natural hair” was still taboo in the southern Black community that I resided in. The 100-200 vlogs of kinky-haired women on YouTube reassured me that my natural hair was beautiful, even as I encountered disapproving stares and comments from my family and friends. Today a “natural hair” search on YouTube yields millions of results and links users to a massive group of women sharing the celebrations, lessons and frustrations associated with natural hair. But more than anything, the women in YouTube’s natural hair community share experiences, ones that reveal a great deal about where relationships between African American women and their hair—specifically natural hair—presently stand.

Conducting a thematic textual analysis of 50 vlogs by some of YouTube’s most popular natural hair vloggers and their comments, this study sought to gain a better understanding of how the Black women in YouTube’s natural hair community identify with their hair and each other. What was discovered is that the natural hair values in this virtual community embody sensibilities of both Black feminism and post-feminism.

While these two frameworks are not recognized by media scholars as complimenting each other, when viewed in the context of YouTube's natural hair community work harmoniously. Natural hair vlogs create spaces for African American women to negotiate new definitions of Black beauty, encourage Black women to adopt healthier lifestyles and enable Black women to use their consumer voices to influence representations of Black women in hair product marketing. This analysis also suggests that internalized stigmas about Black hair are still prevalent in the Black female community. I have located them in how African American women feel towards women who still chemically relax their hair and in the way women with natural hair value certain textures of hair. This concluding chapter will discuss some of the central findings of this thesis and reflect upon the extent to which natural hair is feminist.

## **Discussion**

Black women have always struggled with understanding what it means to be beautiful. Hair has been a staple in Black culture for years and throughout history women have grappled with how their hair defines them as people. Degrading messages within American culture and social hierarchy have created stigmas within African American women. This causes them to question the value of their physical features. Eurocentric beauty standards set by advertisements, media, and communities as a whole have influenced how society perceives Black, un-chemically processed hair. With this study I found that to YouTube's natural hair community natural hair is more than just a trend of kinky, curly and wavy textured tresses. Its multiple meanings symbolize nuanced ways of thinking about African American womanhood, beauty and life in general.

Natural hair means *community*. In Chapters Three and Four I argued that YouTube's natural hair community is not just a virtual forum for dialogue, but a group of women that bond over their shared experiences with natural hair. YouTube provides African American women with a space for them to express themselves and communicate with one another about their insecurities; including what they consider to be beautiful. I argued that it is a Black feminist safe space because it provides a platform for African American women to inform, inspire, question the hair standards that society has set for them and construct alternative values for Black beauty culture.

Natural hair means *freedom*. For the women in YouTube's natural hair community naturally textured tresses mean liberation from the disparaging beliefs about Black hair that have been embedded in many of these women's psyches from birth by their family, communities and the aesthetic standards encouraged inside and outside of African American culture. Natural hair not only means liberation from normative beauty criteria and the physical discomfort of the scalp chemical burns that relaxers cause for many of its users, but it grants Black women the freedom to partake in activities that are not normatively associated with African American women.

Natural hair means *reinvention*. This analysis found that the women in YouTube's natural hair community take on new regimens and values once they adopt natural hair practices. The discourses observed in the sample reveal that there is a desire among these women to not only gain healthier hair, but to become healthier physically and emotionally. With the assistance of the community's vloggers, these women seek betterment holistically. As discussed in Chapter Four, many aspects of the natural hair lifestyle encourage consumption and are influenced by commercialism. However, this is

not an entirely bad thing. The natural hair movement during the Black Power era was staked in changing the political system and gaining cultural recognition. The current natural hair movement is more of a post citizen movement that has placed more attention on getting mainstream culture and beauty companies to recognize natural hair as an important hair practice for African American women. While YouTube's natural hair community is not abolishing the commodification of Black women and Black hair, it is changing who the system benefits.

Natural hair means *journey*. As mentioned in Chapter Four, some of the vloggers observed in this study refer to the adoption of natural hair practices as a journey. The process of going from chemically relaxed hair to one's authentic texture is not a monosemic change, but one that includes the evolution of one's entire being. It also symbolizes a journey of evolving struggle surrounding Black women and self-acceptance. The Black Power movement marked an era where natural hair symbolized racial pride and love. In the current reemergence of the natural hair trend among African American, I believe the love and pride for authentic Black features has reemerged as well. However, as Hall (1990) argues in his theory of cultural identity, identity is constantly transforming and ever evolving. This is highly evident in the Black women of this virtual community.

While progress has been made, this study reveals that there is still a long way to go for African American women and their value of their hair. In my analysis of YouTube's natural community I discovered traces of a culture of judgment and a culture of envy. While most of the vlog videos and comments that I viewed are welcoming to women of all Black hair practices—including those that still chemically-relax their hair—

there are discourses that express elitism over Black women that still employ traditional chemical-straightening methods; suggesting that their use of relaxers signifies their imprisonment by hegemonic aesthetic standards or their lack of self-love. Also, there are instances of women expressing hair envy of other Black women who have looser, less kinky hair patterns; alluding to a dislike for the texture they themselves have. The natural hair movement has assisted in the dispatching of deeply rooted Black hair stigmas, however, there is still a long way to go.

So, is natural hair feminist? I have grappled with this question throughout my analysis and have found it particularly difficult to answer because of the contradictory discourses surrounding natural hair. In spite of these contradictions my answer is yes, for the most part. This study has explored the many ways that natural hair as it is represented by the YouTube community embodies sensibilities of both Black feminism and post feminism, one framework that is unquestionably feminist and the latter that has been argued to be both feminist and anti-feminist (Gill, 2008). The Black feminist characteristics of safe havens and redefining Black beauty that this community possesses coincide with the uplifting and inclusive nature of feminism. On the other hand, the highly commercialized, makeover driven attributes of postfeminism found in this community arguably objectify Black women and counter feminist values. However, in light of the feminist argument that postfeminism hinges on self-surveillance and the commodification of female values to give women a false sense of empowerment, I argue that the Black women of YouTube's natural hair community have repurposed this framework to complement feminist agendas. More specifically, the Black feminist agenda of redefining Black woman hood and Black beauty. In Chapter Four I have

attempted to show that Black natural hair vloggers, while in positions where they could easily become pawns in the game of media beauty marketing, have instead found ways to use the commodification of natural hair to promote healthier Black female lifestyles, create more opportunities for Black female entrepreneurship and to enhance the visibility of non-traditionally acceptable Black aesthetics. I find this to be highly feminist.

### **Implications and Further Research**

The purpose of this research was to briefly outline how the beliefs surrounding African American hair have evolved throughout history and to investigate the meanings that natural hair currently holds in the growing virtual culture of YouTube's natural hair community. While this study has revealed several important themes about how modern Black women identify with un-chemically processed hair, further research can uncover an even deeper understanding of the role that natural hair and YouTube's natural hair community currently play in African American culture. In a future study, a larger sample size of vlogs should be analyzed; with videos from a greater variety of vloggers viewed.

Future research should also include interviews with vloggers and members of YouTube's natural hair community. This community of Black women was first established approximately six years ago and I suspect it will continue to grow and evolve for years to come. It would be beneficial to gather direct insight from the actual stakeholders of this community. Future research should explore what natural hair vloggers feel their role is in the current natural hair movement and what natural hair vlog viewers believe they gain from being a part of this culture.

One thing that I found undeniable after conducting this research is that hair still matters. The relationship that African American women have with their hair is complex. Discourses around it can still be used to gain an understanding of how African American women, and women of other Black cultures around the globe, connect with one another and still grapple with internalized stigmas of beauty. Virtual spaces like YouTube, Facebook, and other forms of social media are promising platforms to continue this type of research; as hair communities like the one analyzed in this study are steadily multiplying by number and popularity. They are open windows into the views that many Black women have learned to hide from dominant eyes.

A question that arose from this research is “Is there such thing as Black postfeminism?” If there is, what are the features of this sensibility? I employed Gill’s (2007) concept of postfeminist to analyze my sample, however the framework of postfeminism is generally one that pertains to the White, middle class women. Future research should explore ideas of Black postfeminism and in turn, given the insights of this research, consider whether YouTube’s natural hair community would fit in that category.

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