Getting to the Root: The Struggles and Resilience of Black Womanhood Through Stories of Natural Hairstyles While Attending a Predominantly White Institution

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GETTING TO THE ROOT: THE STRUGGLES AND RESILIENCE OF BLACK WOMANHOOD THROUGH STORIES OF NATURAL HAIRSTYLES WHILE ATTENDING A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTION

A Thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts- Documentary Studies
in the Department of Southern Studies
The University of Mississippi

by
JE’MONDA S. ROY

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ABSTRACT

This thesis will provide the framework for black women’s stories of struggle and resilience through natural hairstyles at a Mississippi predominantly white institution – The University of Mississippi. Although the framework of this essay is set in one institution in a state located in the Deep South, the stories and methods apply to the American society and how the lack of black representation in white spaces shape black lives, specifically black women’s lives. Like creating black safe spaces in white spaces, black hair is used as a theme in this essay to shape the stories of black women’s experiences – whether they are of conformity or rebellion at this predominantly white institution. The University of Mississippi, nicknamed “Ole Miss” after a wealthy planters wife – an unofficial fact many members of the black student body believes is true – is a campus that continues to uphold racism through a standing confederate statue and buildings named after slave-owners and wealthy planters while also trying to meet the demands of the Black Student Union and other black organizations demanding change and restructure of an institution that encourages black students to attend, but fails to protect them. The stories of these black women will unfold the nature of white society through this institution. The stories of hairstyles shape what every black woman experience and how the demographics shape their hairstyles and life choices. The structure of this thesis is shaped around hair, but this story is more than just hair. These stories reflect what black women – (former) students and faculty – struggle with because of their hairstyles. These stories shape black womanhood. Blackness is diverse and complex. Diversity and complexity apply to hairstyles maintained by black women whether the hair is relaxed or natural, in braids or weave. Certain hairstyles reflect a woman’s
character and life decisions. I will highlight those hair making-decisions through their experiences and argue whether a hairstyle relates to conformity or rebellion for women of color at this predominantly white institution. The hairstyles and experiences at this university shape the black identity and womanhood as these women navigate this institution as the minority.
DEDICATION

Dedicated to every black woman at The University of Mississippi surviving through all the adversity hoping to make a change for the university and their life.
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**Introduction**

When I went natural in 2014, I was culturally moved. Growing up on relaxers and *Just for Me* boxes, black women ditched those childhood memories of cool creamy perm slapping the scalp to the scalp burning in response, for big coily and bouncy natural curls. I was inspired by black women protesting in the streets to police brutality throughout the nation. I was also inspired by local black women protesting confederate glorification and white supremacy at the predominantly white flagship university I attended, Ole Miss.

Black hair has always and will always be a topic of discussion, whether its in the courtroom being made legal to discriminate against in the job market, or private and Christian school administrators dismissing and expelling young black girls because their hairstyles are unkempt and don’t fit school guidelines. In many ways black hair is popular, whether its being discussed in disgust amongst white people or being duplicated by white entertainers through pop culture. Black hair is a conversation. Black hair has been objectified since our African ancestors were brought to the American landscape. Black hair went from being glorified for its natural roots in African history to castigated upon and covered during slavery to assimilation post-civil-war and during the Civil Rights movement to acceptance of African roots and pride of natural curls during the Black Power movement and now. Black hair has gone through many stages in life in response to societal issues the black community faces. Before Africans were forced to America as chattel, black hair, specifically natural black roots before chemicals were introduced, was praised. Different hairstyles were created to signify an African tribe. Like African cultures and hairstyles, in American culture hairstyles signified certain
meanings as well. Following the civil war, in a very crucial period for African Americans, many black women, black men included, used chemicals created during enslavement then introduced as a product by Madam C.J. Walker as hair straighteners. These products helped black communities achieve social status. Later, during the Black Power Movement, icons like Angela Davis and Assata Shakur frowned upon chemicals and wore their natural hair chemically free dictating their Black is beautiful and assimilation should not be appropriated by the black community. These ideals projected through hairstyles signify that hair straightening and weaves used by black women were a form of assimilation to white culture and proudly and boldly wearing natural hair was a form of rebellion to white society. On the contrary, many black communities protested white assimilation during the Civil Rights movement while still wearing hair straighteners. The purpose of my thesis is to use hairstyles and hairstyling specifically among black women to complicate the ideas of rebellion and apprehension through hairstyling. Many black women use their afros and natural hair as forms of rebellion in connection to protests, while others feel pressured to cover their natural hair and wear weaves or straighten their hair to assimilate to white cultures. I will argue, on the other hand, how groups of black women choose to stylistically maintain their straightened hair styles and weaves, while not complying to white assimilation and still rebelling and protesting white supremacy. Chapter one will introduce and discuss black women’s hair in the American landscape looking at black women’s hairstyles and hairstyling through history and what each hairstyle meant, or if it meant anything. Chapter two will focus on the voices of black women at a predominantly white institution in the deep south, the
university of Mississippi. These stories will unfold the challenges black students, former students, graduate students, and faculty share just being a black woman and proudly displaying their natural hair, or not. Chapter three will directly term what each hairstyle is for black women and whether it’s considered a “natural” hairstyle. I will complicate this thesis by arguing whether hairstyles are used for assimilation or rebellion and how some black women just see them wearing their natural hair as their daily routine, not as a political statement. Chapter four will conclude my thesis by discussing my personal journey documenting this thesis project. In many ways this topic was introduced through my thought process because I am a woman, I am black, and I wear my hair natural, as well as been at this institution for almost 8 years. I have experienced good and bad being natural around predominantly white groups and just being black and woman. Thinking over my experiences at this institution, I wanted to know, and document stories experienced by other black women of different backgrounds. This chapter will highlight why I chose to use film as a media for this project and what impact that may have on students of color, graduate students, and faculty and staff as well, specifically black women. This thesis will serve to highlight the struggle and resilience of black womanhood through majority natural hairstyles at The University of Mississippi and as it relates to the American society.
Chapter I. Black Women’s Hair in American Landscape

For this chapter I will reference most of authors’ Ayana D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharps text, “Hair Story: Untangling the Roots in Black Hair America” as it relates to my discussion. Byrd and Tharps provide a heavy account that stimulates which hairstyles were used throughout American history for black women. Their text begins in Africa, where black history begins, and moves to the Americas and how the landscape shaped various hairstyles for black women and the black community as they adapted to or rebelled against them.

To understand black hair, you must first understand that our hair has different varieties making our hairstyles very diverse contrary to other hair cultures across the nation. In the African/Black culture hair tresses range from loosely flowing curls, to deep ebony kinky hair, to flowing locks. Byrd and Tharps note, “The one constant Africans share when it comes to hair is the social and cultural significance intrinsic of each beautiful strand,” (1). This means natural hair, no matter what style, was celebrated and anticipated throughout every African culture and community. Straightened hair was unheard of and forbidden because natural kinks was symbolic to African pride and its rich culture. Natural tresses were used as a carrier of hair messages and kinky hair could withstand heavy loads used by women when transporting goods. In African civilizations, hairstyles were used to indicate a person’s marital status, age, religion, ethnic identity, wealth, and rank within the community. Each hairstyle also indicated a person’s surname as each tribe embodied a unique hairstyle. “The Kuramo people of Nigeria, for example, were recognized by their unique coiffure – a shaved head with a single tuft of hair left on
to. In the Wolof culture of Senegal, young girls who were not of marrying age partially shaved their heads to emphasize their unavailability for courting...Nigerian housewives living in a polygamous society created a hairstyle intended to taunt their husband’s other wives. The style was known as kohin-surogun (“turn your back to the jealous rival wife”) and was meant to be seen from behind. In ancient times, if a Wolof man wore his hair in a braided hairdo it meant he was preparing to go to war and therefore prepared to die, (Byrd & Tharpes 2-3).” Meanings and social signifiers were and are represented in hairstyles in the African civilization. Hairstyles signified tribes and even messages women and children wanted to express within their communities. The tresses of each African citizens were all natural and styled precisely so that other tribes and people within the communities could comprehend the meaning and the messages they portray. African hairstyles are styled neatly, and all carry a message. Therefore, a woman seen with unkempt hair signifies she is either bereaved, depressed, or “habitually dirty.” many widowed women in African civilization choose not to style their hair as a signifier their husbands have died. This also signifies if a woman is depressed because of the passing of her husband. This text shares photos of African hairstyles documented by Samuel R. Byrd.
“The hair’s value and worth were heightened by its spiritual qualities. Both male and female devotees of certain Yoruba gods and goddesses were required to keep their hair braided in a specific style. “The hair is the most elevated point of your body, which means it is closest to the divine.” This image is the indication of the power the hair holds. In African civilization, for some tribes, the hair is the closest thing to the heavens and communication from the gods and spirits was thought to pass through the hair to get to the soul. This hairstyle also indicates that spells could be cast or harm could be brought to another person by acquiring a single strand of their hair.
Celebration of African roots and culture came to a halt when Africans were forced to the Americas during the middle passage. Prejudiced white Europeans slandered Africans with theories connecting the African civilization to disease that would wind up historically embedded in the African and Black culture for centuries. White slave owners believed African peoples carried diseases with them through their bodies and in the hair because of how “different” the hairstyles and hair textures were. Because Black and African peoples chose to freely and proudly wear their natural hair textures, their hair types were deemed “nappy,” “unkempt,” and later in history, “unprofessional.” White Europeans and Americans’ hair were finely textured than black hair and was considered the beauty standard – long, fine hair. So, in response to the idea that Africans were
diseased carrying chattel, slave owners and buyers stripped Africans not only of their humanity, but their culture by shaving their heads. In doing so, Africans could no longer be identified through tribes or other purposeful meanings within their cultures. This was done purposely to disconnect families, abolish African cultures, and assure white Europeans that at least disease wouldn’t be carried to the Americas from their heads. Natural tresses and hairstyles were an important part of African culture, and one of the most important components as tribes were identified by their hairstyles. Head shaving in African culture was opposed as it stood for negative meanings or death approaching. Shaving the heads of Africans stripped them of their humanity, wealth, social status, pride, and essence in African cultures.

White European slave owners dismantled African pride by shaving the hair of men, women, and children. Eventually, their hair grew back and maintaining the idea that Africans carried diseases, white slaveowners and overseers made them cover up their hair using old cloth from their garments or other cloth material. Hundreds of years into enslavement, enslaved people adapted to white beauty standards and covering their hair near their owners and overseers. Many enslaved women used homemade products to try to straighten their hair and mimic hairstyles of their masters and master’s wives. Following the Civil War, former enslaved people and communities were temporarily free of harsh labor, brutal beatings, and pricked cotton fingers. For former slaves, this meant they were free to do whatever they chose. They were no longer in bondage. But, for some enslaved people, freedom was not an option for them because bondage was all they knew. Many black people could not read because it was forbidden during enslavement. Other
black people had adapted to that southern way of life and assimilated to the structure of slavery. Some former slaves did not want to give up their life as a slave simply because they’d adapted.

Progressing into the Jim Crow Era, black hair re-emerged as a hot topic. As they did in enslavement, black people created different creams using cooking ingredients to straighten the hair. During the 20s and 30s this cream was known as pomade. Later black entrepreneurs emerged and created their own hair care brands for the black community. Madam CJ Walker, a black entrepreneur dedicated to the progression of black social and elite status. Her concept for achieving Black social class was straightening hair in order to meet white counterparts in their same position. Walker believed that assimilation would heighten the advancement of Black people. If we look like them, act like them, and talk like them, we too can achieve the same respect and hierarchy. Pomades and relaxers developed throughout the black community nationwide. Black male entertainers could be seen provocatively slicking their hair down during a performance and Black women wore wigs during performances or for a night out on the town. It was rare to see any black person with an afro or displaying any of their natural tresses because that just wasn’t the beauty standard at the time. Very few black males kept a low fade, but many of them had their experiences with pomade and other hair straightening products.
Racial injustice was at its peak. Jim Crow laws were strictly enforced upon black people and their families. From being forced off streetcars and denied education, Black people were speaking up about their unfair treatment. To be fair, Black people have always rebelled, even during enslavement. One of the most infamous slave riots occurred under the leadership of enslaved preacher, Nat Turner. Considering, rebellion never perished from Black culture. Fed up with systematic and social oppression, black leaders spoke up against racial injustice throughout the nation. Notable Leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcom X led the movement against social and racial injustice with different views. Dr. King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) organized and led many non-violent protests where black citizens marched peacefully around and near government buildings. Freedom Summer, a volunteer campaign launched in the U.S., specifically Mississippi to register as many African American voters as possible, was an act of rebellion through non-violence. Interestingly, throughout these peaceful protests that black communities used to oppose racism, black people continued to use hair straighteners and pomades. Black music entertainers continued wearing wigs, but also protested racial injustice in their songs and performances. Artists like Aretha Franklin wore wigs and hair-straightening styles, but also heavily supported her black community. In 1970, Angela Davis was named a “dangerous terrorist” by President Nixon and was put in jail. In response, Ms. Franklin decided she would post Davis’s bail because, “I have the money; I got it from Black people – they’ve made me financially able to have it – and I want to use it in ways that will help our people,” as quoted in the 1970 article of Jet magazine. Using her influence and power, in which she
gained through the support of black people, Ms. Aretha Franklin bailed Black Power leader Angela Davis out not caring whether the bond was $100,000 or $250,000.

On the contrary, in the 60s and 70s, some black people also wore their natural looks. Malcolm X, a strong believer in physically fighting state and local officials rather than protesting through nonviolence, proudly wore a low-cut afro. Entertainers like Nina Simone did the same and affirmed her blackness every chance she got through her voice, attitude, and performances. A popular song of hers is “Mississippi Goddamn” where she expresses racial oppression Black people face. One of her verses sing:
Picket lines

School boy cots

They try to say it's a communist plot

All I want is equality

For my sister my brother my people and me.

Nina Simone was a very outspoken woman and artist. She proudly wore her jewels and crowns – one of those crowns being her afro. There are very few images with Nina Simone wearing a straightened wig. She protested through her lyrics and her voice as she performed. Simone’s chorus to this song sings:

Alabama’s gotten me so upset

Tennessee made me lose my rest

And everybody knows about Mississippi goddam

Figure 6
Chapter II. Black Hair in the University Landscape

The University of Mississippi is a flagship university in a vastly growing town of Oxford, Mississippi. Known for its athletics division in the South Eastern Conference and ranked academic programs, this institution encourages people of color, but fails to celebrate them and represent them in many settings (unless they’re a student athlete). Many students of color, specifically black students excel academically and socially throughout the institution. Yet, not many of these black students receive proper validation for their work and representation they deserve, not only as black students, but as accepted and excelling students as well. Unsurprisingly, the institution’s student enrollment continues to decrease. According to The Daily Mississippian (DM), the university’s publication, “Freshman enrollment dropped from 3,697 last year to 3,455 this year — a 6.5 percent decrease.” Perhaps due to the university’s political controversy over the past few years, African American enrollment decreased as well. As of September 2018, “There are 2,559 African American students enrolled this year, making up 12.5 percent of the student body — a 4.1 percent decrease from the 2,669 African American students enrolled last year,” noted in the DM. In the 7.5 years I’ve attended the university, I’ve experienced the university endure a riot as a response of disagreement to President Barack Obama’s election to second term in November 2012; Mississippi flag and confederate supporters marching to campus in response to student, faculty, and staff opposition to the hanging Mississippi flag, which was followed by the university officially removing the flag in October 2015; Pro-confederate groups holding a rally off
and on campus in response to student, faculty, and staff opposition to the confederate statue located in the middle of the campus, where it continues to stand in February 2019. This is often just national news. The town of Oxford and the university community experiences racial heights that are sometimes not recognized by local and university officials.

Although racial tension continues to rise and students of color continue to voice their concern, black women are still attending the university, and few are tenured professors. Adapting to this new space, black women continue to uphold themselves righteously throughout conflict they may experience either by being black or woman, or both. Black women are challenged with the unthinkable in many settings throughout the campus. Like historically black colleges and universities (HBCU), the black community supports and displays their black pride proudly as university constituents. Despite the predominantly white institution and its racial background and current symbols and buildings that continue to uphold racial strife, white supremacy, and confederacy, black people at this university use their own symbols and creativity to protest those racist ideas.

Black women throughout the university proudly wear their natural curls, African, and pro-black regalia. On the contrary, very few black women continue to wear relaxers, which is very rare today. This chapter will provide an oral history of black women attending and working at this institution and their experiences in this space. Hair will used as the foundation to help readers understand how their lives as black women revolve around their appearances. Black women throughout this university wear their hair natural, relaxed, and with weave. Because of the student body’s political voice, some
women choose to rebel against the continued university support of confederate glorification by revealing their natural authentic selves – powerful opinion, natural hair, and confident swag. Other women still struggle with assimilation in white spaces throughout the community. In some cases, some women’s hairstyles reflect their political opinions and how they choose to navigate the campus.

Finding safe spaces around the university campus has been a challenge for black people at Ole Miss. Safe spaces are forums where people are free to be themselves. These spaces provide a form of protection where the community feels secure and welcome. These spaces are often cultivated by the community that adopts and ultimately becomes a part of that community’s culture. Safe spaces can be inside or outside of buildings. Most often, it’s the literal space communities use to situate themselves and their events comfortably. Like HBCUs, The University of Mississippi has its umbrella of the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC). This is an organization of nine historically black Greek-lettered organizations, also known as the Divine 9. Currently, the university has 7 of the 9 organizations present – Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.; Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc.; Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc.; Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.; Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc.; Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc.; and Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority Inc., with the exclusion of inactive chapters of Alpha Phi Alpha and Iota Phi Theta Fraternities, Inc.

One of those spaces was the Ole Miss Union. It is the main food court on the campus, but also serves as the center for student life. Before plans were initiated to renovate the student union, the space was used as Black Greek life’s hotspot. Every Tuesday and Thursday, the Ole Miss NPHC would host Union Unplugged – an event dedicated to
social activities and fellowship amongst the black student body, as well as strolling and yard shows for Black Greeks. The plaza located in front of the union was the black community’s most sacred space. In December 2016, a big portion of the union closed due to renovations, including the plaza. Space for black Greek life and Black life at Ole Miss had been completely wiped out. NPHC struggled where they would stroll and socialize now that the university closed off their space in the union. Eventually, a new space was found, but is farther from the center of campus as is the student union, so they don’t receive as much student body, faculty, and staff presence as in the past years.

Using the example of the student union plaza and black bodies being pushed out of claimed spaces, I present Ashley Norwood, a former graduate student of the University of Mississippi’s Journalism School. Growing up in Jackson, MS, home of the HBCU, Jackson State University (JSU), Ashley, also a graduate of Jackson State, had never been in a predominantly white space. She grew up around the corner from Jackson State so she loved and celebrated everything black. During our interview she stated, “She didn’t know the world was white” until she got to Ole Miss. Throughout her academic career, even in grade school, Ashley excelled in the classroom and socially. She pledged Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority at Jackson State in 2010 and was a member of several political and social organizations at JSU. Because of her academic excellence and the university’s need for minority presence she was awarded several academic scholarships and the university’s minority scholarship which covers 75% of student tuition. Arriving in Oxford, Ashley was presented with an immediate culture shock. Literally everything around her was white. She struggled to find black hair salons because most beauty parlors catered to the
town’s demographics, which is predominantly white. For a short period of time, Ashley traveled back and forth to Jackson on the weekends just to get her hair done, but Jackson, which is 2.5 hours south of Oxford, came to be a costly trip for her every weekend. By the time she made it to Oxford for graduate school it was 2014 and black women around the world were making transitions to their hair – black women were going natural and ditching relaxers. Overwhelmed with the drive to Jackson every weekend and the lack of Black hairstylists and Black salons, Ashley was forced to make the natural transition. Ashley was also forced to adapt to this different white culture she’d chosen to immerse herself in academically. Based off a saying by her mother in one of their conversations regarding Black people at Ole Miss and ultimately her thesis film title, Ashley loves to refer to herself and other black people at Ole Miss as “the fly in the buttermilk.” She recalls her first day at Ole Miss and what that experience was like as the only black person in her graduate magazine class:

Being Black at Ole Miss in different spaces meant something different. I remember my first day of class. I signed up for a course that I didn’t take the prerequisite because it was my first day – a new student! And I’ll never forget the professor. He was this big white guy and he was passing out the syllabus. He wasn’t looking at the students, he was just passing it out. But it’s like I stuck out like a sore thumb [laughs]. And he’s like “You might as well drop this class; you’re not going to pass it.” And I was just like “Excuse me?” I went back and forth with him, but I decided to leave the classroom. Later I went by his office and was like, “I’m a new student. No, I didn’t take the [prerequisite] but my advisor said I can sign up for it because I’m a new student and I believe that I will do good.” And he still said you should just drop the class without a reason. And what it meant to be the only Black student in that class – initially I felt really small and I felt ignored…So I signed up for another course, but for the next two weeks I still went to the class. He can’t put me out! I still observed, I participated, and then I left. It was a magazine class…and they were trying to come up with a title and we all submitted titles anonymously. And the last day I was in there he pulled out the
different titles, put them on the board, [students] voted, mine won. And I walked out like yeah bruh! That was me!

As a black woman, the only black woman in her class, Ashley felt subjugated, not taken seriously, ridiculed, and a host of other emotions Black women and Black people in general feel at Ole Miss. In many classes you will only see between one and five students of color. With such an impressive academic background, Ashley was appalled at the professor’s comments. Very few times did Ashley feel challenged academically because she loves school and learning. Never had she been academically challenged by way of cultural intelligence – because that’s what she felt – that her professor presumed her intellectually inadequate to fulfill his course as a Black female student, and Ashley was bothered. This was the first of many moments Ashley had been challenged as a Black student in a classroom at Ole Miss and in many other spaces at Ole Miss. She went on to pursue her Master’s in Journalism topping it off with her final film titled “The Fly in the Buttermilk: The History, Perceptions, and Principles of Black Greek Lettered Organizations at Ole Miss,” which is a documentary series detailing a variety of black experiences at Ole Miss, one of them include the student union and how white students perceive Black Greek lettered organizations during Union Unplugged as “a ghetto, ratchet city.”

Also in the Journalism School works Alysia Steele, Assistant Professor of Multiple Platform Journalism. As one of very few black professors, Professor Steele takes much pride in her job and does not take it easy on her students, especially her students of color. A friend of mine and former Journalism student, Jasmyn Brown, noted
how Professor Steele put her out of the classroom and locked the door on the first day because she was two minutes late to class. Jasmyn, a very sensitive young lady, was very upset and embarrassed that Professor Steele put her out of the classroom because she was a few minutes tardy. Jasmyn visited Professor Steele the next day to discuss the matter, where Steele emotionally delivered to Jasmyn the importance of Black women at this university and being prompt and poised at all times. Jasmyn said Professor Steele noted that her actions the first day of class were not to embarrass or drop her from the course, but to provide a framework for black students to succeed in every manner, whether its academically or just showing up on time for class.

Like students, Professor Steele has also found herself challenged in classroom settings. For this professor, she’s not challenged by her colleagues, but more so by her own students. Because of these experiences, she’s tough on her black female students so that they’ll know how to react if and when put in similar situations.

I work in the journalism building where I am 1 of 4 African American professors in the building, including my husband. There’s a lot of pressure being that representation because you’re working with students – Caucasian students – who have never had a black or African American professor. They’ve never taken direction from one. In some capacities, I look like someone that would have taken care of them and so there’s a challenge of hierarchy, so we have to establish that right away. But they learn from me and hopefully I learn something from them, so I think that we’re breaking some barriers just by having that dynamic in the school.

Alysia Steele was pressured by the students registered in her class, needing to earn a grade different from which she determined. As a result, she delicately disciplines those who question her authority. Aware of her power as a professor at a flagship institution, she encourages her students to learn and allows them to grow with her as she
learns too. Aware of her identity, she mentors some of her black students, specifically black females, and like most black women internally do, she pushes her students to prevail into strong, intelligent, and powerful black women so that they are able to take those traits with them and encourage other black women to do the same. While doing so, she proudly expresses her identity by displaying her tattoos and wearing her afro. She wants to portray the message that “her work is good, so she shouldn’t have to change who she is” and she wants her black female students to apply that same message to their lives. She never feels the need to alter or herself and neither should her students in white settings.

On the other hand, alteration and apprehension is something some black female students feel the need that they must comply with in order to progress in life. Ole Miss senior and student worker, Shakayla Yates grew up in Jackson, MS and shortly moved to Brandon, MS. Hinds County where Jackson resides and Rankin County where Brandon resides have totally different demographics and this changed Shakayla’s upbringing in Rankin County drastically. Jackson is a predominately black city, where Brandon is the complete opposite. As a result of attending middle and high school in Rankin County School District, which is also predominantly white, Shakayla says she’s the white girl in her friend group. Many of her friends says she talks differently, or as some black people say, “you talk white.” Shakayla never feels that she’s acting or talking white. She just believes that she adapted to the cultures and her friends in Rankin County. When Shakayla came to Ole Miss there wasn’t a culture shock for her. She was used to being the minority. For Shakayla, being the minority also meant adapting and assimilating to
the cultures around you. Her parents are very old-fashioned and taught her to listen to her 
authority in order to move successfully and freely in life. Shakayla has done just that 
during her tenure as a student and as a student worker. She explains why she feels the 
need to conform:

I work here on campus in a building that is a white space, plainly speaking. There 
aren’t any women in that building that look like me. So when senior directors 
come or people in high places come and want to introduce themselves to me or 
talk to me about a project they want me to participate in, I do feel the need to 
straighten my hair or have something in my hair where it’s not out and have 
makeup on just because that seems to be what’s expected anyway.

Like Ashley said earlier, “In different spaces meant something different at Ole 
Miss.” Shakayla straightens her hair or chooses protective styles to cover her natural hair 
before going to work or meeting with leaders on her job. She loves installing protective 
styles such as braids and sew-ins when asked by a friend to a white event. One of the 
main events she’s invited to are date parties, which are parties hosted by public venues 
paid for by white fraternities and sororities. On the other hand, Shakayla is perfectly 
comfortable wearing her natural hair in Black spaces at Ole Miss or in Oxford. Those 
events may include probates or parties hosted by black Greek-lettered organizations. 

Shakayla is very comfortable around her own people, but is slightly uptight around white 
folks because she feels that she has to respect and conform to their ways to reach a high 
position in her job as well. Not so often does she wear her natural hair to work because 
she’s side-eyed by some of her co-workers and directors which pressures her to buy a wig 
or get a sew-in installed with processed hair she buys for styling. Shakayla loves her 
natural hair and made the decision to go natural at a time in her life where she struggled
with loving herself and feeling adequate enough for social acceptance. Shakayla also
struggled with her parents regarding her hair and internal journey. Her step-father
despises natural hair, so when Shakayla’s mom decided to go natural he looked at his
wife in disgust and Shakayla received that same image when she also went natural.
Shakayla’s mom ultimately reverted to the relaxer to satisfy her husband, but Shakayla is
learning to only satisfy herself, because she loves her natural hair.
Chapter III. Rebellion vs Apprehension to Black Hair in Society

Before Black Lives Matter there was Black Power. Before Black Power, Freedom Riders peacefully protested segregation and registered black people to vote, and before all of these historical movements several enslaved communities rebelled against the harsh brutality of their masters in slave uprisings. Black people been fighting. Although only a few black women have been at the forefront of these movements, they’re behind the scenes organizing the rebellion. As time progresses fashion styles change, but racial oppression remains the same. I will argue in this chapter whether being natural and fighting systemic racism is a form of rebellion. Black women have fought systemic racism and oppression in this country for years, some with afros and some with wigs and straightened hairstyles. For some black women, wearing their natural hair isn’t an act of protest. Its their daily journey and a simple non-political decision they chose to make, for some at least. Hair is complicated so I want to complicate the idea that not all natural hair women view their hair decision as a protest. I also want to complicate the idea that women with natural hair are the only ones rebelling because of their appearance. The story of rebellion within black women is internal and hair may or may not reflect their decision to protest racial oppression as seen in history. Towards the end of my chapter I will break down the term protective style as it relates to the modern culture black women’s hairstyling and whether that should be viewed as an act of rebellion or conformity. I will also argue whether protective hairstyles are viewed as an act of rebellion at all.
White Europeans considered themselves the founders of America and after forcing Black Africans to labor the land that would become known as the Americas, they considered themselves the cultivators as well. Thus, everything which represented them and their bodies – whiteness – was life’s ideal standard of beauty and class. Pure white skin, long blonde hair, blue eyes, and slender bodies were the perfect representation of elitism, and the only standard of achieving wealth, rank, and class in the society. With European bodies and hair held up as the beauty standard, black men and women were interested in straightening their hair, thus creating a homegrown system of black hair care. Byrd and Tharpes provide an analysis of how products were created by the enslaved for black hair care:

Without the combs, herbal ointments, and palm oil used in Africa for hairdressing, the slaves were forced to use common western household products and equipment to achieve certain styles. Instead of palm oil, the slaves took to using oil-based products like bacon grease and butter to condition and soften the hair, prepare it for straightening, and make it shine. Cornmeal and kerosene were used as scalp cleaners, and coffee became a natural dye for women. Several methods of straightening the hair were concocted by ingenious blacks who were short on commercial products. men would slick axle grease meant for wagon wheels over their hair for a combination dye job and straightener. Women would slather the hair with butter, bacon fat, or goose grease and then use a butter knife heated in a can over a fire as a crude curling iron. Sometimes a piece of cloth warmed over a flame would be pulled across the head and worn for a short while to stretch the curls out. Women also wrapped their hair in strings, strips of nylon, cotton, or eel skin to decrease the kink and leave looser curls. some slave mothers took to wrapping their children’s hair to start “training” it to go straight as early as infancy. The most mordant device used to straighten the hair was lye, mixed with potatoes to decrease its caustic nature. This creamy concoction was smeared on the hair and the lye would straighten the curls. unfortunately, it could also eat the skin right off a person’s head (Byrd & Tharpes, 16-17).

Enslaved communities had become accustomed to the ideas and language white people expressed regarding social hierarchy and beauty. Black people endured centuries
of brutal mental and physical trauma. Many of which were never complimented, unless a black female slave by her white master for the benefit of sexual gain. Black men especially were defamed because of contradicting social and science theories of the black body – smaller brains, disease carriers, enlarged sex organs, and more. For some enslaved people, assimilating to white beauty standards would detract from the theories of Black people while others genuinely hoped their physical change would gain greater respect or acceptance from white authorities. Many enslaved peoples simply wanted to recreate the hairstyles on their bodies because of the images all around them. They didn’t do it for social benefit, but simply for stylistic pleasure because slavery was unchanging regardless of a slave’s appearance.

Following emancipation and the short period of Black leadership during reconstruction, some former slaves and descendants of slaves continued with hair straightening products or their own homemade remedies created during slavery. Black politicians emerged and prominent leaders like W.E.B DuBois and Booker T. Washington voiced their concerns for the black community and with opposing political views created agendas for the improvement and advancement of black people. One thing the two leaders agreed upon was the politics of black hair. Booker T. Washington directed his energy not to all the black people altering their hair textures, but hair care manufacturers that distribute the products. One of the hair care companies was that of Madam CJ Walker’s. Byrd and Tharpes note “Washington initially went so far as to ban beauty “culturists” from working as instructors at his famed Tuskegee Institute, a school created for the purpose of teaching various trades to African Americans. Owners of hair
care product firms were also for a time denied membership in Washington’s national negro business league (NNBL), an organization dedicated to the task of promoting black commerce, even though hairdressing for both men and women proved to be one of the most profitable post-slavery black-owned enterprises,” (Byrd & Tharpes, 37-38).

Walker, who also enforced and advocated for the advancement of Black people was infuriated by Washington’s actions and statements regarding hair care companies and products, particularly her company. Denied acceptance to be heard and recognized at Washington’s NNBL annual convention, she exclaimed, “Surely you are not going to shut the door in my face,” after three days of trying to gain the attention of convention participants. She proclaimed she knew “how to grow hair as well as I know how to grow cotton. I have built my own factory on my own ground.” An unmoved Washington claimed, “The profession did not qualify as a legitimate means of pulling oneself up by one’s bootstraps.”

Meanwhile other black leaders criticized the assimilation enhanced within the hair straightening cultures, while also unknowingly providing a framework that supported it. W.E.B DuBois criticized the black community for “always looking at oneself through the ideas of others.” Yet Dubois wore his hair naturally wavy. The concept of good hair and bad hair follows back to enslavement with the bickering of house and field slaves. Some house slaves were subjected to in-house duties simply because they were a product of sexual assault from the master. The appearances of those produced through forced sexual orientation of master and female slave was that of fair skin and long fine hair. These products of people were usually limited to in house duties and thus scorned by field
slaves who were generally darker toned with kinky hair. This idea of fair skinned people, some of those being biracial, were fixated in American culture as having “good hair” which was better than those with kinky hair textures. Wavy, coily and any loose curled hair textures are considered “good.” Marcus Garvey who also denounced straight hair, owned and operated *Negro World* which devoted at least two thirds of advertisements to hair products, some of which included hair straighteners.

During the Civil Rights movement, community members and leaders were criticized for their “compliance” to white authority. The Civil Rights movement for many Black people was a movement of peace in protest of Black oppression and injustice. Civil Rights activists rebelled against segregation policies through acts of nonviolence, most of which including complying to white authority. These activists were scorned by radical Black Power leaders on the rise because of their ability to adhere to racial oppression by their acts of non-violence. However, the Civil Rights movement was just as a rebellion as the black power movement, just different tactics. The appearance of those radical leaders in the Black Power movement included that of black attire, large afros, and guns, which to the world represented nonconformity and violence. The appearance of those during the Civil Rights movement was that of business attire and straightened hair for most women, which to the world represented a placid, harmonious group of people, but perhaps their appearance was just one of deceit. Many leaders of the Civil Rights movements were preachers, so suits, slacks, and ties were common. The type of clothing was also just the stylistic choice of clothing for that era. Both the Civil Rights and Black Power movement organized agendas that would advance the Black community and alternatively provide
equality for both human races. The terminology and structure of both organizations and movements were distinctive. “Negro” and “Colored” were still used to address the Black community, one that white society created. For Black Power leaders, being called negro and colored were terms they did not accept and ridiculed leaders of the Civil Rights movement for allowing themselves to sustain that terminology created by the same white people who oppress them. The terminology of black people shifted to that of “African Americans” and simply “Black.” Byrd and Tharpes share a statement made by Assata Shakur, “The shift to calling oneself black and being proud of it translated into a style that proudly hearkened back to Africa. More than skin color, the word became a political statement in terms of one’s consciousness, color, and culture. After generations of trying to neutralize distinctive African characteristics, people began to celebrate them. And just as hair had been central to the way blacks of earlier years had sought to mainstream themselves, hair became a key determinant in visually declaring Black Pride,” (B&T, 53).

Because of the terminology and the appearance activists of the Civil Rights movement chose to express considered them conformists of the white beauty standard and white society overall. Because the Civil Rights community refused to raise a gun and physically fight law enforcers, they were considered “coons” for assimilating to white society. Contrary to the belief leaders and activists of the Civil Rights movement were assimilating to white society because of their agenda to peacefully protest and wear hair straighteners, does not make them complacent to white society. They did just that of the Black Panthers during the Black Power movement – protest. Black activism does not have an appearance. It’s the agenda carried out by those indivuals and how they choose to
deny oppression and injustice. This idea complies with the modern Black Power movement – Black Lives Matter (#BLM) Shortly after the U.S. Government dismantled the Black Power movement, exiling and murdering its leaders, the movement lost its voice. White society had become comfortable with the afro as white entertainers and people in the white community sported the fro by altering their own hair in the 70s. This created a shift back to hair straighteners for the black community. Decades later, the black community would find themselves revisiting their cultural roots and heritage thus creating a major transformation back to afros and African hairstyles. Black pride and excellence were now trending and being black was everything from natural hairstyles to academic and creative capacity. However, not every black person that celebrated black excellence and black culture represented an afro. The movement of Black – advancement and adoration of everything Black – has always been represented throughout history but was received by the younger generations of the Black community following police brutality in 2014. 2014 was a critical year for the Black community and law enforcement as Black deaths increased at the hands of white officers. As a result, #BLM was at its peak. This was also a pivotal year for black women transitioning to natural hair.

With natural hair care products booming in the hair industry, the new appearance of Black pride includes that of curly or kinky fros and modern black power t-shirts reclaiming their pride. Transitioning natural hair included that of protective styles. Protective styling for black women is any extra weave or virgin hair installed to their hair. Black women use these styles for time sake, but also for work-related reasons. Natural hair is a process. Twisting and washing the hair can take up hours or even a full
day. Protective styles such as braids, crochet, or sew-ins with virgin hair, eliminate that
time. On the other hand, many black women hold high positions in their work fields or
may work in a predominantly white space where their natural hair may be disregarded.
For some black women, eliminating the discussion around their hair or the self-
consciousness on their job, protective styles are imposed.

Figure 7

Le-Dra Luce, UM Senior, enjoys protective styles for the purpose of time sake. It
takes time for her to get ready in the mornings for school and work and having to style of
her own hair can get very complicated and time-consuming. Here, she wears a sew-in
which is virgin hair that’s actually processed in the manufacturers by Asian labor
workers, which she and other black women purchase from either white or black hair vendors to be installed and styled.

![Image of Ashley Norwood wearing box braids](image)

**Courtesy of Ashley Norwood**

**Figure 8**

Ashley Norwood, former UM Journalism graduate student, wears box braids as a form of protective style in the images pictured above. Norwood, who has the pleasure of holding several occupations – radio reporter of Mississippi Public Broadcasting, TV Producer of Issue, and Professor of Journalism at Jackson State University, finds herself in many settings in the Journalism industry that are predominantly white. She realizes that her natural hair sparks conversations that it shouldn’t, so to eliminate those
conversations, Ashley chooses to wear protective styles such as this. She often feels the need to wear protective styles because of the business she’s in. She loves her natural hair, but often chooses to wear other hairstyles when given the opportunity to report on television. Some view that as conformity, but she feels otherwise and simply likes “certain looks” for different jobs.

For some black people all forms of protective hairstyling is conformity. Especially in this era of Black pride and self-love, everything natural about the Black body should be expressed and represented. That includes natural black hair, whether its curly, straight, or dreadlocks. That also includes the elimination of body alterning. For many, Black womanhood is something that’s celebrated in its most natural essence.
Zaire Love, current UM Documentary Expression MFA student sports dreadlocks.
Jasmyn Brown, former UM Journalism students, wears her hair naturally straight. Although similar looking to Le-Dra Luce’s bought virgin hair, this is Jasmyn’s authentic hair type and length.
These photos, along with Zaire Love’s dreadlocks, are the images considered “natural” – natural hair grown out the scalp and represented freely on the black woman’s daily commute. Black hair is very complex and does not contain one style. Although some may argue straightened natural hair or protective styles are signs of conformity, its how we choose to freely represent and express ourselves. Our hairstyles don’t always determine our political opinion. Many women with protective styles, those included box braids and weave, proudly protest against racial and social injustice throughout the nation and on The University of Mississippi campus.

The university’s small Black community struggled with both the loss of black people around the world, but the university’s own racial tensions and ties to the confederacy haunting black students every day. Mississippi’s state flag daunts and disgusts the minute percentage of black folks at the university every day. Black students push through class and work as churlish white frat boys recklessly drove by in their pick-up trucks with Mississippi state flag tags and decals. Many still proudly support the confederacy having been taught that its history is a great part of their American heritage. This flag, which is quickly recognized with its bold blue X and white stars mimicking the American flag’s colors was adopted by the state in 1894. Although the flag was repealed in 1906, it remained in de facto use. The fall semester of 2015 was a very crucial one for the University of Mississippi regarding the state’s most prized memorabilia – the Mississippi state flag. Deeply rooted in confederate history, the university continues to embellish and celebrate its history with statues and emblems throughout the campus. Standing tall, a confederate soldier rests in Circle of the university. The university’s
football team uniform pants are identified as “confederate grey,” and the Mississippi state flag waved high and proud adjacent to the saluting soldier in the circle. Many black students and allies that entered the campus loathed the confederate glory and the university’s dedication to racist bigots, planters, and slave-owners which various buildings are named after, not to mention the nickname *Ole Miss*. After suffering so many heartaches of innocent black kings and queens dying at the hands of white policemen, the black folk at Ole Miss had enough. Black folks demanded the flag be taken down. White folks retaliated. Student groups disassociated. There were high tensions on campus as protest and rallies were held. When it was all said and done, the flag was peacefully removed from the campus of Ole Miss, sparking national attention.

The beauty in this protest for the flag takedown was the unapologetic ambience received from black folks. Black women wore their afros and raised their fist in protest of the university’s confederate glorification. Black folk stood firm and were confident in their words as their white counterparts debated them. Black students reaffirmed the confederate glorification, pride, and heritage to the negligence of black lives. Representing and supporting such history neglects to affirm the importance of black lives and our existence in this society, and especially within this university. Black Lives Matter and the Ole Miss administration failed to understand and administer that message. Despite some conformity challenges on this predominantly white campus, more black women protested the flag with representation of their natural hair. Afros and “Black Lives Matter” t-shirts surfaced throughout campus during the protests. One of my favorite images included one of the leaders of the flag takedown, Dominique Garrett-
Scott, as she marched across the campus in her afro with a “Fuck Your Flag” t-shirt. The messages these women displayed shocked many. By protesting white supremacy with black pride woke everyone. The retaliation and rebellion to the flag mirrored the black power movement with its importance of black pride and uniformity amongst the black community. In the same token, not all black women with natural hair supported the movement by protesting the flag. All women of color were seen with all forms of hairstyles whether it was naturally curly, naturally straight, in a protective style, or relaxed. What mattered was the power of black voices and black womanhood spreading throughout the campus and essentially throughout the nation. A woman doesn’t have to be natural to be black and powerful. Its her voice and her presence that ultimately matters.
Chapter IV. Reflexive Methodology

This project was created for two purposes: to give representation of Black women at this predominantly white institution and share my story of being a Black woman with natural hair at this institution through the stories of other Black women. Overshadowed by the sports culture and racial adversity this university continues to reflect, Black women’s voices go unheard. In some cases, because of the university’s demographics, the representation of Black women lacks that of their white female counterparts. Attending this institution from 2012-2019 accumulating one bachelor’s, one master’s, with another master’s pending, I’ve endured and experienced a lot as a woman, as a black student and staff member, and as a woman with natural hair. In 2014, I felt moved to transition to my natural hair due to the racial calamity nationally and locally at Ole Miss. As did many women I interviewed for my thesis film transitioned in 2014, I wanted to know exactly why they transitioned as well and what they experienced as Black women in this society of Ole Miss.

My research for this project began the summer of 2018 going into my first semester of the MFA program in Documentary Expression. As a MA student in Southern Studies, all of my work focused on minority groups of people – black people at Ole Miss, custodial staff members at Ole Miss, and LGBT members. I wanted my work to reflect the beauty of those minority people not represented often in mainstream media, and at Ole Miss itself. For my MFA thesis, I wanted this work to focus primarily on Black women since much of my work for my first master’s focused heavily on black men. As a minority at Ole Miss, I found joy in seeing, meeting, and growing relationships with
constituents of the University that looked like me. I loved seeing black women walking and teaching around campus. I loved seeing afro puffs and curly hair on the heads of Black women at this university. I wanted to document that. I wanted to document the beauty, struggles, and resilience of Black womanhood at this university, specifically those that looked like me, with natural hair.

June 2018 to October 2018 was devoted strictly to the scholarship of the project. Most of that scholarship work was received from an independent study course at Ole Miss on African-American’s Women’s History gracefully lectured by an African-American tenured professor, who happens to be natural. Much of the scholarship provided and required of analysis benefited greatly to my project. With the setback of an injury in the middle of the fall semester, my film work did not begin until late November 2018. From that moment until the end of February 2019, I conducted over 14 interviews of current and former black students, faculty, and staff members of Ole Miss. I reached out to black women with natural hair that I knew personally at Ole Miss and would be happy to assist me in my documentary. I chose to create a film because the voice of the black woman is more powerful than the photograph, which is the media I initially chose for this project. I also wanted to show the visual representation of protective styles as their stories reflected them. Throughout my filming process, I was introduced to other black women by those I’d interviewed who felt their stories should be shared as well. Reaching out to those referred women of color, they too happily agreed to do an interview. With the help of the women interviewed, I was also introduced to the Women
of Color Network at Ole Miss, as well as the NPHC council, filling my calendar with plenty of black women to interview. During the interview I asked questions like:

*When did you decide to become natural?*

*What does being black mean to you in this white space?*

*Do you ever feel pressured to conform to a white standard of beauty by straightening hair or wearing hairstyles that cover your natural hair?*

*Do you view wearing your natural hair as an act of rebellion at this institution?*

*Do you view wearing weaves or other protective styles as an act of conformity?*

These along with other questions generated healthy and often emotional conversations for some women. For some of the women, the interview was an eye-opener and self-reflection. Some realized they were actually conforming to this white society and left wanting to change that idea, while others did not feel rebellious at all by wearing their natural hair simply because it’s something that’s already a part of them and they’re not trying to make any political statements by it.

I struggled with some interviewees as their answers were vague or if they were simply shy in front of the camera. One interviewee was that of a faculty member at the university. We were introduced through the Women of Color Network and scheduled an interview through text. When scheduling interviews I was always careful to mention they’d be on camera, rather than an interview used with a voice recorder. Most of my interviews were scheduled in the South Docs department, the main building which services Documentary Expression students, faculty, and staff. In that building is a studio where all but one, of my interviews took place. So, upon her arrival, she was startled to
find the video setup for the film, which were the lights, camera and mic. Giving each of my interviewees the reassurance to freely pull out of the interview for the protection of their voice and identity on this campus, I relayed the same information to this woman. She seemed hesitant, but agreed to do the interview, which ended up being great and full of information and quotes I could provide in both my essay and documentary. Immediately following the film, she asked why I chose to complete this project as a film. I told her why and she asked would it be screened anywhere or just for fulfillment of thesis work. I told her that I will be screening the film on campus and in festivals across Mississippi and beyond. Her face turned red and she immediately asked to be pulled out of the document. I was very frustrated because I’d asked her for reassurance before I pressed the record button to begin the interview and she, again, said yes for the interview. She stated she “can sometimes be too honest and doesn’t want to get in trouble for it.” She also simply stated “She didn’t want to risk her job.” I used this lesson of my thesis work to always have subjects sign release forms before the interview. This woman’s interview lasted almost an hour and provided great commentary for the struggles she endured as a woman of color on this campus and as a black professor.
Conclusion

This essay and project will serve as a reflexive documentary. In his text “Introduction to Documentary,” Bill Nichols provides the definition of reflexive documentaries as it relates to mine, “Reflexive documentaries also address issues of realism. This is a style that seems to provide unproblematic access to the world; it takes form as physical, psychological, and emotional realism through techniques of evidentiary or continuity editing, character development, and narrative structure. Reflexive documentaries challenge these techniques and conventions,” (Nichols, 126). In the beginning of the project, I wanted both my voice and story to be told through film like those featured. Throughout each interview, I realized I shared some of the same stories and struggles as the women I interviewed. So instead, I chose to represent myself through their stories in the way I shaped the structure of the film: transition from relaxed to natural, conformity to rebellion of Ole Miss’s racial adversity, and experiences of struggle and resilience as a Black woman and a Black constituent of Ole Miss. Like many of the women, I too, struggled with self-consciousness. My body wasn’t something I viewed as beautiful nor was it celebrated because these were the same things I saw in the media – shaming black women’s bodies and lacking the representation of black women period, specifically positive representation. So, I chose to display my body in intimate moments throughout the film. One of which included my back tattoo showing which I skeptically choose to display in academic settings. The second image was of me in my home. The message for both images was how comfortably I chose to present myself without makeup and without fear of how I would be perceived by my white counterparts.
viewing this film. It was also just as important for how my black counterparts would react to my intimate images.

My journey and the journey of other black women asking and wondering these ideas while also overcoming struggles of blackness is one of beauty and should be shared not only across this institution, but nationally. Black hair and its struggles as it pertains to womanhood isn’t only solidified to The University of Mississippi, but is universal to other predominantly white institutions, as well as struggles in society that black women of all different backgrounds can relate to. This project celebrates the beauty and struggle of black womanhood through the voices of black women.
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