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Rajan-Rankin, Sweta (2021) Material intimacies and Black hair practice: Touch, texture, resistance. *Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, 29 (3). pp. 152-164. ISSN 0803-8740.

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.1080/08038740.2021.1912172>

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Material Intimacies and Black Hair Practice: Touch, Texture, Resistance

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the socio-materiality of Black hair care practice as an affective surface through which we can understand Black women's experiences of intimacy and belonging. Texture of hair has often been overlooked in the examination of racialized presentation, even as shade or skin colour has been over-determined. By paying attention to the centrality of touch in negotiating grooming practices in Black hair care, a multi-layered appreciation of the material entanglements in Black intimacies can be explored. Hair is more than part of the body, it is both highly visible, as well as intensely personal and political in terms of the ways it is worn and seen by the observer. Drawing on a sensory ethnography of Afro hair salons in the UK and biographical narrative analysis, this article explores Black women's relationships with their hair in everyday life, alongside a parallel reading of the classic text "Cassie's hair" by Susan Bordo. This layering of narratives allows for a new form of listening to emerge, an attunement that forefronts the habitual practices of hair dressing and hair making as ways of "becoming black". In every twist, braid and weave, these biographies highlight the intimate entanglements by which the ambivalence of black belonging is negotiated. Touch in particular, both nurturing and hostile, represents an important socio-cultural ritual through which collective belonging is experienced: evoking memories of inter-generational and transnational intimacies with black communities in another time and another place. This paper offers a novel way of reimagining the role of affect in understanding collective intimacies and sustaining black identity in diasporic contexts.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 14 August 2020
Accepted 30 March 2021

KEYWORDS

Touch; socio-materiality; affective intimacies; racial politics; hair

Introduction

Hair is "a near infinitely mutable adornment" (Simmel, 1950, p. 339). It travels across the globe, harvested from temples in South India, to Chinese factories where it is treated, dyed and transformed into a woven fabric (wigs). It is an object that lives dies and lives again, from one head to another (Tarlo, 2016). It represents the lively immanence of matter (Coole & Frost, 2010), a form of "enchanted materialism" (Bennett, 2001), a quest to make affective attachments and ethical engagements within aesthetic experience. Hair is a familiar nothingness that lives on our bodies, but the stories they tell transcend material reality. The role of hair in Black human history goes beyond aesthetics and functionality. It involves explorations of loss, hauntings of past entanglements (Gordon, 2008), and erasures of local and tribal knowledge systems. Hair has played an important role in the subjugation of racialized people as part of the racial eugenics project (Tarlo, 2016). Texture (hair) and shade (skin colour) were used as embodied markers of racial difference, such that "the monsterizing

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practices within scientific racism enabled ‘race’ to become fact and political racism to serve as a tool of governmentality and regulation of bodies.” (Rajan-Rankin, 2021).

Black hairstyles in the African continent served as a visual and aesthetic device by which social location, including tribal identity, gender, marital status, and class status could be communicated (Byrd & Tharps, 2001; Morrow, 1973). Challenging black primitivist discourses, Dabiri (2019) argues that hair braiding itself serves as technological devices of sophisticated African knowledge systems, where the very art of braiding involves complex mathematical formula, binding rhythmic and polyrhythmic movements in a tapestry of textural belonging.

Black hair practice thus has socio-historical and temporal relevance, with encoded meanings of what it means to be “Black”, passed on across generations, in the intimate art of grooming and braiding. As Olufemi (2020, p. 10) notes, “Black women’s history travels in whispers and memories recalled around the dining table by mothers and grandmothers and if often dies when those voices leave us”. While most of the research on Black hair practice has been centred in the American context, this article breaks new ground by exploring the experiences of Black British women’s encounters with hair and identity (see also Tate, 2007). For instance, a BBC documentary on the Windrush generation who arrived in Tillbury suggests that Black women adopted hair straightening as a way of performing Englishness as they encountered the hostile environment of arriving in the UK (BBC, 2020). These representations have also been captured in the art interventions by British artist Sonia Boyce in her afro-wig project (Higgie, 2018).

I argue that the textuality, rhythmicity, touch and carceral meanings imbued through black hair practice, cannot be sufficiently imagined through visual representations or linguistic practice alone. We need to listen with another affective register- that of *touch*, memory and haunting (Blackman, 2012), to understand the interlinkages between “becoming black” and the material emergence of black hair as a collectively produced artefact. Using the concepts of “touch biographies” developed by Kinnunen and Kolehmainen (2019, p. 2) this article considers black hair practice as a form of material intimacy involving “touch (as) an everyday medium for meaningful intercorporeal acts, in both human-only interactions and those between human and non-humans”; and where “touch biographies provide affectively loaded accounts of diverse experiences ... (that) speak to the psychical significance of touch”.

Entanglements: material intimacies and Black hair

Intimacies as social, inter and intra-personal relationalities, have only recently been examined as an intercorporeal device with psychical significance (Blackman, 2012; Kinnunen & Kolehmainen, 2019). Practices of intimacy drawing on family theories (Morgan, 1996) discuss closeness and bonds that may extend beyond immediate family and kin, through shared values and histories. However, as Jamieson (2011) argues, theories of intimacy have frequently assumed “closeness” in the Western context predicated on notions of individualization which are in opposition to more collectivist framings of identity and belonging. Superimposing a valorized Eurocentric domain of intimacy on black subjects can produce the opposite effect- casting feminist struggle into a passive subjects rather than as agential (Rajan-Rankin & Greedharry, *in press*). Similarly, assumptions that intimacy and intimate relations are structured around linear heteronormative trajectories of temporally structured lives, poses barriers in allowing other forms of relationships such as singlehood, queer and non-monogamous intimacies to emerge (Lahad, 2017). Temporality and practices of intimacy are culturally coded, and not unproblematic concepts- they require a historicized understanding of struggles *for* and *from* intimacy—inequalities in gender, class, race and sexuality mediate potentiality to form intimacies.

These temporal inequalities are highlighted by Carby (2019, p. 3) in her powerful family biography *Imperial Intimacies*, where she considers the geo-political webs between empire and colony that shape Black British belonging. “The architecture of this tale has the tensile strength of a spider’s web spun across the Atlantic”, she suggests,

Pitting memory, history and poetics against each other in a narrative of racial encounters . . . intended to undermine the binary thinking that opposes colonial centre to colonial margins, home to abroad, and metropole to periphery.

Intimacies in the Black community are hence historically situated, communal artefacts of passage, travel, rupture, displacement, arrival, becoming. They occupy material and spatio-temporal weight that can span nations, generations, decades, lives lived out of sequence. In doing so, Black intimacies produce a form of haunting of past historical events in the traces of present lives. Haunting can be used to “describe those singular and yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction . . . it alters the experience of being in linear time . . . the way we normally separate and sequence the past, the present and the future” (Gordon, 2008, p. xvi). I refer to the term “*material intimacies*” to suggest a multivocal, multi-textural entanglement between human and non-human stories that are spatio-temporally (dis)located and produce hauntings, traces and presence in contemporary life. The concept of material intimacies is located in a long tradition of feminist materialist studies (Barad, 2003; Braidotti, 1996; Currier, 2000; Haraway, 1985; Puar, 2012; Ringrose, Warfield, & Zarabadi, 2019). Latimer and López Gómez (2019, p. 249) notes that, intimate entanglements between the human and more-than human, can be a way to unsettle “some of the normative shortcuts that . . . push us to think not beyond or together with, but . . . alongside multiple and troubling Others”. In this way, thinking of intimate entanglements between Black women and their hair stories, can produce multi-layered turns through which we can witness not what the racial politics of hair *is*, but what it *does* to black identit(ies).

Texture: hair and everyday racism

As Mercer (1994, p. 105) notes “hair, like skin is a sensitive surface on which competing definitions of ‘the beautiful’ are played out in struggle”. The relationalities embedded in hair practice encompass representational forms as well as material opportunities and barriers in being able to participate in society. Studies on black aestheticism and hair present an ambivalent picture on the affective inequalities experienced by black women especially, when trying to conform to beauty standards based on European beauty norms (Caldwell, 1991; Oyedemi, 2016; Tate, 2007; Thompson, 2009). In the workplace for example, Weitz (2004, p. 113) suggests that “from the time we enter the work world to the day we retire, our hair sends messages . . . about who we are, who we want to become, and what we are capable of”.

Black hair is often seen as deviant or needing to be tamed, managed or disciplined. This is especially relevant given anti-blackness narratives embedded within institutional structures that privilege white bodies as safe, familiar and knowable (Yancy, 2017). This could take the form of identity management work such as adopting westernized accents and pseudonyms to create inter-racial intimacies and trust (Rajan-Rankin, 2018), or in relation to hair practice, by experiencing pressures to present a corporeal image that fits in with the white aesthetic, such as through hair straightening. As Morrison (2010, p. 89) notes, “straightening is whitening. Whitening is bettering. Therefore, straightening is bettering”. The material costs of not adhering to straightening grooming practices are felt through differential employment practices or outright penalties, as have been seen through school exclusions of black children wearing natural hairstyles (Joseph-Salisbury & Connelly, 2018). Hair is therefore not just hair, it is political statement sending messages about the kinds of black bodies that are seeking to negotiating white spaces and how they chose to do so.

Touch here is not just the inimical tactile task of braiding and coiffing hair for public appearance. It can also be seen as the *gaze* through which black bodies are received within white spaces, and the pressures such racially charged atmospheres can present in having to conform to white aestheticism. In her classic essay “*Hair Piece*”, Caldwell (1991, p. 370) describes her hair story of wearing it

“natural” and how her pride in her hair slowly wanes as she encounters the hostile and invasive gaze of her colleagues.

After a year in braids, my hair is healthy again: long and thick and cottony soft. . . . I comb it out and leave it natural, in a full and big “Angela Davis” afro style. I feel full and big and regal. I walk the three blocks from my apartment to the subway. I see a white male colleague walking in the opposite direction . . . He stops, squints his eyes against the glare of the sun and stares, trying to figure out who has greeted him. He recognises me and starts to cross over to my side of the street. I keep walking, fearing the possibility of his curiosity and needing to be relieved of the strain of explanation.

The “presence” of Black hair worn “natural” invites curiosity, speculation and in some cases hostility. The unwanted interest Caldwell experiences from her colleague in this encounter, requires her to justify her hair and be scrutinized. She feels less big and regal, more self-conscious. The textural gaze by which black hair is received in white spaces can feel like a micro-aggression- a call for defensive action, to explain, defend, cover up or retreat. In some cases, this unwanted attention can lead to hostile or invasive touch. Dabiri (2019) discusses the all-too-common experience of black girls and women subjected to invasive gaze or touching of their hair. As a young mixed-race girl growing up in Ireland she notes, “my actions were a bid for assimilation, by way of disguise. My efforts stemmed from a cardinal fear that people would catch sight of my real hair” (Dabiri, 2019, p. 8).

Taylor (2000) calls for the need to recognize mechanics of anti-black aestheticism in which “racialized standards of beauty reproduce the workings of racism by weaving racist assumptions into the daily practices and everyday lives of the victims of racism . . . by encouraging them to accept and act on the supposition of their own ugliness”. A particular tension Black women face is an ongoing ambivalent relationship with their hair. Internalization of racialized beauty narratives means that many young black girls and women experience a “dislike of their own blackness” (Robinson, 2011, p. 359). They can be caught in a performative trap of seeking to be simultaneously feminine (through long hair) (Weitz, 2004) while negotiating the oppositional binaries of natural/unnatural, good/bad and authentic/inauthentic Blackness (Thompson, 2009).

In this article, I seek to move away from a binarized representational analysis of black hair and propose instead a socio-materialist analysis of how touch and hair practice help to curate Black identity. In order to explore some of these themes, I will draw on a parallel reading of biographical narratives drawn from multiple sources. Bordo’s (2008) seminal text “*Cassie’s Hair*” is examined alongside biographical narratives of Black women interviewed as part of a two-year sensory ethnography of an Afro hair salon located in Brixton, London. This kind of biographical layering, of storytelling in tandem, allows for a dialogic politics of participation to emerge that frees us from the petrification of imagination, and allows us to “speak alongside” rather than for another (O’Neil, Roberts, & Sparkes, 2015).

Cassie’s hair

In her essay “Cassie’s hair”, Bordo (2008) presents a remarkable biographical narrative of her reflexive journey of being a white mother to a young black adopted child. This classic text has been selected for its powerful observations of biographical narrative but also the foregrounding of the material entanglements of hair and intimacy in a defamiliarized way. Bordo is a Jewish white woman, and her introduction to the world of black hair in an attempt to better understand how to mother her black adopted daughter, provides key insights in to the insider/outsider experience of black hair culture. Her mothering journey takes her in to uncharted territories of how to help Cassie understand her black identity- one which Bordo does not have direct experience of. A defining moment for Bordo is when one day Cassie returns from primary school with her hair in neat cornrows.

Since infancy, Cassie whose birth mother is white and birth father black, had been taken for many different ethnicitiesBut now, her hair crisscrossed with cornrows, it was absolutely clear that Cassie was a black child. And I had been given a message, with or without intention on the part of the teacher, that as a mother, I had two choices: get inside the world, truly inside, or remain a clueless white mom (p. 401).

In order to get “truly inside” the world of her daughter, Bordo embarks on a journey of learning about Black hair and hairstyling. She engages the help of a Black mother Annice, who would help her do Cassie’s hair, over and over again, until she was seen to be fit to go out in public. Tactility and touch were crucial to this skilled task of taking young malleable kinky hair and treating it with lotions and harnessing it into the exacting cornrows. “My fingers seemed less agile, and it felt, at times, as though I lacked an inherited aptitude” (p. 402). Bordo reflects on her anxieties in the early days, of not achieving the perfect coiffure for Cassie’s hair, and that her failings were in some way, a failure of not being able to enjoy the privileges of black motherhood. Through hours and weeks of practice though, Bordo describes the intense pleasure of tactility and touch in braiding Cassie’s hair.

. . . I became addicted to the pleasure of unbroken physical closeness the ritual afforded As she grew into a more and more independent and active child, I knew that I could count on at least two hours every week when I’d have her on my lap, her little body leaning against mine, sometimes (as I got better at combing) even falling asleep as she had when she was a baby.

The significance of touch through hair practice allows bodies to become “more-than-one” in concrete ways (Kinnunen & Kolehmainen, 2019, p. 29). In Bordo’s case, through learning black hair practice, she is creating new touch biographies with Cassie, and tapping into age old traditions of black women grooming each other’s hair- the sense memory of inter-generational caregiving through hair practice.

She reflects on her own identity and how as a Jewish woman with “hard to manage” hair, she had succumbed to the pressure to straighten her hair, and the racialized politics of this aesthetic. As she is faced with black hairdressers suggesting chemical treatments for her daughter, Bordo considers the very real challenges Cassie will face in deciding how to negotiate the dominant white aesthetic. “Cassie, too knows- without historical knowledge, and perhaps in confused and fragmentary form- that straight hair is not “just fashion” (p. 410). She reflects on the need to understand the tangled roots of black history and the politics of refusal, refusal to simplify identity politics with fashion, but as a way of seeing the “body as a space needing to be reclaimed from culture” (Bordo, 2008, p. 413).

As Bordo continues her journey from being a tentative white mom to a confident mother of a black child, she is minded of the affective intimacies and cross-race solidarities which link her and Cassie together. Reflecting on the desire to strive for intimacy with Cassie, she rejects the notion that they share the “solidarity of strangers”. After all who does Cassie (and her hair) belong to? Claimed by the nursery teacher and asserted by the Black community, Bordo’s task is to walk the fine line between alienation and acceptance. In this way, *Cassie’s Hair* captures many of the interlinked themes of touch, intimacy and alienation that emerge within transracial adoption. The ambivalent location of Cassie, between her white adopted family and her Black heritage, have to be negotiated by Bordo, in direct, visceral, textural ways. Through caring for and braiding Cassie’s hair, Bordo is able to create inter-racial intimacies and forge new memories that take material form. Bordo’s point of arrival in her hair stories with Cassie, is one of love and temporal acceptance of the spaces that separate but also bring her and Cassie together.

I’m not black and never will be. But what I *am* is not so easily “theorized”- and not only because of the hybridity of identity, which for me includes my Jewishness, a working-class background, and numerous other specifics of my “whiteness”- but also because I am now a member of a multiracial family, . . . (that) has altered every molecule of my being . . . (pp. 417–418).

We need to think about hair stories as material assemblages structured by time where we see “memory as temporality, material remembering and forgetting as a way of conceptualizing time through materiality” Hamilakis (2017, p. 173). The material intimacies of hair care have allowed Bordo and Cassie to be part of an interwoven, transracial, inter-generational

community of belonging, one to which they are both “outsider” in some ways, but by building intimacy and trust in the “now”, they are able to soothe the ruptures of the past and its hauntings into their present form of mother-daughter bond. While Bordo’s analysis of Cassie’s hair speaks from the position of a white mother engaging with the racialized identity of her Black child, in this article I extend some of these analytical themes by exploring the biographical narratives of Black British women and their experiences of hair and identity through an ethnographic study.

Methodology and analytical frame

The empirical data presented in this article emerge from a two-year sensory ethnography of two hair salons, a European salon in Kent, and an Afro-Caribbean hair salon in Brixton, London. I visited each salon once a week over the two-year period and adopted the multi-sensory experiential data methods (of recording touch, sight, smell, sound) proposed by Pink (2009) in addition to traditional ethnographic methods involving participant observation. Sensory ethnography has the benefit of moving beyond discourse and language and exploring the visual, aural and contextual affective arrangements within which everyday life takes place (Nakamura, 2013). In my ethnographic work, I collected sensory data through auto-ethnography (by getting my own hair braided and straightened and observing the sensual experience of this process), through a visual study of hair salon shop fronts (Hall, 2012), audio recordings of salon sounds, textual collection of hair combings from the shop floor, and through “olfactory” walks around the Brixton market, tracking the different smells, movements and rhythms of the urban city scape where the salons were located (Rhys-Taylor, 2013). I conducted informal and formal interviews with 30 participants including female customers (9 in Kentish salon, 11 in Afro hair salon), hairdressers (8) and wig sellers (2). While there is a rich range of sensorial data collected from the ethnographic project, (Hamilakis, 2017), for the purpose of this article, I will be focussing on the biographical interviews with 11 Black British women (7 from the Afro hair-salon and 4 whom I accessed through snowballing techniques).

Over a period of two years, I engaged in participant observation in Brixton, a multi-cultural hub in London. I visited wig shops and spoke to hair braiders and wig sellers. I sat for hours informally chatting to hairdressers and Black women getting their hair braided, conducted formal and in some cases, repeat interviews, and underwent Afro hair treatments myself. Memoing, reflective embodied accounts and field notes supplemented my interviewing process, allowing for a flavour of “nowness” to enter my annotations of the interview process.

My own subject positionality as an Asian female researcher posed both challenges and openings in the field work process. I was acutely aware that as a light skinned woman with mixed-textured hair (Indian hair is highly sought after in the wig industry), my presence may have seemed voyeuristic and my questions intrusive. I used my own body as a research instrument through the ethnographic process (by undergoing hair treatments) and by being reflexive of how my body was being received in the Afro hair salon space (for instance, hairdressers pressurizing me to go for straightening rather than braiding treatments). With the women I interview, we formed rapport over shared life experiences including their (and my) observations about colourism and valuation of shade and texture in our respective communities. Material intimacies of interviewing women while they had their hair done also offered a shared attachment to form between researcher and participant. Touch biographies unfolded not only as invited reflective accounts of people’s recollection of touch (Kinnunen & Kolehmainen, 2019), but as visual and sensory recordings of watching and speaking to women talk about their journey with their hair as they undergo tactile Afro hair treatments. Layered appreciation of texture, memory and recounting hair stories produce the possibility of multi-vocality to emerge, through an invitation of heterogenous voices, joined in discussion over a common theme: the subject of hair and identity. All names and identifying characteristics of participants have been masked to protect confidentiality.

Inter-generational intimacies: hair, touch and memory

I met Teresa several times during the course of my two-year sensory ethnography of Afro and European hair salons. I had initially contacted her through a snowballing sampling method, and as an African woman meeting an Asian researcher interested in black identity, our discussions quickly turned to hair practice. Teresa shares her journey of being a diasporic African, first leaving Ghana to study in Australia, and then moving to the UK. She speaks animatedly about feeling lonely and isolated at first, living in predominantly white neighbourhoods where there were no black hairdressers. Black hair salons frequently serve as a social hub, as speech communities for affective belonging, whereas Majors (2003) states “black folk can be black folk”. In her initial years living abroad, Teresa talks about meeting other Africans, and striking reciprocal arrangements to braid each other’s hair, in exchange for spices and food from home. For Teresa, braiding and grooming create strong nostalgic longings for home.

Growing up in Ghana there is a lot of emphasis in our tradition on hair, and actually . . . if you’re a woman and don’t have long hair it’s almost like you are failing in how you view yourself. So, from childhood I’ve always been conscious, or it’s instilled in you that hair is a big part of your identity. I can remember my mother braiding our hair from probably the age of three, four, with the view that we should grow up with long hair . . . the more you braid it, the longer your hair becomes. The second part is of the oils that I used, and I remember just the simple Vaseline was what we used. My mum would use simple Vaseline . . . it was very cheap as well. You would have a ritual of combing through your hair every morning before you go to school, because you had to undo the braiding which is done overnight. You had to make time for it, and I don’t know where my mum found the time, you had to factor that in . . . But when the evening came it was also like a down time, my sisters and I, you know, if my mum was concentrating on my hair, I would either be doing my sisters, or my sister is playing with my hair, so it becomes actually a gender-based activity, my brothers wouldn’t come near. Then there is also the ‘toolkit’ you know and the kinds of combs you use.

Oh, I still remember the combs I hated! There was one my mum favoured and it used to . . . leave a painful feeling, because she would be brushing, and I’d say, “Mum, don’t use this brush, use the other one,” she said, “No, no, no, this one doesn’t take out the knots in the way I want”. So, the act of sort of you sitting passively, there is a reaction as well, because I’m going, “Oh gosh, my scalp,” and she would say, “Teresa, don’t be weak, come on, you know, this makes it look better, your hair is hard.” My mum used to say my hair was different from my sisters, ‘cause it was very kinky, so it needed a lot more time, and a lot more oil with it. And which meant of course sitting longer, whilst she’s doing that. So it is a very . . . you know, there is the hand, there is the feeling of your fingers in the scalp, the touch of your mother’s hand.

Teresa’s recollection of childhood rituals of hair care reflect affective intensities; pain when the hard comb ran through her kinky hair; the smell and feel of Vaseline (used on both hair and body); the touch and synchronicity of collective gathering in the evenings as generation of women and girls sit together doing their hair in tandem. These are not individual memories, they are interlocked sensations of pain and pleasure, mother-child bonding, entangled histories that set apart her relationship with her hair as not only from her body, but one that spans generations of women’s hands and bodies linked together to bring together communities of hair care practice. Inter-generational intimacies involve intensely tactile memories, that feeling as bell hooks puts it, of “your grandmothers knees cradling your cheeks”, as you kneel pliantly for the pleasurable and often painful act of hair grooming (Hooks, 1999).

Chastity, another 51-year-old interlocutor from the Caribbean, talks about how the deprivations of not having black hair salons, created new forms of diasporic arrangements between her and her family.

Coming originally from the Caribbean islands, we had a family of hairdressers (laughs)- no really! It was very unusual to actually go to a salon for basic braiding or upkeep work, we would do this ourselves. When I moved to the UK and married an African man and we had our children only then did I realise how much we had lost and taken for granted, of the riches of knowledge we had back home. My aunts and granny moved with us, in many ways to help us keep up the grooming of our daughter’s hair. Hair is so pivotal and the lost art of hair care needed our own family hands to help us with these tasks, to help us bring these aspects of our culture.

For both Teresa and Chastity, hair practice is metonymic with “home”, family and cultural belonging. In many ways it is a bid to create black networks through which these women are able to negotiate white spaces, or as Hamilakis (2017) calls it, a “metonymic materiality” by which diasporic intimacies are forged and sustained.

Hostile touch

Many of my interlocutors reflected on the challenges of growing up with black hair and attending English schools.

I have very unpleasant memories of school . . . the girls like they would say my skin was like poo, and would keep touching my hair without asking, “it’s so wiry! It’s so nappy”- I started straightening my hair in my teens just to avoid the questions. (Shanice, 25, Black British)

These micro-aggressions faced by Shanice as early as in primary school, speak to the risks encountered by black children when they present natural hair in schools (Joseph-Salisbury & Connelly, 2018). To be told your skin, skin colour resembles excrement, or that one’s hair is an exotic device for scrutiny or subject of fun, can be deeply damaging to young black children who can feel like they must hide their natural hair in order to keep safe. Not all hostile encounters are as direct though. Chastity speaks of her frustration and despair at the way schools plan activities without taking black hair care into consideration. She reflects on the days her daughters were in primary school.

It’s like schools don’t even think about the impact of their activities on black hair! Play in the sandpit they say, or let’s engage in water play . . . do they have a clue what that does to oiled and treated black hair- nightmare getting it out and hours and hours of combing and tears.

Speaking from a position of a Black mother who has been socialized into hair care practice by her mothers and grandmothers, Chastity is referring to the gaps in black experience when families live in primarily white neighbourhoods. School and play activities are structured in ways that are suitable to *all children* without thinking about the bodies of some children and how the texture of their hair may present challenges in their participation in play and life.

Another key theme in being able to participate in social life, is the pragmatic decisions which often underpin wig-wearing and protective styling. Giselle (19, Black British) for instance notes,

One thing white girls don’t understand is black girls who wear wigs are not always trying to be white. like . . . fair enough I get why they may think that on the surface. But that’s not the full story. Do you know how long it takes to comb my hair out? If I came to uni with natural hair every day I might as well so goodbye to my studies- I need to clear my weekend out just to deal with my hair- 8-10 hours, it can take. So sometimes it’s just more practical to put my weave on, its professional and I’m ready to go to work.

Black hair can be an “obsession” for many young black girls and women, especially given the huge diversity of options available to them in terms of protective hair styling. However, the implicit suggestion in Giselle’s account is that she has experienced her white peers as considering her wig wearing as a rejection of her black identity, rather than an expression of how she finds herself most comfortable in engaging in her public life. The conflation of her hair styling with a political stance of blackness stems from both lack of understanding around black hair care practice, as well as the assumption that black girls and women must operate strictly within the binary of natural/unnatural black (Thompson, 2009). It leaves very little agency for black girls and women to define for themselves what their hair style and presentation means to them.

Love, sex, intimacy and hair

Sexual intimacies and black identity have often been portrayed in very binary ways, and hair and body presentation play an important role in these interactions. Black women have frequently been

portrayed in popular culture as simultaneously hyper sexualized and racially inferior- characteristics of racialized sexism and the way it structures black women's experiences in intimate and public lives (Bell & Nkomo, 2003). As Tate (2007, p. 301) notes, deeply embedded racist logics within Eurocentric beauty ideals and body presentation mean that idealized white beauty is "based on notions of purity, delicacy, modesty, asexuality and physical frailty . . . while black women were viewed as physically strong, immodest, exuding an animal sensuality" (Tate, 2007, p. 301). Tatiana (27 Black British) describes the difficulties of hyper-sexual encounters, in an account of going clubbing with her girlfriends.

We were really looking forward to a night out and had weaves made special, like. I had a really beautiful hombra weave and we looked fierce! I was feeling really good and we were all together ready to have a good time, but when we entered the club a group of white boys just looked at us, and one of them yelled "twerk for me, baby", and I froze, I just froze . . .

The blatant sexism evident in Tatiana's account suggests a temporal freezing of time, when these group of young black girls groomed and "feeling fierce" and beautiful in their own right, are treated with stereotypical images of hyper-sexuality. When else would it be acceptable for a group of strangers to ask a group of women to perform the sexualized dance that is embedded within urban hip-hop culture, an iconic "black dance"? The group of white men reduce in an instant, these young women, to writhing bodies on display, vacant flesh for their pleasure and arousal. Tatiana's account of "freezing" also suggests the emotive response of fight or flight, encountering hostile intimacies, restricting her and her friends, ability to express their sensuality and sexuality freely and without harm.

In a racial politics of hair workshop event, I organized to disseminate the findings of my research, one of the panellists remarked on how representational frames around intimacy and sexuality are bound by white normative claims about relationships.

I mean, how often do we actually see romantic leads that are black women? Not in silo art films, but in mainstream blockbuster movies? Practically never! And the visualisation of intimacy in the trailer is all about the man running his hands through his girlfriend's straight blond hair. It just doesn't speak to the black experience at all . . . I mean, who in their right mind would associate with that image? Running your hands through a black woman's hair? It would get stuck! These images of freedom and intimacy are for white folk, they are not talking about us.

Olu is speaking to the textural bias in romantic iconography that implicitly privileges white heteronormative ideas of intimacy, and by extension excludes the freedom of touch and expression among black communities. For these very reasons, Shanice who we heard from before, talks about her decision to date within the black community.

You have to think about it this way . . . if you date a black boy, he is socialised into it. He has seen his mother and his aunty come home and take off her wig. He has seen the women in his life wearing a skull cap, or combing out their nappy hair. He isn't going to be shocked. Hair is a big part of women's lives. It's important if you get intimate with someone that they can see all of you. I'm really happy to be dating a black boy, he is very understanding. I even make him wear my wig while I am styling it as I can't do it so easily on myself (laughs) . . .

Material intimacies are so entrenched in Shanice's account that the textural possibilities of getting close with someone are strongly determined by black hair choices. Shanice's family are also in the hair dressing business, and her mother and aunts are all hairdressers. The central importance of Black hair practice in both intimate and family life is evident in her narratives about relationship choices. While in public life, black hair can often be policed or disciplined, in private life, being with someone with the same cultural frames of reference, allows for a shorthand way of "knowing the intimate other", that does not need or demand explanation or justification.

Going natural: futures of Black hair

The natural hair movement holds a very divisive place in black hair culture: at once being revered for its pride in black beauty ideals, while also casting as inferior other hair choices (Thompson, 2009). Black girls and women's hair journeys often circle back to the desire to embrace natural hair. In Cassie's hair, Bordo (2008, pp. 404–405) grapples with the choices Cassie may face growing up, and the issue of chemical straightening and her ambivalence about these styling techniques.

It pains me when Cassie tells me she hates her curls (as she calls them). I am constantly aware . . . of the contemporary reality of my daughter's life, within which some of her most powerful role models, Latifah, the Williams sisters, . . . all have straight hair. Think of any highly public black female role models . . . Whoopi or Toni Morrison . . . and she is probably too old for my . . . aspiring-to-be-cool, six year old daughter to identify with. What are the implications for the future? . . . What extraordinary ethnic traditions are being lost?

Role modelling is significant in black women's choices of "going natural". All my interlocutors who were diasporic of British born Black African or Caribbean or mixed heritage, made reference to "Angela Davis" in their depiction of her *as* a shorthand *for* natural hair. Gracey, a 19-year-old Black British college student talks about her natural hair experience.

When I go natural like, it's a very spiritual experience. I think about like Angela Davis, and the Black Panther movement, and why it's important to be proud of black culture. I wear like really chilled clothes, very loose and comfortable, no make-up, and I get into the mindset of being natural, one with my roots.

Gracey came for her second interview with me with her natural hair and invited me to touch her soft billowing curls. She had presented herself in the first interview wearing a weave and was keen for me to understand the whole experience of what it meant for her to "go natural". She invited me to touch her hair, to experience its texture. She sees this process as becoming one with herself and conjures images of African American idols and civil rights activists (even though she herself is Black African born in the UK) to situate her own black pride experience. What is striking about this narrative is that for Gracey, natural hair practice isn't about her hair, but a completely embodied experience that connects her to her African heritage and ancient forms of black belonging as well as a political stance that she finds some resonance with.

Natural hair choices are also seen by hairdressers and black women themselves as an aspirational choice frequently linked to life-course or "coming of age" moments in black women's belonging and self-awareness. These narratives are tinged with sexist narratives around black beauty practices and the male gaze. Jimmy, an edgy young urban black "hair artist" in Brixton notes,

Well with black hairstyling there is so much variety now. It's mainly young girls and women who want wigs or weaves or go for more dynamic braiding and hairstyling. Older women yeah, well they don't have a man to keep happy, you know what I mean? They let themselves go, yeah why not, go natural . . .

The contrast between these accounts is very striking. While Gracey sees her "natural hair days" as a spiritual return to black pride, Jimmy's accounts suggest that protective hair styling is common among younger women who want to please and appear sexually attractive to their partners. These heteronormative ideals both around sexuality and ageing bodies, coalesce with notions of natural hair being a way of "letting themselves go", shedding the need to be beautiful to a man's gaze, being natural for one's self.

Conclusions

In this paper, I introduce the concept of "material intimacies" as a way to explore a multivocal, multi-textural entanglement between human and non-human stories that are spatio-temporally (dis)located and produce hauntings, traces and presence in contemporary life. Black women's hair stories are ultimately stories about belonging, intimacy, touch, presence and erasure. In "Cassie's hair" Bordo (2008) talks about "living inside" black hair culture as an intense embodied

connection in mothering a black child. Hair takes on material traces and provides a spatio-temporal staircase, as it were, by which Bordo as an “outsider” to black culture can cultivate a tactile relativity within which to participate in the experience of black becoming. In contrast, the Black women from my ethnographic project are situated from “inside” the black experience and describe their hair stories as a way of being in the world. Hair provides a material surface by which affective inequalities are experienced in the way black bodies can express themselves without censure. The diasporic Black women I interviewed were able to speak vividly of touch and hair practice in relation to their memories of their mothers and grandmothers and ritualistic practices of grooming in their home countries. Black British women I interviewed were still negotiating their black identities in relation to institutional school and workplace settings, and for them, protective hair styling was also a way of protecting them from hostile environments and racist attack.

Hair matters then, serves different representational, material and iconographic tools by which black women encounter the key aspects of their intimate lives. Hair is entangled as touch, be it intimate, nurturing, or laced with hostility in the dislocation of black bodies within white spaces. I have elaborated on the ways in which touch and texture intersect and become entangled, and how materiality, context, space, affect and memory produce affective registers which mediate their meaning in time. Hair is not just a representational or political tool, it has weight, solidity and dimension to black experience. The affective practices of hair care bring together rhythms that are “bodily and cosmic”. They operate as socio-material bonds, forging communities of black belonging. These material and psychic connection are captured in the poet Nicky Finney’s words:

We have adorned our heads from the beginning of time. It is ancient and black to crimp, coif, and curl in supreme celebration that part of us that lives closest to the sun and other celestial bodies. I believe we have focussed on and been obsessed with hair in order to keep our hands and sights on each other. I believe we stay in a groomed state with each other in order to remind ourselves of the language of touch as often as possible, in order to love on each other out loud (Bordo, 2008, p. 411).

Touch represents an important socio-cultural ritual through which collective belonging is experienced. It is through touch and touch biographies that collective belonging is established, by reinstating cultural practices that are not immediately present, evoking memories of intergenerational and transnational intimacies with black communities in another time and another place. Hair can be seen as a textured tactile mnemonic and memory creating device, that allows touch to speak across time and space, and evoke and involve the materializing of memory and the memorializing of matter within the same moment. The assemblages of hair, texture, touch and belonging allows us to complicate black women’s presence in everyday life, and provides insights into black belonging in white spaces.

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my deepest thanks to Marjo Kolehmainen, Kinnerat Lahad, Annukka Lahti and Sasha Rosneil for their guidance and superb editorial support. To my participants, thank you sharing your hair stories. I am indebted to Greg Seigworth, Jessica Ringrose, Carolyn Pedwell, Dawn Lyon and Dimitrios Theodossopoulos for inspiring my interest in materialising affect and racialised body assemblages.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the University of Kent [Faculty of Social Sciences Award].

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