

The Shifting Image of Black Women's Hair in Tshwane (Pretoria), South Africa

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"If your hair is relaxed white people are relaxed. If your hair is nappy, white people aren't happy" (Paul Mooney, 2012).

Abstract

In this article, we explore the motivations for the changing image of black South African women's hair in Tshwane, Pretoria. We argue that black South African women's hair, in the past, as in the present, has largely been misconstrued. We demonstrate that like all black South African inhabitants, South African women's hair has had its own fair share of ridicule, ostracising, and racial classification. As a result of this, black South African women's hair is constantly in motion, searching for recognition and appreciation. The article is based on a review of literature and interviews conducted with 30 black South African women in Tshwane, Pretoria, from July to September in 2015 and in August 2016.

Subjects: African Studies, Visual Communication, History of Art, Visual Culture, Visual Arts, Political Communication

Keywords: Black Hair, Women, Tshwane, Shifting, Pretoria, Racism

Introduction

In August 2016, questions around policing black hair came to the fore at Pretoria High School for Girls, following the insistence from the school's administration that black learners straighten their hair in order for it to be considered neat according to the school's code of conduct. Instead of adhering to the school's request, a 13-year old pupil black pupil went into a peaceful protest that attracted the attention of the public and garnered national attention. The public's reaction to the incident was mixed but it pointed in one direction— to the country's past racist policies. Reacting to the protest, Sharlene Swartz (2016) of the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) maintained that:

The School's code of conduct was a throwback to the country's colonial history and promoted white beauty standards... It's fantastic that we have 13-year old girls doing what they are doing. The rules need to be revisited because this still stems from apartheid... The rules imply that natural black hair is not beautiful...¹

In reacting to the protest, Gauteng Member of the Executive Council (MEC) for Education, Panyaza Lesufi wasted no time in setting up a committee to investigate the allegations of racism at the Pretoria High School for Girls, which is a former whites-only Model C school. Similarly, the Ahmed Kathrada Foundation visited the school and made the following remarks:

We are shocked and outraged at the incidents of racism that we were told took place at the School. It was inspiring to see though, the manner in which the pupils fearlessly took on the system that discriminated against them²

To protest as the pupils did and to support their actions as the commentators have is in line with the “tactic of the post-apartheid government... to celebrate various interacting cultures, [in order to] to embrace the rainbow nation concept” (Nettleton, 2008, p. 108). But above all, the protest points to the complex image of black hair and why it has historically always been fraught with an interplay of meanings and associations that have cast it as being simultaneously emblematic of black people’s inferiority (savage, unpleasant, unkempt, unclean), exotic (elaborate, labyrinthine, curiosity arousing, stylising), and a dominant exemplar of self-affirming re-appropriations of blackness and/or Africanness (afros, dreadlocks, black is beautiful, Rastafarianism). Furthermore, this image of black hair is all the more loaded when unpacking the specificity of black women’s hair. As Caldwell (2003, p.18) points out in reference to black Brazilian women, “the racial implications of hair texture [and hair in general] take on added significance for black women, given the central role accorded to hair in racialized constructions of femininity and female beauty.” Indeed, since notions of gender are always racialized, and notions of race are always gendered, notions of femininity form the foundational aspects on how racial categories or races –in this instance blacks, have come to be perceived.

This article contributes to the extensive literature focusing on black hair by exploring some of the motivations for the changing image of black hair, with special focus on black women’s hair in Tshwane.³ Based on data from interviews conducted with 30 black women in hair salons in Tshwane in 2015 and 2016, we argue that such is the complex nature of the politics and meanings surrounding black hair (and afro hair in particular), that black women’s hair has to constantly be in motion, searching for an acceptable aesthetic, creating new denotations, as well as pushing political frontiers.

Background: The Black of Black Hair in South Africa and Tshwane⁴

For a better understanding of our use of the term black hair in this study, we will begin by unpacking the loaded use of the term in South Africa and Tshwane in order to establish a context for our argument. The racial categories white, Indian, coloured, black African, and their bodily identities, including hair, are deeply entrenched in the South African reality and imagination. This, however, does not mean that official documents and policies do not recognize the racial categories Indian and coloured and black Africans. In many formal instances, the racial identity – black in South Africa, as a category is also inclusive of Indians and coloureds, who are in most informal instances, considered to belong to different racial groups. How the term black came to be an encompassing term is most certainly due to the influence of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM), an anti-apartheid movement most prominent in the 1960s and 1970s (Biko, 2004). It can be argued that the BCM’s most lasting impact is in its development and articulation of what is referred to as political blackness (Makino, 1997). Black consciousness sought to provide a critique of the four colonial and apartheid racial classifications, hierarchically categorised with white at the zenith, and then Indian, followed by coloured, and black African in descending order. Instead of following this categorisation, Black consciousness activists put forth the contention that the only racial delineation that really matters is between whites and the rest, that is, between whites and non-whites. Moreover, it was argued that further differentiation of non-whites by non-whites was an attempt by the colonial and apartheid regimes to create divisions that would help in nullifying a unified struggle against white supremacy, as well as further promoting the entrenchment of colonial and apartheid nationalist ideology that sought to create, naturalise

and make rigid, a range of ethnic, cultural, racial, and national identities that were non-existent prior to colonisation (Gerhart, 2008).

What was important, was for non-whites to mobilise under a singular political banner that sought to position itself against white domination. This political banner came in the form of a political identity, namely blackness (or Blackness, that is, black with a capital 'B') (More, 2008; Gordon 2008). Being Black meant that one has rejected whiteness, and its attendant categories, as the only authentic form of identification and had thus attained a consciousness that allowed self-insight into the true nature of the colonial and apartheid racial system which had white supremacy as its ultimate objective (Biko, 2004). White supremacy rendered anything non-white as insufficient, and so irrespective of whether there were categories of non-whites organised hierarchically, that designated some non-white groups as superior to others, what ultimately remained is that they were all inferior to whites in varyingly significant degrees. And too the fact that whiteness was the utmost measure in which gradations of superiority and the inferiority of non-whiteness was applied to was in itself rendered fraudulent by the BCM (Makino, 1997). This is why, in the BCM Indians, coloureds, and (light skinned) African blacks who chose to identify as black were considered black.

What the identification of being black also entailed, was an affirmative reclamation of those physical, cultural, linguistic, aesthetic, and epistemological characteristics of non-whites that had been systematically and violently ridiculed, diminished, and eroded by white supremacy. This meant, for example, the recognition and subsequent refusal of colourism and all the associated benefits that came with having a skin tone closer to whiteness – hence the BCM's dismissal of skin-lightening or bleaching products – and an affirmation of darker skin tones. This also meant that hair was re-introduced into the consciousness of the black self, as a site in which a positive reclamation could be born, since hair that is progressively less straight (not in the image of those of European descent) has been considered as being undesirable and unbecoming to varying extents. Consequently those who identified as Black in the BCM would to adopt a stance which sought to subvert this cluster of complex hair meanings, in order to affirm the kind of hair that has been thought of as being the most undesirable and unbecoming of all hair textures. The idea that BCM fought to bring into the collective consciousness is that despite one's own characteristics as a black person, perhaps with fairer skin and straighter ('good') hair, is that being Black and conscious necessitated an endorsement of those skin and hair traits conventionally understood as being the most disagreeable and/or condescendingly exotic. In other words, being Black means loving and being proud of your black skin and black hair, and doing so even though black features have been considered the antithesis of what is desirable, white skin and white hair (wa Bofelo, 2008).

And so how we use the term black hair in this article, encompasses hair which is, to varying degrees and based on particular contexts, representative of the most undesirable hair that black people can have. We acknowledge that in the context of 'good hair', for example, Indian hair can be seen as more appealing or appropriate than coloured hair, which in turn can be perceived as more appealing and appropriate than afro black hair. But because as these categories are all lumped into the category 'black' (non-white) in South Africa, therefore in the context of this article we choose to think of black hair as those examples of hair that are the most unappealing and inappropriate, that black people could have within particular contexts.

Tshwane and black hair during the colonial and apartheid era

Gavin Jantjes (2011) has written on the one-sidedness of aesthetics across South Africa during the colonial and apartheid era. In his introduction to the Visual Century project, he describes the evolution of South African art, including hair and hairdressing from 1907 onwards. He demonstrates how the harsh political circumstances of the twentieth century, colonial, union, and apartheid rule, often eroded facts and shaped cultural fictions (Garvin, 2011, p. viii). Similarly, Leibhammer and Bila (2011) note that all these prejudices were clearly spelt out in the “treaty of Vereeniging (1902), the proclamation of the Union of South Africa (1910) and the Native Land Act (1913) that saw black South Africans forfeit all their residual franchise.” As a result of these narratives, the majority of South Africans were rendered voiceless, even in terms of the imagery of their hair. It is no wonder that efforts towards reversing these narratives have become one of the main preoccupations of the post-apartheid government. We argue that, it is for this reason that in the South African context, which is dominated by racial politics and aesthetics, that black South African women’s hair has become one of the most highly contested aesthetic practices since 1994.⁵

Elsewhere, including Brazil, Britain, and the Caribbean, black people have similar stories about the categorization of their hair (Mercer, 1987, p. 35). The American experience holds that “until recently, *good hair* meant only one thing for a black woman: long, shiny, and straight” (Monk, 1995, cited in Zimitri, 1997, p. 12). In Brazil, Kia Lilly Caldwell provides us with a critique of a popular Brazilian song titled *Look at Her Hair* (English translation), by an artist named Tricicia, released in 1996, which is essentially an inventory of disparaging stereotypes about black women including their hair. Caldwell (2003, p. 20) writes:

While not explicitly stated in the song *Look at Her Hair*, the notion of having ‘bad hair’ was implicit in the song’s lyrics. By comparing the woman’s hair to a scouring pad, Tricicia made a clear statement regarding the coarseness of her hair, which resonated with Brazilian notions of *cabelo ruim*, or bad hair. In Brazil, the concept of having bad hair is associated with individuals who have black or African ancestry. Having *good* or *bad* hair is also used as a means of assigning individuals who have questionable or ambiguous racial origins to either the white or black racial category. Given the high degree of racial intermixture in Brazil, individuals with African ancestry may not readily appear to be black. As a consequence, hair texture has long been used as an indicator of racial background and a basis of racial classification.

This diasporic snapshot of racial politics is entrenched in how hair is seen as a more-than-physiological consequence, and how hair is constructed, reproduced and perceived, this is in many ways reverberated within the South African contexts. Prior to 1994 and arguably to this day, social relations in South Africa are structured around race, and hair which is as visible as skin colour, and is also one of the most tangible signs of racial difference, that has taken on a symbolic dimension (Mercer, 1987, p. 35). Literature from individuals such as Joyner (1988) and Erasmus (1997) make it clear that hair is not only physical but it fulfils a symbolic function as well, especially when unpacking how hair is socially constructed in society and how its meanings manifest within social spaces. Literature about the symbolism of hair, explore how hair is socially embedded and represented in historical black societies, as well as in contemporary society, where there remain political and colonial undertones.⁶

According to Mercer (1987), racism is considered to be an ideological code in which biological attributes are laden with societal value, black hair is perceived within this framework as it is burdened with a range of negative connotations. Indeed, classical

ideologies of race established a classificatory symbolic system of colour with black and white as signifiers of a fundamental polarisation of human worth—superiority and inferiority (Mercer, 1978). The political and racial undertones of hair in South Africa were manifested through vocabularies such as *kroes* (kinky) or *lekker-hare* (nice or sleek hair) (Zimitri, 1997, p. 12). Moreover, derogatory Afrikaans terms used by white South Africans existed, and still exist for “hair that is not nice, such as *korrelkop*, *boesmanskop*, *af-kop* and *vos-koppie* among others” (Zimitri, 1997, p. 12).⁷ These Afrikaans terms, especially *boesmanskop*, (‘bushmen’ hair – a derogatory term for indigenous Southern African peoples), are themselves embedded in this classificatory system where being told that one has hair that is deemed to be the furthest from that of whites is used as an insult. Indeed, even a term like *kaffir hare* (hair like kaffirs – a derogatory term for black Africans), is used insultingly to designate a level of hair irredeemable by whiteness. It is no wonder then that during the apartheid era, the pencil test – a ‘test’ used to determine one’s racial identity through the placement of a pencil in one’s hair, the result of which (whether it slid out naturally, fell out after the head had been shaken, or stayed in the hair), meant that one would change or maintain their racial identity – became a credible tool of racial classification.⁸

As Mercer (1987) continues, “distinctions of aesthetic value—beautiful and ugly, have always been central to the way racism divides the world into binary oppositions in its application of human worth. Similarly, Nyamnjoh and Fuh (2014) maintain that the “politics and history of racialised encounters and relationships between whites and blacks have shaped the profound ways in how black women perceive themselves, and how they situate themselves in relation to the purportedly superior white ‘other.’ As they note, corporeal elements such as hair were used to mark racial difference and make clear distinctions between a superior and inferior beings (Nyamnjoh & Fuh, 2014).

In the same vein, Harriet Deacon (2011) draws on relevant literature on “how natural black hair came to be regarded in a negative light in the United States of America under slavery, and how this played out in the politics of protest and accommodation of the 20th century,” to argue that positive views of natural African hair virtually disappeared with the exportation of Africans to the West as slaves. While white slave owners generally and negatively characterised the hair of their African slaves as ‘woolly,’ they were all too eager to employ slave women with straighter hair and lighter skins as house slaves, confining those with kinkier hair and darker skin to the fields (Nyamnjoh & Fuh, 2014). In post-apartheid South Africa, this biologizing and totalizing racism can be traced and is present in everyday comments made about black hair. For instance, good hair, a term used to describe hair on a black woman’s head, refers to hair that looks European, straight, not too curly, not that kinky (Mercer, 1987; Nyamnjoh & Fuh, 2014). Because of the negative connotations associated with hair, black South African women’s hair has been historically devalued and is the most visible stigma of blackness, second only to skin colour. Such devaluation is echoed by Nyamnjoh et al (2002, p. 101), when they note that:

A European woman walking down the streets of Buea, Cameroon threatens to transform Cameroonian hair with her own blow dried style; a Cameroonian woman in recognisably non-western hair walking down the streets of Boston is seen either as still indigenised and not yet incorporated into the globalized market of style and identity or, at best as a resource that might be picked apart and adapted for novelty and someone’s project of exoticising herself to differentiate herself from her mass-marketed counterparts.

In line with Nyamnjoh et al, Lester (1999) maintains that the popular perception of good hair, is hair that is closest to what looks like white people's hair, whereas black hair is hair that juxtaposes perceived good hair and is described as being "short, matted, kinky, woolly, coarse, brittle and nappy" (Lester, 1999). Hall (1990), well known for his theory on cultural identity, claims that black hair is irrevocably linked to racial and political spaces, this is also the case in the South African and Tshwane contexts.

Methods of data collection

To understand some of the motivations for the changing image of black South African women's hair, we conducted semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of women who are: (a) regular customers to particular hairdressing salons, (b) change hairstyles most of the time.

The purposive sampling method was deemed appropriate because of a number of specifications which were mandatory for the study. These specifications included that participants have to be female and be considered black South African. This delineation therefore excluded white South African women. Moreover, snowball sampling was used, in that some of the interviewees were located through acquaintances of the researcher(s), and thereafter, referrals from interested participants (Johnson & Sabin, 2010).

Our sample involved 30 black South African women with varying social and demographic backgrounds. The age range for our interviewees was 18-62 years. Of the 30 interviewees, 11 are married and have children. Out of the 11 who are married, four have matric (a high school certificate), while seven are school drop-outs without any certification. The four interviewees with senior certificates are working in senior positions in government departments. Out of the remaining nineteen interviewees, nine are retired and ten are in-between jobs. The majority of the ten interviewees who are in-between jobs consider themselves to be unemployed, yet, in spite of their unemployed status, some argue that they cannot afford not to do their hair, as stylish hairstyles make them part of the new dispensation.⁹

Interviews were conducted between July and September 2015 and again in August 2016. Each interview lasted about one hour thirty minutes. Interviews were conducted in hairdressing salons, cafes, and restaurants in Tshwane central. Interviewees were first asked to talk about their hair and how it pertains to them as black South African women, how their hair care has developed and their motivations for changing their hairstyle. We also asked the interviewees if they faced any challenges with their hair, what the challenges are and how they overcome them. When conducting interviews with interviewees who are regular customers at hairdressing salons, we asked them about the type of hairstyles that they have, how their hairstyles have changed over time, and what role hair plays in their relationships and within broader society.

Although most black South Africans understand and speak English, some struggled to communicate in the interviews clearly. Hence the qualitative data for this article was collected using two languages – IsiSotho and English. Using these two languages was important in that it allowed the interviewees to speak in any of the languages that they felt

comfortable conversing in. Interviews were conducted by the corresponding author in English and co-author in English and IsiSotho.

The interviews were recorded and later transcribed by the co-author and analysed by the corresponding author in line with Glaser and Strauss' (2009) grounded theory approach in which generalisations are derived from data. The analysis of the interviews and the literature reviewed are the basis of this article.

Decline of pre-1994 perceptions of hair in Tshwane

During the interviews conducted with black South African women across Tshwane in 2015 and 2016, some of the discussions were around the question of black women's hair in post-apartheid South Africa. During the interviews, most of the participants agreed that it was important for South African women to look good under the present dispensation, especially given that they did not have such opportunities in the past. As one interviewee, maintains:

The new South Africa is different because women can work for themselves and therefore must be allowed to decide on how to spend their money. Before 1994, it was not just apartheid on black women's hair but most women depended on their husbands for everything and hair was not a priority (Sithole, personal communication, June 2016).¹⁰

The quote illustrates that, even though black hair was not important before 1994, most black women also did not have the means of allowing their hair to be transformed through styling. In essence, it is not just about the apartheid image of black hair before 1994, but it is also about the inability of black South African women to control the means of cultural production.

According to Gramsci (1971) and Marx (1977), it can be argued that hegemonic culture is constituted first and foremost by following the values that serve and justify the privileged classes in any given society, and that the class is thus privileged because of its relation to the mode of production. When the mode of production changes hands, fundamental changes occur in society, as is the case of black South African women's hair. As new modes of production become dominant, new classes are formed, class relations shift, and the new classes that rise to power then construct new cultural objects, aesthetics, values, and ultimately an ideology, that justifies their hegemony. The privileges provided to black South Africans, including women since 1994 have allowed them to follow the aforementioned trajectory.

In his paper titled *Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive*, Achille Mbembe (2015) notes that:

...the decolonisation of buildings and public spaces includes a change of those colonial names, iconography, i.e., the economy of symbols whose function, all along, has been to induce and normalize particular states of humiliation based on white supremacist presuppositions.¹¹

Such names, images, and symbols, Mbembe, goes on, "have nothing to do on the walls of a public university campus more than 20 years after apartheid" (Mbembe, 2015). In his study on "HipHop Origin as Organic Decolonization" Sajani (2015) notes that "HipHop culture, at

its origins, is an organic decolonization of local urban space by internally colonized people in post-industrial 1970s New York.” Similarly, the interest in black hair in South Africa and Tshwane can be interpreted as an organic decolonisation of the local Tshwane cultural space by the African National Congress (ANC) government and black South African women. Accordingly, the term decolonisation alludes to the deconstruction of the pre-1994 regimes in South Africa, who used aesthetics such as straight and shiny hair as a means of exaggerating the importance and dignity of whites over non-whites—this was made apparent in the form of apartheid administration through which a certain political and social order and set of privileges were given to whites and maintained at the expense of others. More specifically, decolonisation refers to the activities of the colonial and apartheid elites who prior to the transition to democracy in 1994, promoted and upheld racialized notions about black South African women’s hair because they did not want social change. It was this practice of suppressing and devaluing black South African women’s hair that led Zimitri to note that hair in post-apartheid South Africa is “a creative response to the experience of oppression and disposition” (1997, p. 15). Indeed, South African women’s interest in overcoming the scourge of pre-1994 oppression through hair has led to an insatiable taste for hair styling across Tshwane.

The taste for hair styling is manifested through the numerous hairdressing salons and hairstyles seen across Tshwane. One notable fact that emerged during the interviews is the fact that most hairdressing salons are owned by African migrants but their clientele are predominantly black South African women. When asked why most of her clients are black South African women, Anathasia, a Cameroonian female hairdresser had this to say:

...black South African women want to spoil themselves with creative and innovative hairstyles and African migrants like me have proven to them that we have the skills, so what do you expect? Good hairdressers are scarce and when a woman succeeds to find one, she will do everything possible to keep her... (Interview, Anathasia, August 2015).¹²

This was corroborated by two of the interviewees, one, a 40 year old woman who had just finished straightening her hair and the other, a 45 year old woman wearing extensions that were installed at the same salon. As one of the women maintains:

I can never stop doing my hair because doing so will compromise my relationship. As soon as I finish doing one hairstyle, I plan for the next and that is what keeps my partner and I happy... [a] good hairstyle is what is in fashion in South Africa and Pretoria, and no black woman wants to be left behind. The opportunity to look good and be admired is now... (Interview, Adeli, August 2015).¹³

There is a general conception across South Africa and Tshwane that African migrants, especially Ghanaian and Cameroonian women are the best hairdressers and so too are their hairstyles and products. Through these new hairstyles and products, most black South African women are able to reinvent themselves by changing hairstyles and other bodily identities frequently. This is significant, not only for the women’s partners but also for society and the current era of change, because of the general belief that a black woman’s hair and other body adornments are reflective of her beauty.

As Nyamnjoh and Fuh (2014) note in the responses made by some South African men to new hairstyles:

Naked DJ of Metro FM loves it when a woman is able to reinvent herself every two weeks. He loves feeling like he is dating many women in one woman. If the hairstyle looks good and she is comfortable in it, he is happy (p. 60).

The downside of this constant change, however, is that, society believes consciously or subconsciously that black women who straighten their hair or wear extensions are trying to imitate their white counterparts. And if indeed, this is true, then, this perception is a continuation of the pre-1994 imagery of hair rather than a newfound form of liberation of black hair. However, while it might rightly be a continuation of the 'good hair' imagery, it is also important to note that some of the beauty standards that were common during the colonial and apartheid era, and the personalities wearing such hairstyles and body adornments have changed from white women to black South African women. This change of ownership of beauty standards is significant and is not limited to a particular hairstyle. Indeed, freedom, for the black man and black woman in South Africa has also been accompanied by the freedom of expression which is manifested through various hairstyles and other forms of body identity. This is echoed by Kabomo in the following:

Women should do with their hair what they want. If a man does not like that you have natural hair, let him go, and if a man does not like the fact that you have a weave, let him go. What is important is the intent behind having the hairstyle (Nyamnjoh & Fuh, 2014, p. 60).

While Kabomo (2014) is open about the type of hairstyle that a woman may have, he remains cautious and insists that his sister must have natural hair, except when her hair is unmanageable. In such a situation, straightening or wearing extensions will be a way for her to manage her hair rather than emulating white standards. Whatever interpretation that might be associated with Kabomo (2014) and the Naked DJ's (2014) views of black women's hair, the fact of the matter remains that black hair, globally, and in the South African context in particular, is complex and black women are always searching for an acceptable aesthetic. By acceptable aesthetic, here we should be understood as referring to the socio-cultural and political beauty standards of post-apartheid South Africa. This shift in aesthetic is the major outcome of this article on the shifting imagery of black women's hair in South Africa and Tshwane.

The Shifting Image of Black Hair in Tshwane

If the colonial and apartheid regimes portrayed black hair as *boesmanskop* and not worth promoting, on the contrary, the post-apartheid government has created an enabling environment for the recognition, promotion and preservation of black hair as an aspect of the black cultural heritage. Four reasons account for this shift. The first is that the ideology that presented straight, shiny hair and its associated European cultural practices as ideal and worth emulating is no longer the predominant ideology and is no longer part of the superstructure of society.

The second, is that colonial and apartheid notions of black hair are considered out-dated following the advent of democracy in 1994. Indeed, similar changes were experienced by most African postcolonial societies in the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and 1990s (Larsen, 2013; Mbembe, 2015). As Larsen (2013, p. 1) maintains about Nairobi, Kenya, "the lifting of

colonial rule created a space in the city's symbolic landscape for the expression of resistance and the inscription of new voices." Mokoena Hlonipha (2016) has noted that in "slave societies and by extension, during the colonial and apartheid era, white women would often hack off the hair of their enslaved female servants because it supposedly confused white men." Similar observations have been made about black hair in America and Great Britain (Mercer, 1987; Zimitri, 1997), but this perception has changed with the attainment of independence in these countries. Given this trend, South Africa - with a similar colonial history cannot be an exception. For instance, the lifting of apartheid saw an influx of black South Africans into the cities, including women from various parts of the country, to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the new dispensation. Notable among these opportunities was the opening of the doors of whites-only institutions such as Pretoria High School for Girls, to black South African girls, to the extent that black girls also had the right to challenge authority when their hairstyles were questioned in 2016.¹⁴

Thirdly, colonial and apartheid notions of black hair are said to have been informed by two misconceptions that have now been corrected. The first being that that natural black hair is dirty, and the second is that natural black hair does not grow, hence the black woman's fascination with hair length, hair extensions and dreadlocks. To elaborate on this, Mokoena, (2016), notes that:

Many black women and men who wear weaves and relax their hair will explain their choice by either saying that their natural hair is unmanageable or that natural hair is dirty. This is one of the most enduring stereotypes about black hair. People will even cite the anecdotal evidence that Bob Marley's dreads had 47 different types of lice when he died. These are urban legends of the worst kind because they perpetuate the stereotype that only black hair attracts lice, and other vermin, which is scientifically untrue (2016).

As a matter of fact, the meaning of good hair for some black women is slowly beginning to shift from its colonial-racist content—straight and shiny—to the notion that good hair is healthy hair whatever the texture. In present day South Africa and Tshwane, most of the previously marginalized population groups, especially black South African women are fascinated by the newly found imageries of black hair. Most of the 30 women that the authors interviewed felt that this new imagery of black hair reflects their cultural values and identity in one way or another. Indeed, most of them agreed that for decades black South African women were forced to adapt to a Western hair standard to the detriment of their own natural hair. Now, as one of the interviewees notes, is the time for black women across South Africa to express and celebrate the variety of black hairstyles, be it dreadlocks, natural hairstyles, an afro, or straightened hair. For instance, in most of the hairdressing salons that we visited, we were astonished by the large number of women queuing to have their hair done and the styles they wanted. On one occasion, we met a 50-year old black woman and her two daughters, aged 16 and 14 years waiting to have their hair done. Given that it was during the hair racism incident at Pretoria High School for Girls, we asked the woman if her daughters were learners and if their school administration was not going to complain about their hairstyles. Her response was categorical:

Their hairstyle is no longer my problem alone. It is a human rights issue and I am sure you listen to the Gauteng MEC for Education, Mr Panyaza Lesufi. He said in his response to the incident at Pretoria High School for Girls that the call for black learners to straighten their hair is a human rights case and must be treated as such.

Any school that attempts to question my daughter's hairstyle will face a similar response, she concluded (Interviewee, September 2016).¹⁵

This woman's notion of black hair illustrates the extent to which black women feel protected in terms of their cultural representation. It is entrenched in the equal rights for all citizens' declaration in the South African constitution which also frowns at the abuse that the same rights can afford to a certain population group, as seen in the code of conduct of some former Model C institutions such as Saint Michaels' and Pretoria High School for Girls.¹⁶ In a similar vein, one of the woman's daughters echoed her view by saying that any school that has a problem with her hairstyle is not for her. "I cannot be a born-free and live without enjoying the privileges associated with my status. Black hair matters in the new South Africa," she concluded.¹⁷

Lastly, when South Africa achieved its independence in 1994, social transformation was made one of the top priorities of the new government. The constitution, for example declared equal rights for all citizens, and one can add equal cultural representation to this. Because hair is one of the platforms through which people can express their heritage and social status, cultural heritage became a space where the government had to persuade the population to support its policies. Accordingly, on Heritage Day in 1997, former President, Nelson Mandela used the opportunity to criticize the cultural landscape of 1997 as one which still reflected colonial and apartheid points of view (Kayster, 2010). In line with the country's new constitution, Mandela demanded a change of the old imagery. He emphasized that the cultural representation had to change in order to reflect the democratic ideals and experiences of the majority of the population, rather than focusing on a privileged few as had been the case. His pronouncement was well received as many people saw it as a wake-up call. According to Kayster (2010), President Mandela's speech clearly showed that the post-apartheid government had proposed and desired transformation of the entire cultural landscape, including perceptions of black hair. Transformation in this case encompasses, "inclusion, assimilation, participation, collaboration and sometimes eradication" (Kayster, 2010). It is a process of constructing new ways of thinking, doing and understanding black hair, for example.

However, the call for the transformation of the cultural landscape has less to do with the fascination with the new imagery of black hair rather than with fundamental changes that have been happening in South Africa since the 1990s. Not only have these changes supposedly swept away the colonial and apartheid ideology that in the past undermined black hair in favour of straight and shiny European hair: it has also greatly hampered the influence such hair has, as any attempt to undermine black hair is openly challenged, as was the case at Pretoria High School for Girls and St Michaels' in Bloemfontein in 2016. This is how important the issue of black hair has become under the new dispensation, not only for the previously marginalized, but also for those who feel that South Africa's black culture and identities have been largely misconstrued and underrepresented. This article argues that it was precisely because of this notion of transformation that the black pupils at Pretoria High School for Girls held a protest following the school's decision to unduly regulate their hairstyles.

Black Women's Hair in Tshwane in 2017

Indeed, most of the stories narrated by black women about black hair points to their newly found status which has been necessitated by the law, and the various available hairstyles they can now wear. This fascination with the new imagery of black hair raises a number of

questions, the answers of which, might help in understanding the rationale behind the shifting image of black hair. Notable among these questions is, what makes black hair or the different styles of black hair attractive to black women in South Africa and in Tshwane? And what kind of message does this interest in black hair convey? Four suggestions, which are not definitive, attempt to answer these questions.

The first is that, hair played a significant role in the cultures of ancient civilizations as it symbolized one's family background, social status, spirituality and ethnic group. As early as the 15th century, hair was the main disaggregating factor between the different ethnic groups and within communities, of a person's marital status, age, wealth, and rank on the social hierarchy within a community. For instance, members of the royal family would often wear elaborate hairstyles as a symbol of their status, and someone in mourning, usually women would pay little attention to their hair during the period of grieving. Moreover, hair was seen as a symbol of fertility, as thick, long, neat and clean hair symbolized one's ability to bear healthy children¹⁸. But above all, hair was a social activity in the past as it is in the present day, because women still come together to do each other's hair and use this as an opportunity to interact with each other. Out of such interactions emerged different hairstyles that were interpreted differently by both Africans and Europeans. One of such hairstyles is the Afro, which was associated with dirty hair and of being under par to the standards set by Europeans. Such misinterpretation is highlighted by Mokoena Hlonipha (2016) in the following extract:

Historically, the myth about Afro comes from images of the pejoratively named fuzzy-wuzzy that British soldiers who were fighting Sudanese insurgents in the Mahdist war sent home. This war, from 1881-1889, popularized the image of the wild Afros that people now imagine when they think of black hair...

These images, Mokoena (2016) continues were misleading for the simple reason that "they suggested at the time that Sudanese soldiers did not dress their hair or wash it, since in the images it often looked unkempt." Across the African continent, including in South Africa, techniques of dressing hair are as varied as the hairstyles that they produce. But as varied as these African techniques and hairstyles are, they were devalued and stigmatized as already discussed, and as a result black people never had the freedom of expressing them. For freedom of expression to exist in present-day South Africa, allowing black women to dress and style their hair freely and as they wish is significant and enough of a reason for people to be fascinated with black hair.

The second reason is that black women see the new techniques and styles of black hair across Tshwane as a recognition and revival of an important aspect of their cultural heritage. But it also points to the fact that like the pre-1994 regimes that promoted and upheld Western hair standards, the post-apartheid regime and the black majority population view natural black hair as a means of going back to their roots. In fact, black people and women in particular, see black hair as a means of ensuring that there is continuity and connection with a past that they were deprived of fully embracing during the colonial and apartheid era. More importantly, it is through the practice and expression of various hairstyles that black women give themselves agency, since many South Africans believe that one way of achieving symbolic restitution is through such practices (Swartz, 2017). As a result of this, hairdressing salons in Tshwane are second only to Johannesburg, South Africa's economic capital, in number.

Thirdly, black South African women are also attracted to the varied techniques and styles of black hair because freely styling their hair contributes in giving a voice to black women who are one of the formerly marginalized groups (Sherriff, 2014). For instance, the incidences of marginalisation through the creation of cultural narratives before 1994 are still fresh in the minds of most black South African women, and the cases of hair racism which are still present in some schools are only worsening the situation. Accordingly, black women feel that embracing the varied techniques and styles of black hair is one way of making their voice heard. As one woman observed in a hairdressing salon at Sunnyside, in Pretoria, “black hair has come to stay.”¹⁹

Lastly, black South African women now see their interest in black hair as an instrument of defence. For instance, a number of studies on hair have reiterated the fact that the interest in hair today, as it was in the past is essentially a political phenomenon (Mercer, 1987; Zimitri, 1997; Nyamnjoh et al, 2002; Nyamnjoh & Fuh, 2014). This holds true, especially for the varied techniques and hairstyles of black South African women in Tshwane, because hair is forming part of an aesthetic practice that has playing a crucial role in defining and shaping South Africa’s cultural identity in a post-colonial era (Zimitri, 1997; Ojong 2005; Kayster, 2010; Leibhammer & Bila, 2011). All these cultural practices that are now being freely expressed were clearly spelt out in the restrictive policies of the apartheid regime (Kayster, 2010; Garvin, 2011; Leibhammer & Bila, 2011).

As a result of these restrictive policies, black South African women under the new dispensation see the act of identifying with and embracing black hair techniques and styles as a pivotal instrument of the counter-hegemonic project. More importantly, this resistance through black hair techniques and styles enables black people to contextualise not only the pre-eminent position of the colonial and apartheid regimes (as seen through Western hair standards) but also strengthens their claims of exercising control over particular aesthetic practices, through black hair governmentality.

Across South Africa and Tshwane, black women’s interest and fascination with the varied techniques and hairstyles of black hair fits into the country’s idea of hair as a symbol of status and prestige. It also reflective of the ambition of black people and women in particular to outshine Western hair standards in what Arjun Appadurai calls the “tournament of values” (1996). By tournament of values, we should be understood as referring to the complex ways in which pre-1994 regimes perceived Western hair standards and used them as instruments of power and authority, and as a means of controlling the cultural aesthetics of the county. In the same vein, black people and women see the promotion and preservation of black hair as an opportunity for them to make their voices heard in the wider South African community. As a result of this tendency, black women have taken upon themselves the task of changing hairstyles not only for themselves but also for their teenage daughters, most of whom are pupils and are expected to follow hair standards set out by their school governing bodies. Undoubtedly, by doing this, black women are further extending the pre-1994 practice of fascination with hair as a symbol of prestige.

Concluding Remarks

This article has presented an overview of the historical and contemporary status of black hair in South Africa and Tshwane. The article has shown that while pre-1994 imagery was largely influenced by Western hair standards; post-apartheid hair is largely tilted towards black hair standards. Using the example of the Pretoria High School for Girls’ code of conduct that

inferred that black students straighten their hair, this article highlights the shifting nature of the imagery of success and power in South Africa and Tshwane. The paper further shows that, while the shifting nature of the image of black hair is seen as an act of liberation, the fascination with straight hair indicates a continuation of the pre-1994 status of black hair. The interest in the new image of black hair is supported by four major reasons. First, is the fact that hair played, and continues to play a significant role in the cultures of ancient or pre-colonial Africa. Secondly, that black South African women see the new techniques and styles available as a recognition of their cultural heritage and values. Thirdly, the varied techniques and styles of black hair contribute in giving a voice to black South African women. Lastly, most black South African women see their hair as an instrument of defence against the continuous domination of the cultural landscape by Western hair standards.

By embracing black hairstyles, South African, and black women in particular are slowly but steadily disrupting pre-1994 Western hair standards, thereby ushering in, and positioning the various new hairstyles and techniques as part of the aesthetics of the new dispensation. Through the shifts in the image of black South African women's hair, we can deduce that hegemony is never a permanent state of affairs and it is never uncontested (Gramsci, 1971). For example, in pre-1994 South Africa, white supremacy rendered anything non-white as inferior and unwelcome in society. As a matter of fact, at the time whiteness served as the utmost measure in which superiority standards and by extension, hair was evaluated. However, in present day South Africa and Tshwane, such standards are questioned, disrupted and made to exist side-by-side with previously inferior black South African women's hair, as is seen in the cases of Saint Michaels' and Pretoria High School for Girls. For previously inferior black hair to exist side-by-side with the previously superior white hair seems to suggest that the hegemony of the white hair has somewhat been neutralized.

Title Page

The Shifting Image of Black Women's Hair in Tshwane (Pretoria), South Africa

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Public Interest Statement

South Africa's new dispensation has opened up a new world of hair and hairdressing for black South African women to reconnect with their past and to grow their relationships. But what are the motivations for this new world of hair? This paper explores the motivations for the changing nature of black South African women's hair in Tshwane, Pretoria. The paper demonstrates that like all black South African inhabitants, black South African women's hair has had its own fair share of ridicule, ostracising and classification. As a result, black South African women's hair has remained constantly in motion, searching for recognition and acceptance. A review of literature and interviews with 30 black South African women is used in supporting this argument.

Notes

¹ Shalene Swartz (Accessed, August 2016). Local hair products rope in cash. Retrieved from <https://www.iol.co.za/capetimes/news/local-hair-products-rope-in-the-cash-2062834>

² Villette, F. (2016, August, 31). Local hair products rope in the cash. Retrieved from <https://www.iol.co.za/capetimes/news/local-hair-products-rope-in-the-cash-2062834>

³ See Banks, L. (2000). *Hair Matters. Beauty, Power, and Black Women's Consciousness*. New York: New York University Press; Bowler, D. (2014, September, 30). On Hair and the Politics of Distraction. Retrieved from <http://ewn.co.za/2014/09/30/OPINION-Danielle-Bowler-On-hair-and-the-politics-of-distraction>; Elle Magazine (2016); Byrd, A., & Tharps, L. (2014) *Hair story: Untangling the roots of Black hair in America*. New York: Macmillan; Bowler, D. (2016, September, 5) Elle Q&A: Danielle Bowler on Natural hair, Curl Hierarchy, and Beauty. Retrieved from <http://www.elle.co.za/elle-qa-danielle-bowler-natural-hair-curl-hierarchy-beauty/>; Feminist Stokvel Hair Soiree. Marco, J.L. (2012) *Hair Representations among Black South African Women: Exploring Identity and Notions of Beauty* (unpublished master's thesis) University of South Africa; Pilane, P. (2014, August, 29) *The Problem isn't Black Hair, It's Racist Schools*. Retrieved from <http://www.thedailyvox.co.za/the-problem-isnt-black-hair-its-racist-schools/>; Rock, C (Producer). (2009). *Good Hair*. [Motion picture]. USA: Chris Rock Productions/HBO Films; Rosado, S. D. (2003). No Nubian Knots or Nappy Locks: Discussing the Politics of Hair among Women of African Descent in the Diaspora. A Report on Research in Progress. *Transforming Anthropology*, 11(2), 60-63; Rosette, A. S., & Dumas, T. L. (2007). Hair Dilemma: Conform to Mainstream Expectations or Emphasize Racial Identity, *Duke Journal of Gender and Law & Policy*. 14(407), 407-421; Tate, S. (2007). Black Beauty: Shade, Hair and Anti-Racist Aesthetics. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 30(2), 300-319.

⁴ The metropolis that is known today as Tshwane has gone from Tshwane in pre-colonial times to Pretoria in the colonial and apartheid era, and back to Tshwane and Pretoria again in present day South Africa. Pretoria, the political capital of South Africa was founded in 1855 by Marthinus Pretorius, the then leader of the Voortrekkers who named the settlement after his father, Andries Pretorius, and chose a spot on the banks of the Apies River to be the capital of the South African Republic. Prior to this, oral history holds that the area used to be called Tshwane, probably named after a local chief, Tshwane, who lived there. The meaning of the name Tshwane is not very clear, but it is associated with the term Tshwana, which means "we are same" (accessed: www.sahistory.org.za, July 13, 2017). Other commentators associate the name Tshwane with the colour "black" in Sotho, as in black cow or "kgomo e Tshwane" while still, others say it means "little monkey" (accessed: www.sahistory.org.za, July 13, 2017). Following the 1994 transition to democracy in South Africa, Pretoria was again renamed Tshwane Metropolitan City but the name Pretoria remains as the name of the capital of Tshwane and South Africa.

⁵ Apart from the case of the Pretoria High School for Girls mentioned earlier, cases of hair racism are common across South Africa. For example, in 2016, another former whites-only Model C school, St Michaels' in Bloemfontein in the Free State Province was at the centre of attention after an irate parent posted photos of black South African girls lined up to test their neatness. The girls' hair had to fit into a swimming cap or school hat as a test of their compliance with the uniform code of the school. While no white girls were seen undergoing the so-called test, the school defended their policy. "This is not a white or black issue," said the school governing body chairperson, Brian Sweetlove. "This is about the amount of hair that can fit into swimming cap" (accessed: <https://qz.com/770696/it-took-a-13-year-old-girl-with-an-afro-to-make-south-africans-notice-their-racist-school-dress-codes/>)

⁶ There isn't a rich body of literature on hair in South Africa, but many discursive similarities can be generalised and communicated across the literature from other regions.

⁷ These are *Afrikaans* terms which literally translate to mean hair that is not nice.

⁸ Ndlovu, N. (2008, May, 25) The 21-st century pencil test. Retrieved from <https://mg.co.za/article/2008-05-24-the-21st-century-pencil-test>.

⁹ For ethical reasons, descriptions of some of the interviewees and their hairstyles are not included.

¹⁰ Ms Sithole, personal communication, June 2016.

¹¹ Mbembe Achille, (accessed: 13 November, 2015).

¹² Ms Anasthasia, personal communication, August 2015.

¹³ Ms Adeli, personal communication, August 2015.

¹⁴ Observation by Nthembu, (one of the interviewees), September 2016.

¹⁵ Interview, Thembu, September 2016.

¹⁶ These schools were established in the 1980s and 1990s. They receive a hefty state subsidy including some staff salaries paid on the state scales, but charge parents fees in addition to subsidy received from the state. Pros:

they are multicultural and highly diverse, they pay teachers in well and many offer a high quality of education at a very reasonable fee. Cons: relatively large classes, the higher the fees paid by parents, the lower the subsidy received from the state. Some of these schools are struggling, while others are thriving, while most offer a good quality education, parents should examine the school's results (Accessed: <http://blog.mytopdog.co.za/whats-difference-no-fee-schools-ex-model-c-schools-state-schools-private-property-independent-schools-private-schools-parents-care/>) (October, 2017).

¹⁷ Interview, Faith, September 2016.

¹⁸ (Accessed: www.africa.com/history-africa-womens-hairstyles, August 2016).

¹⁹ Ms Alari, personal communication, September 2016.

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