

# Oppression at the Roots: Feminism, Hair, and Alice Walker

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FYS 35: Tangled: African-American Hair in  
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Before the United States Black Power Movement of the 1970s, a single Eurocentric standard of beauty defined what made hair beautiful. If a man's hair was naturally kinky, coarse, or tightly curled, Whites and fellow Blacks alike expected the man to closely cut or chemically straighten ("conk") his hair. Women were either expected to straighten or cover their hair if it was unsightly. If a woman chose not to, she was not only seen as unkempt, but also as ugly.<sup>1</sup> Black feminism, an offshoot of the Black Power Movement, strove to challenge this commonly held notion. During the 1980s, black feminist emphasis on self-definition facilitated a continued departure from societal beauty standards set for African American hair, providing a platform for black feminist author Alice Walker to challenge expectations of African American hair and explore self-definition as the key to empowerment for black women.

In their endless efforts to look more professional and beautiful (which, not coincidentally, also meant looking whiter), black men and women went through extreme and painful efforts to straighten their hair. Civil rights leader and Black Power advocate Malcolm X, for example, famously detailed his first conk as one of the most painful experiences of his life. However, when he saw the results of the process he "vowed I'd never be without a conk again".<sup>2</sup> Malcolm

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<sup>1</sup> Maxine Craig, "The Decline and Fall of the Conk: or, How to Read a Process," *Fashion Theory* 1 no. 4 (1997), 401.

<sup>2</sup> Malcolm X as quoted by Ayana D. Byrd, and Lori L. Tharps, *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2014), 43.

X believed (and many other black men and women agreed) that it was worth risking serious chemical burns to obtain the straight hair of a white man. Malcolm X's conk echoed the experiences of thousands of black people who were willing to risk their wellbeing for a chance at being considered beautiful by a society that found their natural appearance ugly. In order to be considered beautiful, minorities with unconventional hair types had to devote an enormous amount of effort to styling their hair in order to look "white".

Thankfully, this singularity in beauty structure did not last forever. In the 1970s, men and women chose to grow out their hair in Afros, defying past beauty standards and emphasizing a return to their African heritage. Men and women were finally deviating from the cultural expectation that they must look white to be considered presentable.<sup>3</sup> "Going natural", or choosing to stop chemically straightening their hair, allowed men and women to proudly and publicly display their racial pride.<sup>4</sup> By choosing to no longer conform to Eurocentric beauty standards, black people took a huge step towards recognizing their own beauty.

However, it was much harder for women to define themselves by their African heritage. Women had to face a unique challenge in their transition to natural hair. In choosing to wear an Afro, men were displaying their cultural pride and returning to standard expectations of masculinity by no longer participating in what was considered the "feminine" process of chemically straightening their hair.<sup>5</sup> Women had a much harder time leaving chemicals behind. By choosing to wear their hair natural, women turned their backs on the Eurocentric beauty standards, but also had to deviate from feminine beauty ideals that stretched beyond race. They

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<sup>3</sup> Craig, 401.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 414.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 414.

could not avoid making a political statement about feminine beauty ideals when they chose to make a statement about racial oppression.

Thanks to Eurocentric beauty norms, hair played an integral role in how black women defined their femininity. Flowing golden locks were, without a doubt, considered the standard for American beauty.<sup>6</sup> With the help of advertisements, television shows and images of popular actresses, this standard became the measure by which all American women would define themselves, regardless of race or hair type. If a black woman wished to be seen as beautiful or professional, she had to conform to societal standards meant to accommodate women who did not share her bone structure, skin color, or hair texture. Black women had to endure hours of pain if they wanted swaying “white” (European-looking) hair.<sup>7</sup> This preference for long, flowing hair was so deeply rooted in American culture that women with naturally short hair were forced to “[live] with rejection and mockery.”<sup>8</sup> Without any cultural support encouraging black women to go natural, women of color were forced to conform if they wished to be seen as beautiful.

Before the Black Feminist Movement began, black women received very little support and encouragement from communities to which they belonged. Although the Black Liberation and Women’s Movements existed, black women were still experiencing racial and sexual oppression in everyday life. These two movements, meant to represent blacks and women, did not represent *black women* as a demographic: “‘black’ was equated with black men and ‘woman’ was equated with white women.”<sup>9</sup> As a result, black women continued to be marginalized

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<sup>6</sup> Shauntae Brown White, “Releasing the Pursuit of Bouncin’ and Behavin’ Hair: Natural Hair as An Afrocentric Feminist Aesthetic for Beauty,” *International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics* 1, no. 3 (2005), 297.

<sup>7</sup> Susan Brownmiller as quoted by White, 297.

<sup>8</sup> Craig, 413.

<sup>9</sup> Cherise Charleswell, “Herstory: The Origins and Continued Relevance of Black Feminist Thought in the United States,” *The Hampton Institute*, 27 Feb 2014, 6 Nov 2014,

members of society. Black feminism became the first movement that actively sought to represent the interests of black women.

Officially acknowledged in 1973, the Black Feminist Movement was revolutionary because it was one of the first to examine race and gender together. Instead of viewing an individual as black, or an individual as female, black feminists strived to take a holistic approach when defining human beings. By looking not only at African Americans, and not only at women, the black feminist movement was able to examine the specific ways in which black women were defined and oppressed by society.<sup>10</sup> Black feminism was the first movement to acknowledge the racial, cultural and political struggles that black women faced as a result of their gender and race. By tying these ideas together, black feminism explores the intersectionality of oppression, and recognizes the expectations society places on all black women.<sup>11</sup> Black feminism strives to better understand black women by examining the challenges they face through different perspectives, while specifying that these challenges come about as a result of their entire identities.

One main ideal of black feminism is that it strives to promote self-definition as a way for black women to empower themselves in a white man's world. At its inception, black feminism worked to "challeng[e] the oppression of race, gender and class while at the same time developing and validating a self-defined standpoint."<sup>12</sup> In order to help stop black women from seeing themselves through a Eurocentric beauty lens, black feminism encouraged black women to define themselves by their own beauty standard. To do so, black feminism had to directly

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<http://www.hamptoninstitution.org/black-feminist-thought.html#.VFvA7snefIU>

<sup>10</sup> Charleswell.

<sup>11</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (London, GBR: Routledge, 2000. Accessed October 30, 2014. ProQuest ebrary), 22.

<sup>12</sup> White, 300.

challenge the commonly held notion that kinky, coarse, or tightly curled hair was “bad”.<sup>13</sup> Black women could see their natural selves as beautiful if they chose to identify with a beauty standard that embraced their bodies and hair-types. Black feminism set the stage, opening up a conversation about race and gender and enabling women to speak out against unfair beauty standards.

Alice Walker, famous writer and author of *The Color Purple*, was one woman who used black feminist thought to encourage an exodus from conventional beauty norms. Commonly identified as a feminist author, Alice Walker actually preferred to be identified as a “womanist”. The term “womanist”, like black feminism, embraces the intersectionality of the challenges of black women as individuals, and emphasizes the same holistic viewing of societal expectations.<sup>14</sup> Walker wore her hair natural or in braids later in life, choosing to challenge mainstream societal standards in her writings and in her daily life.<sup>15</sup>

In a 1987 address to her alma mater, Spelman College, Walker examines hair and hair culture, acknowledging the unhealthiness in beauty culture to which she once subscribed. When she, at forty years old, decided to stop processing (chemically straightening) her hair, and begin braiding in extensions, she loved the result. She described her “short, mildly processed” hair as “oppressed”.<sup>16</sup> Walker “remembered years of hairdressers—from my mother onward—doing missionary work on my hair,” as if her hair was a savage in need of structure.<sup>17</sup> By choosing to

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<sup>13</sup> Mark Hopson, “Language and Girlhood: Conceptualizing Black Feminist Thought in {Happy to be Nappy},” *Women and Language* 32, no. 1 (Spring, 2009), 33.

<sup>14</sup> Yvonne Johnson, “Alice Walker,” *Dictionary Of World Biography: The 20th Century* (January 2000), 1-3. *Literary Reference Center*, EBSCOhost (accessed November 7, 2014).

<sup>15</sup> Alice Walker, “Oppressed Hair Puts a Ceiling on the Brain,” In *Living by the Word*, ed. Alice Walker (San Deigo: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), 72.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 72.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 73

describe straightening as “missionary work”, Walker equates the Eurocentric beauty standard to the gospel. She not only saw hair straightening as undeniably necessary (even religiously so), but she also it as a something she must force herself to enjoy. With this metaphor, Walker was accurately able to emphasize the amount of respect that black women gave to the Eurocentric beauty standard.

Walker uses these metaphors to poignantly describe the way that processed hair became central and poisonous to her own life. She chose to write this address because she felt as if she could no longer grow. Her hair, as the title of the speech indicates, put “a Ceiling on the Brain.”<sup>18</sup> Not only were her earlier hair choices unwanted and unhealthy, but they prohibited Walker from growing emotionally. Her hair choices limited her because, thanks to endless societal pressure to constantly have perfect hair, Walker was “always thinking about it.”<sup>19</sup> Hair had become such an important aspect of her life that thoughts of her hair consumed her, taking up her time and energy and stopping her from thinking about more important issues. Society focused so intently on long, flowing, “white” hair that Walker could not help but be drawn in to an unhealthy hair culture.

Interestingly, in the end, the reader realizes that Walker did not choose to speak about hair exclusively. In discussing the societal expectations for black hair, Walker is able to call attention greater societal limits placed on black women. As it grew, Walker’s natural hair “sought more space, more light, more of itself.”<sup>20</sup> Her hair, no matter what society said, wanted to grow out, in any way it chose. It pushed to be itself. When she chose to let her hair go natural, “the ceiling at the top of my brain lifted; once again, my mind (and spirit) could get outside

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 69

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 71

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 73

myself.”<sup>21</sup> Both she and her hair could grow free because she chose to stop listening to the expectations of society that had once managed to burrow into her mind. Walker found that if she allowed her hair to be oppressed, she allowed herself to be oppressed.

Alice Walker was able to use black feminism as a platform for her ideas as she challenged Eurocentric hair expectations for black women. In her discussion of hair, Walker was able to emphasize the amount of power society has over black women. Societal beauty standards forced Walker into believing that she had to conform to a singular ideal of femininity. It took until Walker was forty for her to realize that society was robbing her of her time and of her self-love. However, Walker’s hair journey was not unique. Because she and other black feminists began to speak out, more and more black women were able to hear stories of hair oppression, and were therefore able to learn to define themselves by their own beauty standards. This self-definition, a central ideal of black feminism, paved the way, allowing women to love their hair even if it was not long, straight, and blonde. Self-definition is the key to empowerment for women with course and kinky hair, but it is also the key to empowerment for all women. Without self-definition, women of all races are slaves to beauty ideals that they can never attain. Women waste their time and energy conforming to societal expectations when they could be allowing their hair, and their spirits, to grow free.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 74

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Statement of Revision:

I revised my essay according to your comments. I tweaked my introduction so that I could emphasize the relationship between the Black Power Movement and the Black Feminist Movement. I also elaborated a little on Walker's description of hair care as "missionary work". Finally, I edited my conclusion to emphasize the fact that Walker was just one example of someone who experienced and spoke out against this hair oppression. I wanted to highlight the movement and its influence, not just Walker.