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# Indian Hair, the After-Temple- Life

Class, Gender and Race Representations of the  
African American Woman in the Human Hair  
Industry

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The penultimate paragraph of an online marketing campaign for Virgin Remy Indian hair reads as follows:

Polished Natural Relaxed Straight Virgin *Remy Indian Hair* provides the finished Silky *straight look* of newly informal<sup>1</sup> African American hair without rival or peerless in shine, texture, luster, body and movement that will demand the attention of any multitude! Gathered directly from the *temples of India*, this rare natural hair texture is in *high demand globally* for its soft texture showing an affinity to that of silky straight relaxed *African American hair* (eIndianHair.com, para.9; my emphasis).

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<sup>1</sup> Note that 'informal hair' is used in this paragraph as a synonym of 'relaxed hair', perhaps erroneously so, given the usual meanings of "informal" outside the hair context. Relaxed hair refers to chemically treated hair that transforms naturally curly hair into straight hair. The other common term for relaxed hair is permed hair.

In many respects, the above content is telling of the “production”<sup>2</sup> process, the targeted clientele, the intended use, as well as the key racial and spatial dimensions involved in the marketing of “Virgin Remy Indian Hair”<sup>3</sup> as a commercial product. Furthermore, when examining the name of the product, the distinctive trait of the hair (the fact that it is *human* hair) appears silenced at the benefit of the racial and geographic attributes of the hair (the fact that it is *Indian*). As such, the attribute “Indian” can be seen to be an implied brand, thus carrying a weight equal to that of the terms “Virgin” and “Remy”<sup>4</sup>.

This paper follows Virgin Indian Remy hair from its production in India to its global distribution, with a focus on its marketing, distribution and use in the United States (US). The focus on the US is justified by the storyline in the above advertisement, which identifies Virgin Indian hair as having an ‘affinity to that of silky straight relaxed *African American hair*’ (*eIndianHair.com*, para.9; my emphasis). In this context where the US as an importing country is privileged among other regions, and given that the advertisement implicitly stresses stereotypical attributes of female hair textures, as well as a tacit focus on Black women<sup>5</sup>, the paper seeks to situate and discuss the class, gender and race representations of African American women, within the marketing, distribution and use of Remy Indian hair. Specifically, the paper questions what such representations of African

<sup>2</sup> Since the paper deals with human hair rather than manufactured synthetic hair, production simply refers to where the hair originates, how it is collected, sewn (so as to be used for extensions or weaves), and packaged for distribution.

<sup>3</sup> “Virgin Remy Indian hair”, “Virgin Remy hair”, “Virgin Indian hair”, “Indian hair”, “Remy hair”, will be used interchangeably in this paper. These terms will also be used to connote the human hair in general.

<sup>4</sup> Virgin hair simply refers to unprocessed (chemically) hair, but this term will be problematized later on in the paper, as it pertains to the notion of “Virgin Indian” hair that is not mixed hair from other races. Remy hair refers to hair cut or shaved for sale, which still has ‘the cuticles on, and in the same direction to keep the hair soft, long lasting, and tangle free’ (*Hair & Cuticle Inc.*, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> In addition to referring to African American hair in their advertisement, the pictures on the website of *eIndianHair.com* solely depict women, and mostly Black women.

American women mean *vis-à-vis* Indian women who “produce” Virgin Remy hair; and what they mean *vis-à-vis* men. Furthermore, the paper is particularly interested with *self-representations* of African American women *vis-à-vis* the use of Indian hair, and seeks to understand what these self-representations mean *vis-à-vis* the identity of Black women in the US. Indeed, this investigation seeks to uncover useful tools for locating and unpacking discourses and practices for and against the use of human hair within African American women’s self-representations. Specifically, the study seeks to emphasize the race, gender, and class dimensions of the global impact of marketing human hair, and to thus uncover the multiple power relationships involved in the human hair industry. Ultimately, a close analysis of these self-representations can serve to justify the need for exploring two important issue areas. First, it will provide the basis for a clearer understanding of fundamental constructions of “blackness” within the Black American community, which can be located within global production chains such as the human hair industry. Second, it will provide a needed appreciation of the mechanisms through which representations of Black American women in Hollywood and in the American music industry impact on the beauty ideals and the self-representations of Black women in Africa, the Caribbean, Europe and Latin America. In other words, as a study which aims to expound the linkages between body politics (in this case hair politics) and identity politics in African American communities, this paper also positions itself as trigger for future analyses on the political economy of the human hair industry globally. To be sure, although this is not the focus here, the paper hopes to provoke debates on the linkages between the human hair industry and enduring structural conditions of poverty and subordination within and across Black American communities and Black communities worldwide.

Anchored within Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s (2003) anti-colonial and anti-capitalist feminist project, this paper identifies key self-representations within the human hair debate in the African

American community as centered on a dichotomization of “natural” “Afro” hair *versus* “non-natural”, “White-like” “straight” hair. In this context, the empirical and theoretical examination of the use of human hair extensions as a means to “straight” hair is pertinent for locating narratives and counter-narratives of the connections between hair politics and identity politics within the African American community. Mohanty’s anti-colonial and anti-capitalist feminist discourse is useful for decolonizing feminist discourses from representations of the “other” as simplistic homogeneous entities that are either authentic or not, legitimate or not, oppressed or not. Furthermore, recognizing the importance of wider capitalist structures in shaping power relations between different groups around class, gender, and racial dimensions is crucial to this analysis.

The paper suggests that dominant discourses of resistance by some black feminists against the use of human hair by African American women problematically apprehend African American women as a homogeneous and singular category that can be captured in space and time. Rather, this essay advances that there is no hairstyle that is authentically “black”, “natural”, and as such, exclusively legitimate for African American women. The discussion aims to show the importance of engaging with multiple meanings of “blackness”<sup>6</sup>, as a means to productively examine hair and identity politics locally within the American context, but also globally. The focus on the global speaks to the importance of capitalist power structures that construct and perpetuate a specific politics of hair and identity. The rest of the analysis is presented in a threefold discussion. In the first section, the paper opens up with a critical examination of the assumptions that guide the production, marketing, and “consumption”<sup>7</sup> of Virgin Remy Indian hair. The second section discusses pow-

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<sup>6</sup> This proposition reacts specifically to bell hooks’ (1992) discussion of “blackness”, whereby blackness is implicitly understood as a “singular universal” (Mohanty, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> As in the disclaimer regarding the “production” process, consumption here simply refers to the use of human hair by individuals, for hairstyling purposes.

er relations at the intersections of class, gender, and race, with regards to the production and consumption of Virgin Remy Indian hair locally (within India and within the US), and globally (in particular between India and the US). Building from the previous sections, the third section tackles the core theoretical concern of this paper, and addresses the significance of African American women's self-representations within various discourses on, and practices of human hair extensions.

### **Selling Indian, Constructing *the African American Woman***

#### *The Indian Preference*

Via internet, phone, regular mail, or international delivery services, individuals or groups worldwide can purchase any type of Virgin Indian Remy hair (straight, wavy, curly, etc.), using cash or a major credit card<sup>8</sup>. Before being accessible to people everywhere, from Kingston Jamaica to Kingston Ontario, Indian Remy hair as the name conveys, originates in India. While there are other types of Remy hair on the market such as Chinese, Brazilian, Malaysian and Russian hair (Dream Girls, 2007: para.2), Indian hair remains the preferred type of human hair in the US market, and so despite it being the most expensive kind (Good hair, 2009). It is important to question why there is a privileging of Indian hair in the African American human hair market; what explains the increasing demand of Indian hair in the US in particular; and how the supply mechanisms of Indian hair has sustained this demand.

An investigation by journalist Swapna Majumdar (2006: para.12-13) shows that while the Chinese demand for Indian hair has steadily risen over the years, (whereby China has maintained the

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<sup>8</sup> Indeed, all the online sites examined in this paper and which advertise and sell Virgin Remy Indian hair offer the aforementioned means of payment.

lead as India's number one hair exporter)<sup>9</sup>, US imports of Indian hair have also grown significantly, with \$82 million worth of hair exported to the US in the 2004-2005 fiscal year. One is right to ask why, given that the quality of human hair is primarily determined by whether it is remy (cuticles on, and in the same direction) and virgin (unprocessed), preference is given to Remy Indian (rather than Remy from other races) in the African American community. Some distributing companies advance that the affinity between Indian hair texture and that of *relaxed* African American hair is what makes Indian hair the preferred choice of African American women (*eIndianHair.com*: para.9). Others claim that 'Indian Remy hair is the most popular type for most African Americans because it naturally matches *their own hair texture* so well' (Remy Hair Talk, 2009: para.1; my emphasis). However, the difference between "natural" African American hair texture and "relaxed" African American hair texture is significant. Indeed, going from one to the other requires intense chemical treatment. Thus, this disparity in explanations from otherwise analogous marketing campaigns justifies that doubt be cast upon the so-called affinity between Indian hair and African American hair as a selling factor. Furthermore, basing African American women's preference for Indian hair among others is an undoubtedly clever marketing move, as it justifies a continued supply for Indian hair based on the supposed demand for it by the African American community. In this sense, the marketing story is conveniently made to correspond to basic neoliberal accounts of the market, according to which *demand determines supply*.

In order to further problematize the above aforementioned marketing accounts for the privileging of Indian hair in the US hair market, this analysis suggests that the marketing of Indian hair heavily determines its demand rather than a simple demand and supply mechanism . That is, Indian hair has been constructed as more desir-

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<sup>9</sup> Note that China exports Indian hair in order to resell it eventually worldwide (Majumdar, 2006: para.13).

able than other types of hair, without such a characteristic having actually been tested. Indeed, apart from the above explanations, there has been no concrete evidence from the examined distribution companies. Thus, although the term "virgin" in the human hair industry has come to signify unprocessed hair, one may view the "virginity" of Indian hair (recall the name of the product as "Virgin Remy Indian hair") to be implicitly constructed and marketed on racial lines. As seen above, Remy Indian hair is privileged in the US market relative to other types such as Brazilian, Chinese, and Russian hair for instance. It may be argued that rather than resulting from its necessary affinity with African American hair<sup>10</sup>, Indian hair is the preference of African American women because it has been made so through marketing that emphasized a racial hierarchization of hair, with Indian hair placed at the top of the hierarchy. In other words, Indian hair has been constructed as "rare" (eIndianHair.com, para.9), exotic, and better than European or Chinese hair. The Merriam-Webster (2011) online dictionary defines "rare" as either 'marked by unusual quality, merit or appeal' or 'seldom occurring or found'. Given that the *unusual appeal* of Indian hair sharing an affinity with African American hair has thus far been contested in this paper, one is left with the second meaning of rare as 'seldom occurring or found'. In relative terms however, one need not conduct intensive research to be aware that the Indian population is much higher than that of Russia or Brazil for instance, rendering the seldom factor untenable. As such, it is difficult to sustain a justification for the privileged status of Indian hair, especially as it remains the most expensive kind as discussed above. It is no surprise therefore that some of the distribution and export sites resort to the fact that Indian Remy hair, unlike Chinese, European or Brazilian hair, is collected in Hindu temples as a selling point – or should we say an "exotic" factor

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<sup>10</sup> The "affinity" explanation is also especially dubious given that African Americans (both men and women) have many different types of hair textures, yet the marketing campaign assumes "African American hair" to be a coherent and singular kind of hair.

upon which to build an image of rarity (see eIndianHair.com; Human Hairs Impex, 2007). In addition to the homogenization of African American hair, the various marketing campaigns construct a homogenized view of all Indian Remy hair as a coherent category of hair that is always better than all non-Indian hair. One would have a hard time believing however that each Indian woman's hair is always more desirable than the hair of other races, including the African American community. The discourses that underpin the marketing of Indian hair are therefore homogenizing on three levels: 1- viewing African American hair as homogeneous; 2- viewing Indian Remy hair as a homogeneous category, and 3- viewing all non-Indian hair (such as African American, European or Chinese) as less desirable groups of hair relative to Indian hair. Finally, and very illustrative of the above discussion on the virginity of Indian hair as readable on racial lines, is China's exports of Indian hair, with the purpose of mixing the latter with Chinese hair, so as to ultimately resell it at a lower cost (Majumdar, 2006: para.11). In this sense, the fact that clients assume Indian hair to be of superior quality relative to other types of hair automatically justifies the lower price that one is expected to pay if Indian hair is mixed with any other kind of hair; this testifies to the successful hierarchization of hair within the human hair industry.

### *Marketing to African American Women: "Made" in India or "Made" for the US?*

That Virgin Indian Remy hair has successfully gained preferential treatment among the African American community is now evident. The final part of this first section seeks to illuminate the fact that in the marketing process, the production stage (dominated by Indian men and women) is profoundly disconnected from the consumption stage (dominated by African American women). The rationale behind this discussion is that such disconnect may aid in understanding why the purchase of actual Indian hair by African American

women appears less problematized by this group of women (as individuals and as a community), than their use of the hair.

In the documentary *Good Hair* (2009), which analyzes the various traditions and trends in "Black" hairstyles, interview questions posed to women who purchased human hair (more often than not, Indian hair), revolved around why they used human hair, the affordability of the hair, as well as the social and political implications of their practices for their social, political, and economic status in the US. In short, the fact that the hair came from the shaven heads of actual Indian women who donated their hair to deities was never directly discussed with interviewees, nor were the choices and working conditions of those who worked on the hair (washing, drying, sewing it in manufactures nation-wide and worldwide). To be sure, the documentary *Good Hair* did raise awareness of the production process, but separated its discussion of the production process from its coverage on the use of Indian hair by African American women. One may argue that this divide serves to explain why throughout the film, fond "consumers" of Indian hair (mostly African American singers and Hollywood personalities) do not show awareness or concern of the issues and actors involved in the production process.

This situation is also problematically reflected in the marketing campaigns of the sample of US-focused and (perhaps even more problematically so) of non-US focused distribution companies examined in this paper. By US-focused companies, this paper refers to those companies whose marketing campaigns are principally but not exclusively targeted to African American women (as in the opening paragraph of this essay). Note that in the sample of the nine online marketing/distribution companies examined in this essay, three are Indian-based Import-Export companies (Human Hairs Impex, 2007; Gupta Group, 2009; The Indian Remy Hair, 2007), one is a Toronto-based Canadian company (Hair & Cuticle Inc., 2008), while the remaining five are American-based (Dream Girls Hair, 2007; eIndian Hair.com; International Hair Company, 2010; Remy Hair Talk,

2009; Remy Hair Today, 2008). With this brief inventory in mind, it is telling that beyond mentioning the temple-collected hair and the washing, sorting, and sewing of the hair by Indian women on or off site, none of these companies render visible the choices, conditions, actors and structures involved in the production of Virgin Remy hair. For instance, Remy Talk summarizes the steps from producing to distributing Virgin Indian Remy hair in the following manner:

Indian hair comes from various temples in many different parts of India, and is sold at auction to companies all over the world<sup>11</sup>. In turn, these companies wash and sort the hair for use in many different forms including putting it on wefts, in wigs, in creating various pieces, and much more (Remy Hair Talk, 2009, para.1).

As such, Virgin Remy Indian hair is made to be free of any power struggles, reflecting a classless, genderless, raceless image. For instance, how does the hair get to the various Hindu temples, and why? Are hair donors voluntary? Forced? Remunerated? Are they aware of what happens to their hair after they leave the temple? What are the class, gender, and race dimensions at play? Is the hair collection institutionalized or informal? Who benefits and who loses? Apart from the knowledge provided by some sites which explain that the hair is donated to the temple based on Hindu religious beliefs, potential clients who visit any of the aforementioned sites will conveniently purchase their chosen style of Virgin Remy without any further concerns for issues that may be involved in the production phase of the hair in India. As such, past the name of the product (Virgin Indian Remy hair), it may be forgotten that the hair physically originates in India and used to belong to someone else. What appears important in these websites is the commercialization of the product, hence the heavy emphasis on its marketing, as assessed in the earlier part of this section. Thus disconnected from any grounds

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<sup>11</sup> As the Indian-based Import-Export companies point out, these companies can also be found inside India, such as the Chennai-based Gupta Enterprises (Gupta Group, 2009; Human Hairs Impex, 2007).

on which to potentially problematize the product that they are being encouraged to purchase, eager clients such as African American women seeking to model their looks according to Hollywoodian standards of beauty, are able to concentrate on the image and life-style that is being sold to them. With the glamorous head shots of Hollywood celebrities such as Halle Berry and Kelly Rowland (respectively on the top left and top right hand corner of eIndianHair.com's webpage titled "Straight Indian Hair"), the focus is solely and without a doubt, on appealing to the potential buyer, in this case African American women. When local workers are mentioned, it is again solely to reassure the customer that the company only deals with "skilled workers" (The Indian Remy Hair, 2007: para.3). Therefore, in this consumer-focused and producer-blind marketing process, the fact that Virgin Indian Remy hair is produced for the US market is more visible than the fact that it is produced in India. Ultimately, this discussion serves to further problematize an implicit homogenization of African American women, by highlighting a marketing process that assumes that all African American women interested in Indian Remy hair are attracted to the Hollywood lifestyle.

### **Power Relations in the Human Hair Industry**

For an unconventional business such as the trade of human hair, extant academic scholarship on the topic is scarce. Indeed, Black feminist scholarship and other scholarship on hair politics tend to remain centered around the issues of hair in general (Banks, 2000), hair relaxing and synthetic hair, (hooks, 1992; Banks, 2000), and so even when they acknowledge the use of human hair (Banks, 2000). As such, the rest of this section will draw heavily from the 2009 documentary film directed by Jeff Stilson, and narrated by comedian Chris Rock on the one hand, as well as from the work of journalist Swapna Majumdar reporting for the Women's eNews (2006). This

phase of the paper seeks to situate the various power relations locally and globally, *vis-à-vis* the market mechanisms underpinning the trade of Virgin Remy Indian hair. To do so, one must first understand the actors and structures at play in the production process.

Although their roles remain invisible on the web pages of the various distribution companies examined so far, temples play a very active role in the Indian human hair business. From collecting tonsured hair to auctioning it, Majumdar shows that temples are formidable administrative organizations that contain a panoply of actors of different kind (2006). Devotees who go to Hindu temples to offer their hair to their deity have their heads tonsured by temple barbers. The occupation of barber is largely held by male barbers, although there has been an increasing amount of female barbers, given the increased levels of tonsure due to a rising population (Majumdar, 2006: 19). Once the hair is tonsured, temple workers garner it into bags, in preparation for auctions. Temple administrators deal with the logistics and finances relating to the auctioning of hair, by advertising auction notices on the temple's official website, and holding scheduled auctions (Majumdar, 2006). Temples were said to have collected at one point in time in the early 2000s, an average of about \$1 million for 3 million kilos of hair sold (Majumdar, 2006: para.18); with increased demand, this number is expected to have increased. While these workers are remunerated with unequal salaries, the devotees who offer their hair as a sacrifice to show gratitude to their deity are simply not remunerated, and would probably refuse any monetary payment. In effect, most do not seem to realize that the hair is auctioned off all over India and abroad. The answer of a newly-tonsure woman to whether she expects to see the hair on someone else's head is telling of this reality: "God likes hair too much"<sup>12</sup> (*Good Hair*, 2009). The level of trust that this devotee as an individual places in her religious institution constitutes a highly sig-

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<sup>12</sup> The implication is that God likes hair too much to give it away.

nificant power structure. This kind of power relations will not be explored further in this paper, but is useful in terms of stressing that class, gender and race are but a chosen focus in the present analysis. It also serves to stress that while one may be tempted in understanding the stages in which the hair is collected as a succession of events, the various power relations that are constantly negotiated and played within the temple, as well as between the temple and outside entrepreneurs is so complex and multi-layered that it would be faulty to understand the process as linear. It is worth indicating that while both men and women offer their hair in sacrifice to their deity, women's hair is the kind that is used for weaves and extensions, whereas men's hair is usually used for 'coat linings and to extract L-Cystein (...)’ (Majumdar, 2006: para.7).

It is only after this very complex process that the successfully auctioned hair can be sent off to a manufacturing site where workers sort out, wash, and tie the hair into wefts. Remy Indian hair is the most sought after category of hair as per Majumdar's findings, with this type of hair selling for as much as \$160 per kilogram (2006: para.8). Exporters confirm that Hollywood is the biggest consumer of human hair (Majumdar, 2006: para.14), which explains why Chris Rock comically dubs LA “the weave<sup>13</sup> capital of the world” (*Good Hair*, 2009). If one is to believe the fact that the Black Hair industry is a \$9 billion industry, with 60 to 70% of that industry being made of the human weave hair alone (*Good Hair*, 2009), then there is need to further problematize why those at the very core of the production of weave hair (the Indian women who donate their hair to their Gods, the Indian men and women who work in the temples to collect the hair, and all those who work on manufacturing sites inside and outside India) do not share the bigger portion of the benefits in this global industry. However, it is imperative to insist that one not

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<sup>13</sup> A weave is 'synthetic or natural hair that is braided, sewn, bonded (i.e. glued), or woven into already existing hair (Banks, 2000: 173). Weaves are the most common way through which human hair is used. In this paper, weaves strictly refer to human hair weaves.

look at this issue as one of poorer Indian “producers” of human hair *versus* rich American “consumers” of human hair. Indeed, to do so would be to trivialize the important structural foundations that underpin the various power relations at play, and which resist any homogenization of the different groups of actors involved in the human hair industry.

### *A Structure *versus* Agency Debate*

*Good Hair* juxtaposes on the one hand the work of Indian women who “produce” human hair, with the pleasurable use of the produced hair by African American women on the other hand. Indeed, the poverty that characterizes the conditions in which Indian women must work to process the human hair (*Good Hair*, 2009) takes a more poignant meaning when contrasted with the opulence that defines the lives of Hollywood celebrities who made up a large number of the film’s interviewees.

However, one should be careful so as not to simply retain a representation of poor Indian women contrasted to rich African American women. For instance, Majumdar (2006: para. 1-2) points out that Bollywood actress and Miss India 1976 ‘offered her waist-length locks at the 1,200-year-old Sri Venkateswara Temple in Tirupati (...) to thank its deity for granting her a private wish (...’). In a parallel vein, many customers who buy human hair in the US are working class<sup>14</sup> women ranging from hairdressers to teachers and students, who believe that they must wear human hair to enhance their looks (*Good Hair*, 2009). Ironically, one may link these two groups of women on religious grounds, given that, as one male interviewee believes, ‘the weave culture is a culture of indoctrination’ (*Good Hair*,

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<sup>14</sup> We recognize here that a definition of “working class” is a subject of debate and may have conceptual limitations. I use it here rather loosely, recognizing it may encompass the unemployed, students, and people who might otherwise see themselves as “middle-class”, or who may in some definitions be considered “petty-bourgeoisie”.

2009). Without going further into that debate, it is clear that women of all classes in India (from poor women working in the manufacture to sort out collected hair to rich women like Nafisa Ali who donate their hair to deities), as well as women of all classes in the US (as per the above brief discussion) participate in sustaining the market of Indian human hair, willingly or not. In other words, the transnational power relations between Indian and African American women involved in the human hair industry goes beyond a mere rich women *versus* poor women issue.

Rather than a simple dichotomization of the actors involved, I suggest that women in India and women in the US confront power relations that are shaped by the local and global structures that regulate their actions. As such, in terms of local structures - although for instance Nafisa Ali did not plan for her hair to be auctioned off to an unknown buyer – the Indian state's policies, which make the hair trade a legal one in India, does not guarantee any measures against the practices of Hindu temples in India<sup>15</sup> auctioning off hair, nor do temples forbid it. In turn, such local policies and rules work to the advantage of the African American woman who is interested in buying Indian human hair, thus providing African American women with a sense of entitlement to hair that does not belong to them. Local power structures may work in similar ways in the United States, and can be found for example in expectations created by the music industry. The case of Melissa Ford, a renowned "video girl" whose career involves appearances in numerous hip-hop and R&B music videos, is a telling example. Indeed, Ford proudly asserted that she changes her weave monthly, and does not know what she would do 'if she did not have the kind of money that [she does]' to afford it; she reports spending between \$,3000 to \$5,000 monthly just for the purchase of the weave (*Good Hair*, 2009). Although Ms. Ford's

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<sup>15</sup> The Indian government has a council on hair. The council was represented in Majumdar's report by its representative, the regional director of the time (2006: para. 13).

statements suggest independent choices of hairstyles, it is clear that the privileging of Black women with extra long wavy or straight hair in the Black American music industry constrains her to keep using human hair in order to fit the demands of the music industry and remain competitive, thus maintaining a degree of longevity in her career. Therefore, one is presented with another case of local<sup>16</sup> powerful structural forces that are able to subordinate the independence of individual actors.

Furthermore, global capitalist structures that allow individual entrepreneurs, companies and other institutions to pay workers such as Indian temple barbers a meagre \$68 a month<sup>17</sup> (Majumdar, 2006: para.21), while simultaneously allowing importing countries such as the United States to pay \$1.50 for a strand of hair that expensive beauty salons may then weave into extensions or wigs that can sell for between \$1,500 and \$3,000' (Majumdar, 2006: para.5), participate in justifying and perpetuating unequal power relations within and between the aforementioned actors. To be sure, these actors are diverse and the power relations discussed can be captured both within and between class, race and gender dimensions. The actors in consideration in this paper include global capitalist entrepreneurs, Indian citizens who offer their hair in sacrifice and Indian workers in the human hair business, female American celebrities and working class American women, decision-makers in the entertainment business, American and Indian states who shape and control the policies that regulate the import and export of human hair. The next section looks at the gender dimensions of such structurally-founded power relations.

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<sup>16</sup> Note that although the United States is the leader in terms of shaping practices in the R&B and hip-hop music industry, this industry is truly global in its nature and functioning, and goes well beyond the boundaries of America. Therefore, this example speaks to the importance of global power structures.

<sup>17</sup> About 100 female barbers are said to cater to approximately 4,500 to 20,000 female devotees a day.

### *Gendered and Racial Power Relations*

In order to examine gendered power relations in the US, it is important to recognize that the subject of hair is fundamentally linked to that of sexuality. A quick look at the pictures of the women displayed on the various websites show very glamorous, sexually alluring women. The marketing on these websites often appeal to the heteronormativity of hair politics in the African American community. This is especially pronounced in the movie *Good Hair*, whereby most questions to men and women imply that human hair weaves are designed to sexually attract the opposite sex. Thus, actress Nia Long speaks of "weave sex", only addressing heterosexual sex, where the man has to abide by the rules of weave sex determined by the woman (i.e. no weave touching, as this might temper with the expensively acquired weave). Melissa Ford for her part cautions that "men have to be patient" while the weave is being done, as this may take up to eight hours; and an African American male interviewee goes as far as to commodify African American women: 'the price of maintaining [an African American] woman is like real estate in new York City, it's skyrocketing' (*Good Hair*, 2009). It is important to note that there appears to be a consensus among the men and women interviewed, who view the weave as a means to appeal to the opposite sex, and view men as the expected providers of the means to purchase the weave, should the women not be able to afford the price.

These gendered relations lead to a layered racial and gendered power relations involving African American women, African American men, and White women in the US. I suggest that this is so, given two conditions. First, the sentiment among African American men that they "cannot afford a [African American] woman because of their hair", or that rules that emanate from the use of human hair such as "weave sex" make matters too complicated for them (*Good Hair*, 2009). Second, the fact that in the US, Black women's sexuality

'has been constructed in a binary opposition to that of white women' (Hammonds, 1997: 170). These two conditions thus explain why when men in a barber shop are asked whether they think White women were easier to deal with than African American women (sexually), many strongly answered "yes" (*Good Hair*, 2009). Paradoxically, the question may be whether the "straight" White-like look that the weave provides is a means for African American women to appropriate a White woman's body in order to reclaim the interest of African American men.

## **Self-Representations: Hair and Identity Politics**

When invoking the term "body", we tend to think at first of its materiality –its composition as flesh and bone, its outline and contours, its outgrowth of nail and hair. But the body, as we well know, is never simply matter, for it is never divorced from perception and interpretation (Peterson, 2001: ix).

This analysis fully embraces Peterson's understanding of the body not only as material substance, but also as a site of *perception and interpretation*. Who perceives and interprets, to what purpose, and what are the wider implications of such perceptions and interpretations on the body? In seeking to tackle these questions within the present topic, this section posits African American hair types as reflective of, and impacting on various perceptions and interpretations of "the Black female body"<sup>18</sup>.

*"Straight" Hair versus "Natural Hair": Internalized or Internal Racism?*

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<sup>18</sup> The expression is borrowed from the title of the 2001 edited book by Michael Bennett and Vanessa D. Dickerson "Recovering the Black Female Body: Self-Representations by African American Women".

The title of the first chapter of bell hooks<sup>19</sup> book *Black Looks*, is unambiguously telling of its agenda: 'Loving Blackness as Political Resistance' (1992:1). In this chapter, hooks denounces the perpetuation of white supremacy reinforced daily by Black people through images in the mass media; she calls this phenomenon "internalized racism" (hooks, 1992: 1). Hooks (1992: 2) argues that unless Black people are free from 'hegemonic modes of seeing, thinking, and being', they cannot liberate or decolonize themselves, nor can they contribute to non-Blacks removing their colonizing gaze. In order to make further sense of how Black people practice internalized racism, how these mechanisms develop and how they are sustained, hooks (1992: 6-7) critically examines images in the mass media, which she calls the "spectatorship" of 'images of race and representation'. It is in this context that hooks examines the fixation of the music industry on hair, specifically that of African American women. She contends that highly sexualized images of Tina Turner and Diana Ross sporting White-like long hair are designed to represent these singers as desirable to White males (hooks, 1992: 70-71).

Hooks' call for resisting such internalized racism may at first sight, be echoed with Mohanty's call for an anti-colonial feminist discourse and praxis, whereby colonization is defined as 'almost invariably imply[ing] a relation of structural domination and a suppression – often violent – of the heterogeneity of the subject(s) in question' (Mohanty, 2003: 18). In this sense, this paper would align with hooks that a representation of the Black female body in the mass media is one where light-skinned Black women with "straight" long hair are favoured (Turner and Ross for instance), and where images of dark-skinned "nappy-haired" women are suppressed. Thus, the homogenization and objectification of African American women would reflect a colonization of the Black female body

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<sup>19</sup> The paper will maintain the name of this author in lowercase letters, to reflect the author's wish; hooks' rationale for this is that what matters most is the "substance of books, not who I am" (William, 2006: para.1).

through a regulation of their hairstyle. As such, the promotion of a product such as Virgin Indian Remy hair can be seen as serving to discipline the Black female body. To be sure, wearing weaves made of Indian hair would thus represent an attempt to suppress the heterogeneity of "natural" hair textures and styles in the African American community, and an attempt to force African American women into sporting White-like "straight" hair. These observations echo longstanding concerns regarding popular expressions in the American Black community such as "good hair". "Good hair" is defined as 'hair that is naturally straighter in texture. However, "good" hair can be quite curly but not tightly coiled or curled such as nappy hair' (Banks, 2000: 172).<sup>20</sup> In this definition, the binary that opposes "good hair" (straight and White-like) to "bad hair" (nappy and African-like) is evident. These are all discursive representations that would support hooks' argument of internalized racism.

Nevertheless, this type of criticism risks repeating the problems that it seeks to address, on two accounts. First, one may argue that seeking to socialize African American Women so that they all are "Happy to be Nappy"<sup>20</sup> (hooks and Raschka, 1999), is an attempt to discipline the Black female body into following a specific path, that of what may be called "the nappy way". Second, assuming that all African American women would have relatively nappy hair at once essentializes and homogenizes their bodies into a single coherent group, when many African American women (much like Black women in other continents) naturally do not have "nappy" hair. As such, this kind of assumptions can bring not internalized racism, but *internal* racism within the Black community, where those who do not have "nappy" hair are implicitly assumed to be relatively "less Black" than the nappy-haired individuals, and become ipso facto a lesser discussed group. It can therefore be argued that dichotomizing the hair debate into "nappy/natural/liberated" hair *versus* "straight/non-

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<sup>20</sup> The title of a children's book that hooks co-authored with Chris Raschka as the illustrator.

natural//colonized" hair duplicates the very problematic that such a debate initially sought to redress, namely the dichotomy between "good" *versus* "bad hair".

### *"I am Not My Hair"*

Inspired by bell hooks' insistence to keep her name in lowercase letters so that readers focus on the substance of her books rather than focusing on who she is (William, 2006: para.1), one can seek to negotiate a differentiation between hair and identity. Indeed, many African American women have already offered counter-discourses to criticisms of "internalized racism", in order to assert their capability to wear any kind of hairstyle – including weaves made of Virgin Remy Indian hair – without compromising their racial identity as African American women. In this vein, singer India Arie's popular song powerfully entitled "I am not my hair" (released in 2006), is the illustration *par excellence* of such counter-discourses. Her chorus (A-Z Lyrics, 2011: para.3) sums it best:

"I am not my hair  
 I am not this skin  
 I am not your expectations, no no  
 I am not my hair  
 I am not this skin  
 I am a soul that lives within"

Echoing Arie's lyrics, and commenting on her own use of weaves made of human hair, rapper Eve maintains that "I am not my hair...It's just like putting on clothes" (*Good Hair*, 2009). Thus, these women bring their voices, resisting labels of not being "natural" or "Afro" enough, instead claiming their hair as a mere adornment that does not impact on their identity. While the rationale behind discourses and practices such as India Arie's can be justified as resistance mechanisms to the homogenization that may emerge from essentializing and disciplining constructions of Black American

women as “natural” “nappy” women, it would be a mistake to agree with these resisting voices that one’s identity can be totally divorced from one’s body. Rather, one’s hair is apprehended as a reflection of one’s body, and in Peterson’s definition, it is subject to perception and interpretation. As was suggested at the beginning of this section, such perceptions and interpretations are best understood in a plural sense. By this stage, it is clear that both the body being apprehended and the body doing the apprehending perceive and interpret, respectively self-representing and representing the apprehended body. This explains the focus of the analysis so far not just on representations but also on self-representations.

To claim that “I am not my hair” denies the fact that the body is inescapably perceived and interpreted by oneself and by others. This would be an untenable position, as it would assume that one’s body exists in isolation from other bodies. Rather, this paper suggests that in order to refrain from homogenizing and essentializing discourses and practices (in short from colonizing methods), counter-discourses should acknowledge the possibility of multiple meanings. With this premise, one can transform the risks of hooks’ proposition of “loving blackness” from a proposition that may lead to colonizing practices into one that brings productive debates. To do so, “blackness” cannot be understood as a singular, but rather as expressing multiple meanings, which would therefore transcend essentialist discourses. However, to accept the possibility of a plurality of meanings involves the acceptance of the fact that there is always a perception and an interpretation for a meaning to be expressed. Hence, I, as a subject that accepts the existence of other subjects, can no longer say that “I am not my hair”, but I may assert that I can be apprehended as more than one kind of hair, and still be apprehended as a *legitimate* subjectivity that is continuously in the making.

### *I Can Be More Than One Kind Of Hair*

To acknowledge the legitimacy of multiple meanings is to also acknowledge the importance of language in creating or suppressing possibilities. As such, one should consciously recognize that the way in which one uses language can fundamentally be colonizing or emancipatory. Here, Mohanty's concern over homogenizing discourses and practices can be tied with Katie King's concern with "the politics of naming", and can help unpack the implications behind the term "blackness" or "African American hair" for instance. In King's 2002 piece entitled "Lesbianisms, Feminisms, and Global Gay Formations", she argues that using the term "lesbian" in singular may suggest that there is only one way of being a "lesbian" (and quite often, the hegemonic Western way). Yet, a lesbian may mean different things to different people (King, 2002). For some, it cannot be temporal, while for others, it is essentially in fact, a transition (King, 2002). Similarly, the term "blackness" can be used in many registers. However, blackness in hooks' understanding is intended to define a certain way of being an African American. For women for instance, this may be based on whether they wear long straight hair – keeping in mind that some Black women may have naturally long hair straight hair, or whether they happily sport nappy hair – if they happen to be naturally "nappy-haired" indeed.

In essence, this section argues that the implication that someone "can wear their race wrong" (Rooks, 2001) is highly problematic. Indeed, unless there is an openness about what blackness may be, and an acceptance of the possibility that it can be the "happy nappy" or the weave-on Remy Indian hair for instance, the debate risks creating new hegemonies. To be sure, this argument does not deny the many issues that stem from the human hair industry, and which have been discussed above. Rather, it contends that the denunciation of these issues should not create other ones or duplicate the challenges it is trying to address. For instance, movements such as "the

Black Power" in the 1960s that aimed to reclaim pride in "Afrohair" and that expressed their mottos through expressions such as "black is beautiful", "dark but beautiful", can be alienating to light-skinned African Americans who are 'are obliged to "prove" their blackness', given an assumption within the African American community that lighter-skinned African Americans feel superior to others (Shohat, 1997: 203). It can be convincingly argued that similar alienating effects would target African American women who choose to wear Virgin Indian hair, within an environment that constructs such hairstyles as "un-black" or "un-African". This implies the understanding that African American Women (rather than the implicit conceptualization of the African American Woman) are plural subjectivities, and that their individual transformations need to be engaged with, rather than arbitrarily suppressed. In this respect, Shohat (1997: 204) evokes the work of Kobena Mercer who points out that "natural hair" in the African American diasporic context is 'not itself African; it is a syncretic construct. Afro-diasporic hair styles, from the Afro to dreadlocks are not emulations of "real" African styles but rather neologistic projections of diasporic identity'. The terms *syncretic* and *neologistic* are particularly important here, as they speak to the fact that the black female body, like other bodies, cannot be isolated in space or time, as it is continuously changing at the contact of other bodies. In this sense, Rooks' (2001: 283) attempt at a "sense-making dialogue" between African American bodies who claim the right to adorn their bodies with different hairstyles, and African American bodies who seek to retain their hair as is, represents a productive beginning at initiating a plural, engaging, and constructive representations of African American women.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In the preceding analysis, I have argued that the so-called "authentic" or "natural" African American woman must be able to be

bound in time, and “untouched” by outside bodies in order to be indeed, “natural”. This, it is clear, is not possible. Therefore, one must instead recognize the possibility of multiple subjectivities, and be willing to openly engage with these subjectivities in a constructive manner. Furthermore, attempts at counter-discourses on the use of human hair by African American women risk turning into exceptionalist and essentializing discourses, as they myopically focus on local conditions – on the US for example, thus failing to understand in what ways alternative discourses and practices can negotiate new productive spaces and meanings. As far as concerns the industry of Indian hair specifically, a productive avenue that can begin to shape new discourses and new understandings of the linkages between local and global politics of hair and identity will be one that will identify and engage a common agenda across class, gender, and racial dimensions. Thus, engaging with debates surrounding the cultural appropriation of “black” hairstyles globally (such as dreadlocks, cornrows, braids), can serve as a productive way to assess what “black” hairstyles mean for other groups that come into contact with the multiple meanings of black cultures, and what such appropriations mean for the appropriation of other cultural practices by black communities – through the weave world for instance. Through such a productive engagement, one can begin to subsequently engage with the implications of various cultures of “blackness” – as represented through the use of human hair for instance – for the socio-political and economic conditions of Black communities, and for the agency of individuals and groups within Black communities. Only by opening up new spaces and meanings in this manner, can one open up the possibility of discourses and practices of ‘a politics of engagement rather than a politics of transcendence’ (Mohanty, 2003: 122), the consequence of which will be truly decolonizing and anti-capitalist.

In closing, the paper proposes a shift in focus that will consider the importance of locating African American women’s experiences

such as their discourses and practices *vis-à-vis* the use of Virgin Remy Indian hair (and human hair in general), within wider global capitalist power structures. In other words, understanding African American hair and identity politics as part of a global puzzle is a *sine qua non* to a more productive discussion of the socio-political and economic underpinnings and implications of the debate undertaken in this paper. Shohat (1997: 208) illuminates this point best when she states that 'the global nature of the colonizing process and the global reach of the contemporary media virtually oblige the cultural critic to move beyond the restrictive framework of the nation-state'.

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