

# **Black Hair: Centring the Offline and Online Geographies of Young Black British Women**

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Finally, I dedicate this project to my participants. Your journeys are inspiring, and thank you for trusting me with your most intimate experiences.

## Abstract

This study is concerned with black British women's offline and online hair journeys. Situated within the framework of Afrocentricity, the study seeks to transgress traditional Eurocentric theorisations of African experiences and instead illustrate the weight of an African centred framework when discussing the lived realities of the African diaspora. Embodying afro hair often dictates how one takes up space, whether this is in the school setting, work place or online, afro hair has an inherent geography which signifies ones belonging and identity. By analysing black women's engagement with the online Natural Hair Movement, this study reveals the fluidity of their identities, which cannot be compartmentalised exclusively to online or offline spaces.

## Chapter One: Introduction

### *Black Hair: An Introduction*

Hair is heavily entangled in the history and cultural identity of continental and diasporic Africans. Prior to imperial and colonial encounters, hair was multi-purposeful for African peoples; and depending on the community, hair was frequently used to communicate different messages and social codes (Byrd and Tharps, 2014). A notable example includes the Wolof women of West Africa (present day Senegal and The Gambia) who ‘would either not “do” [their] hair [in mourning] or adopt a subdued style’ (Jahangir, 2015). Consequent of colonial and imperial projects that placed derogatory labels on afro hair, such as “woolly” and “cotton-like”, black women turned to straightening techniques to dis-identify with the “kinks” of their hair. Black hair is therefore enmeshed in legacies of displacement, the search for belonging and negotiations of Eurocentric beauty standards. Studying black hair thus illuminates these contested experiences, and also maps the diaspora’s acquired senses for manoeuvring exclusionary spaces.

### *The Natural Hair Movement*

Black women have recently began rejecting the mental and physical legacies of oppression through the reclamation of their roots (Luter, 2014). Though the Natural Hair Movement is considered to be a revolution that is influencing black women to return to natural hair, it is not the first of its kind. The 1960s Civil Rights Movement is referred to as the first wave of the Natural Hair Movement (Byrd and Tharps, 2014). During the 1960s, the diaspora witnessed a similar shift in beauty standards and representations, as the afro became the iconic symbol of black power and liberation.

The Natural Hair Movement re-emerged in the early 2000s (Luter, 2014) as a transnational online hair care Movement which sought to educate black women on the ways to maintain healthy natural hair. The continued under representation of black women on television and in print magazines led them to construct their own spaces catering specifically to their needs and experiences. The Natural Hair Movement has undoubtedly transformed the beauty and hair care industry by highlighting the adverse impacts that normalised beauty standards have on black women. Though the Movement has been somewhat successful in ‘harnessing consumer agency’ (Spaulding, 2015, p.132), it has simultaneously been criticised for re-introducing the same beauty standards that it is attempting to eradicate.

### *Dissertation Aims*

As a member of the African diaspora, I have often felt that my hair played the role of affirming my belonging within different spatial contexts. I obtained my first chemical relaxer at the age of 7, consequent of my experience within a predominantly white primary school. Having been teased and ostracised over my natural hair, over time I began to detest it and instead longed for a more manageable and socially accepted hairstyle. At the age of 18, I was influenced by the online Natural Hair Movement to return “back to natural”. My prior experiences have therefore inspired me to explore the following aims:

What are the factors motivating young black British women to (in)directly engage in the online Natural Hair Movement?

- Though the movement has its roots in the United States, it nonetheless symbolises a transnational struggle that black women experience globally. This thesis thus seeks to give voice to the African diaspora here in the United Kingdom.

To what extent do social networking sites act as alternative spaces to learn more about black hair?

- Due to the oppressive histories that African peoples endured, natural hair care techniques were eradicated through oppressive measures, and further alienated through black women's attempts to conform to normalised beauty standards. Over time, that knowledge was subsequently lost. This question therefore seeks to explore whether/how these roots are being reintroduced.

In what ways have these spaces facilitated identity (re)construction for young black British women?

- Lastly, black women's identities are repeatedly depicted as entangled in their hair, this question seeks to explore black women's negotiations of offline and online spaces, and the similarities and differences in how they experience those spaces.

### *Dissertation Structure*

Succeeding this introduction will be the literature review, where the discussions and developments taking place within the relevant academic discourses will be highlighted.

After the literature review, there will be a summary of the methodological tools utilised to collect and review the primary data. Furthermore, the analysis section of this dissertation will be compartmentalised into three separate chapters: Narrating Childhood Experiences, Black Hair and Identity, and The Online Natural Hair Movement. This research will conclude by affirming the complexity of black women's online and offline geographies.



## Chapter Two: Literature Review

### *Introduction*

This review will focus predominantly on the literature from the discipline of Geography.

Given the nature of this research and geography's limited engagement with black identities and experiences, it was necessary to draw on the literature from disciplines such as Cultural Studies and Black Studies to contextualise the complexities (Banks, 2005) of black British women's lived experiences. Despite the prevalence of a black revolution taking place before our eyes, the geographical discipline is still yet to engage with the ways in which black women are taking up online and offline space (Daniels, 2013; Byrd and Tharps, 2014), in ways that are redefining black beauty performance.

### *Children's Geographies and Narrating the Past*

Critical to understanding present identities, is paying attention to how individuals narrate their past. However, there continues to be a divide amongst geographers who are doubtful of people's ability to effectively recall childhood memories (Schactel, 1959; Philo, 2003), and those who feel that it is possible for adults to travel back to their childhood (McGeachan, 2013). Despite these internal disputes, the geographical literature on childhood memories enables us to appreciate present bodies as material that is inscribed by past experiences. Notably, 'every fibre of our bodies, every cell of our brains, holds memories' (Casey, 1987, p.ix).

Furthermore, there has been a growing focus on the ways in which memory is inextricably linked to place and identity formation (Said, 2000; Hoelscher and Alderman, 2004; Kraftl, 2013). As the geographical discipline asserts, identity goes hand in hand with location because most experiences are localised; including memories. Thus, the same way our

experiences are informed by the our individual and collective localities, memories also serve to inform our present identities (Jones, 2003,2011). Whilst there is an overwhelming amount of geographical scholarship centred on children in public/private spaces, children as agents (Ansell, 2009) and constructing young identities (Gagen, 2000; Cartwright, 2012), the literature concerning black girls' identities and their geographies is practically non-existent (Banks, 2005). This marginalisation of black bodies within the discipline consequently ignores black girls' negotiations of intersecting identities and their distinctive navigation skills.

### *The African Diaspora*

For Hall (1990), Africa is a symbolic marker of shared histories of colonialism, imperialism and resistance. The African diaspora's lived realities are therefore complex (Gilroy, 1993; Hall, 1997) and simultaneously entwined in transnational experiences of displacement (Carter, 2006).

The literature on diasporic experiences spans across various disciplines and has focused on the multiple identities that govern how one moves through space (Okazawa-Rey et al., 1987; Crenshaw, 1995; McCall, 2005), with the skin operating as the primary signifier of ones belonging (Howarth, 2002). This racialisation of bodies has been explored by Fanon (1986) and Said's (1993) interrogation of enlightenment discourses that positioned black bodies as marginal to whiteness. Black feminists however, have in comparison focused specifically on the social conditions that black women in the diaspora are exposed to (Reid and Comas-Diaz, 1990), particularly the demonisation of black womanhood (Pro'Sobopha, 2005) in white spaces (Finney, 2014).

### *Afrocentricity: Moving the Centre*

Afrocentricity, coined by Dr Molefi Kete Asante, is an epistemological standpoint rooted in the interests of African people. Similarly to the literature concerning the African diaspora, Afrocentricity seeks to centre African voices (Collins, 1990; Bob and Perry, 2014). Bob and Perry's (2014) insightful article titled '*Transforming Human Geography: Embracing Afrocentricity*,' calls on the discipline to reassess what constitutes as legitimate knowledge. They directly criticise the discipline for overlooking the concepts and contexts that black experiences are situated in. This call to humanise African voices and interests (Mazama, 2001; Bob and Perry, 2014) should be of critical concern to the geographical discipline. As asserted by Asante (1988, 2007) Afrocentricity is about moving the centre, not in a way that fosters the construction of a new central location, but instead acknowledges all voices and ways of knowing the world as equal and valid (Asante, 1988; Mazama, 2001). Nonetheless, the origins of Afrocentricity continue to be debated amongst scholars, but for Okur (1993) this theoretical standpoint is not new, it simply builds on the frameworks of black revolutionaries such as Du Bois, Garvey, Fanon and Malcom X.

### *Race and Whiteness*

Despite the social constructionist turn, the geographical literature on race remains static (Mahtani, 2014), and scholarly works on race continue to be confined to dormant spaces when race governs our daily geographies (McKittrick, 2000; Mahtani, 2014). Due to this immobile theorisation of race, Peake (2011) is apprehensive about the relevance of geographical theory beyond the Eurocentric world. For Pile (1996) this immobility is a result of geography's inability to transgress the colonial gaze, which continues to confine black identities within the realm of whiteness.

Nonetheless, acknowledging whiteness as a socially constituted racial experience enables us to illustrate the ways in which space, particularly white spaces, are governed by normalised racial and cultural codes (Feagin et al., 1996; Dwyer and Jones, 2000; Gusa, 2010). Scholars researching race and whiteness have focused on the function of whiteness within institutional settings, specifically within work and school (Ansell, 2009; Thomas, 2009).

For Leonard (2002) and Zembylas (2010, 2011), white bodies are able to construct and maintain a culture that serves to afford those who fit into the realms of whiteness entry, whilst others are excluded (Ignatiev and Garvey, 1996; Kobayashi and Peake, 2000). Scholars have also researched the conditionalities attached to performing whiteness, specifically for black bodies (Frankenberg, 1993; Dyer, 1998; Ahmed, 2004; Reitman, 2006; Ahmed, 2007). Geographers such as McKittrick (2010) and Finney (2014) have extended the debate on whiteness by providing a more situated insight into the experiences of black bodies, and more specifically black women who find it difficult to navigate prescribed cultural codes due to their race and gender positioning.

### *Intersectional Identities*

Coined by Kimberle Crenshaw (Crenshaw, 1995) the term intersectionality is not limited to race, class and gender categorisations but refers to a range of intersecting identities that can be applied to specific groups or individuals (hooks, 1988; Collins, 1996; Mattis, 2004; Settles, 2006).

The literature on intersectionality provides a critical framework to analyse black women's experiences by considering how their identities are situated within complex intersections of space, class and gender (Tate, 2007; Valentine, 2007). For geographers, the space in which

one performs their identity is a critical site that reveals the fluidity their experiences (Valentine, 1993; Zembylas, 2011). However, depending on the circumstance, individuals may find that a particular identity is singled out to a greater degree. Geographers have located the work place as the site where black women experience multiple exclusions based on their multiple oppressions (Ignatiev and Garvey, 1996; Leonardo, 2002; Zembylas, 2010; Panelli, 2004; Towns, 2016).

Critically, there is a tendency to limit intersectionality to experiences of race, gender and class. Scholars such as Carbado and Gulati (2013) sought to go beyond these restrictive categories by bringing to the surface intra-discriminatory group differences. Essentially, this framework is critical to enhancing our knowledge on intracultural interactions, for example, skin and hair privileging hierarchies within the black community (Tate, 2007).

### *Black Hair*

Byrd and Tharps' (2014) book, titled *'Hair Story: Untangling the roots of black hair in America'* is a critical source within the literature as it provides a situated historical background to black hair. The material richness of black hair has been traced back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century, a period when African communities such as the Yoruba, Mende and Wolof societies wore their hair in intricate styles that communicated their societal status (Rosado, 2003; Chapman, 2007). However, there is a notable overrepresentation of the African American experience within the literature.

Furthermore, within the literature, there is a tendency to position hair straightening and hair relaxing as attempts to obtain white femininity (James-Todd et al., 2011; Fritsch, 2014). These discourses and narratives have been criticised for limiting black women's beauty

performances, and stripping black women of all agency and choice, as the discussion on black hair continues to be confined within colonial/anti-colonial discourses. For Weitz (2001) centring bodies as agents enables us to contextualise why and how particular inscription are accommodated and others resisted.

### *Social Media*

A reoccurring theme throughout the literature on social media is the reiteration of online spaces as sources of information (Vromen, 2008; Graham, 2013; Valenzuela, 2013). Vromen (2008) focused on the one-to-one interactions that have been facilitated through platforms such as Facebook and email messaging which enable users to distribute information more efficiently (Bruns, 2006) and to wider audiences (Poon and Jevons, 1997). Graham (2013) and Valenzuela (2013) have expanded on the discussion introduced by Vromen (2008), asserting that the distribution of information can also influence online community development. From this standpoint, information sharing thus mobilises groups to engage in online activism (Graham, 2013; Valenzuela, 2013).

Furthermore, the dialogues concerning online spaces as sites that foster community development (Baumeister and Leary, 1993; Ignacio, 2005; Gangadharbatla, 2008) have been on going. Castells (2000), who is frequently cited within the literature, coined the term 'real virtuality' which is used to refer to the internet as a virtual space. However, Castells' perception has attracted direct criticism from scholars such as Papacharissi (2009) who view the internet as an extension of physical space. Similarly, Martin (2003) and Longhurst (2009) have supported Papacharissi's contention by maintaining the notion that competing discourses of "physical space versus virtual space" overlook the fact that physical bodies influence how all spaces are experienced. Whether online or offline spaces are socially

constituted within everyday geographies and societal discourses. Massey (2005) however, moved away from these binaries of virtual and physical space to analysing the ways bodies take up online spaces. For Massey, online spaces can reshape the visibility of bodies, in ways that centre some bodies and marginalise others.

### *Disintermediation and Infomediaries*

Disintermediation remains relatively understudied within the discipline of geography. The literature on social media remains bounded to discourses concerning the distribution of information and online activism. Critically, studies on disintermediation have discussed the changing consumer culture that is being influenced by cyberspaces such as Youtube, Instagram and ecommerce sites (Amazon and Ebay). These sites have contributed to the elimination of spatial distance (Poon and Jevons, 1997) thus providing consumers with access to goods from practically anywhere in the world (Graham, 2008). Disintermediation refers to the removal of pre-defined value chains (Poon and Jevons, 1997) such as middle-men (Porter, 2001; Bruns, 2006) who previously facilitated consumer and market relations. Wrigley et al. (2002) however, identified that as well as the rise of disintermediation, there has also been the emergence of infomediaries, who act as agencies that accumulate information regarding products on behalf of companies and/or consumers. However, the process of disintermediation becomes questionable when the role of infomediaries is further scrutinised. It can be argued that power has simply shifted and is now situated in the hands of infomediaries who now maintain control over the marketisation of goods.

### *Summary*

The literature on children's geographies provided the foundation to begin understanding how young people construct their identities, with the race and identities discourses serving

the purposes of bridging the gap between childhood and adulthood identities. Embedded in contested experiences of exclusion, oppression and belonging, the collective literature reveals the complexity of black women's geographies. Nonetheless, my engagement with scholarly works from disciplines outside of geography also highlights the gaps that this thesis will seek to address. Whilst the discussion remains grounded in geographical discourses, this thesis also seeks to overcome the shortfalls of the discipline by centring black women's offline and online identities and their experiences of navigating exclusionary spaces.



## Chapter Three: Methodology

### *Introduction*

Deciding on an appropriate framework to position participants' narratives was a relatively tasking process. I wanted to place their experiences within an academic context that revealed the complex relationship that black women have with their hair. Due to the nature of Afrocentricity as a methodological and theoretical framework that is centred on 'establishing a world view about writing and speaking of [African] people' (Kete, 1987, p.159), I felt it appropriate to situate the experiences of participants within this paradigm. It is important to note that the 'geographical scope of Afrocentricity is not limited to Africa but wherever people declare themselves Africans' (Bob and Perry, 2014, p.292). This worldview seeks to connect both continental and diasporic Africans, whose lived experiences are linked through common struggles of colonialism and imperialism (Hall, 1997).

### *Afrocentricity*

Afrocentricity is therefore relevant to this study as it provides the conceptual tools to analyse the narratives of my participants. There is a lack of engagement with African centred methodologies within the discipline of geography. Therefore, this theoretical framework which has been borrowed from Black and Africana studies is critical to centralising 'African voices, experiences, concerns and interests' (Bob and Perry, 2014, p.304) within appropriate historical and cultural contexts. Current theoretical approaches within geography fail to contextualise prevalent cultural differences. Whilst human geography is a discipline that asserts that all knowledge is situational and relevant to specific cultural contexts, it continues to analyse the lived realities of continental and diasporic people through traditional Eurocentric paradigms (e.g. marxism, feminism,

structuralism). The Afrocentric idea deliberately seeks to locate (Asante, 1988; Asante, 2007; Mazama, 2001) African people at the centre of their experiences by acknowledging them as active agents in the construction of knowledge (Cloke, 2004) rather than subjects on the 'fringes of European [discourses]' (Asante, 2007, p.32). As reinforced by Dr. Asante, the 'worst form of marginality is being marginal within your own story' (Asante, 2007, p.41). Therefore, social justice is not only central to this research but is also an over-arching moral concept that unites both Afrocentricity and human geography.

### *Positionality and Reflexivity*

Throughout this research process I have continued to reflect on my position as a young black British woman who has shared similar experiences to those of my participants. Whilst some may deem this to have negative implications on the research, I would argue otherwise as it enabled me to establish a rapport with participants underpinned by trust and mutual understanding. Black women's hair journeys tend to be very personal. In particular, reflecting upon individual experiences is often accompanied by an emotional nakedness and vulnerability that can only be initiated through supportive sisterhood.

It is therefore vital for me to be transparent about how my race and gender positioning not only facilitated my access to participants but also assisted me in acquiring the data.

Nonetheless, these shared experiences have undoubtedly equipped me with the appropriate lenses to make sense of these acquired black hair narratives. As an insider, I am afforded the advantage of being able to situate the data I have collected in the appropriate academic discourses without misinterpreting the content and context (Ekingsmyth, 2002).

### *Participant Recruitment*

As a young black British female, I have spent most of my life attempting to “fit in” to predominantly white spaces. Frequently, I turn to social media outlets such as Facebook, YouTube and Instagram to learn more about my identity as well engage in discussions with other women who have shared similar experiences to myself. Finding the spaces to recruit participants for this study was therefore a relatively straightforward process. Though the online black hair community is considered to be a niche and gated space, being a member of several black hair forums on Facebook afforded me access to groups of individuals that may have otherwise been difficult to obtain (Dowling, 2016).

Social media has undoubtedly revolutionised the ways we collect data and recruit participants (Longhurst, 2009; Curtis and Mee, 2015). However, as researchers we are still obliged to engage in ethical research whilst manoeuvring online spaces. For these reasons, prior to reaching out to participants online, I sought permission from the group organisers. Once they were satisfied with the nature of my research, I was given the go ahead to recruit young black British female participants between the ages of 18-25 who identified as black. It was important for me to explicitly state the kind of participant that was required for this research as it enabled the relevant people to come forward. In addition, identity remains a contested concept, and my aim was to refrain from reaching out to individuals and making assumptions about their identity based on their Facebook profile pictures. Those who were interested, or wanted to recommend a participant for the study, were prompted to get in contact with me via my email address or directly through Facebook Messenger. Having a flexible recruitment process like this, where participants could refer family members or friends, enabled my dissertation to have a broader group representation characterised by

participants who were engaged in online conversations and others who may be regarded as more disengaged.

### *Skype Interviews*

In total I conducted 11 semi-structured interviews. 3 of these interviews were conducted using Skype Video Call, 7 via Skype Audio Call and 1 was a face-to-face interview. Though unplanned, one of my interviews had to eventually take place face-to-face because my participant had very limited access to the internet at home. The alternative solution was to meet at her work place. I recorded this interview using an iPhone application called 'Voice Memos'.

In order to record the Skype interviews, I elicited the help of third party online software called 'Ecam' which I downloaded on to my computer. Though participants were given the option between Skype audio and video call, after conducting my first 3 Skype video interviews, I decided to limit all Skype calls to audio. Unanticipated internet restrictions made it difficult to engage in Skype video calls if the interviewee or I had a weak internet connection. Due to the fact that a strong internet connection could not always be guaranteed, all interviews were later limited to Skype audio. This proved to be more efficient.

Having recruited the majority of my participants from online social networking groups, I felt it was necessary to adopt a method that would enable anyone, regardless of where they were in the country to participate in the research with relatively few restrictions. As noted by Deakin and Wakefield (2013, p.3), Skype interviews 'mitigate the distance of space' by enabling researchers to reach those who may otherwise be difficult to physically access,

whether it be due to physical immobility, travel costs or time constraints (Hanna, 2012). Though Hanna (2012, p.241) asserts that online interviews are 'the most feasible alternative to face-to-face interviews', my engagement with Skype interviews has contrastingly served to affirm Deakin and Wakefield's (2013) view that online interviewing methods should be considered as an option by researchers rather than a 'secondary choice' (Deakin and Wakefield, 2013, p.2). Similar to face-to-face interviews, Skype interviews functioned as windows in to the lives of participants (Kitchin and Tate, 2009; Burgess, 1984) because they enabled me to enhance my understanding of participants' experiences with their hair. Adopting semi-structured interviews equipped me with the flexibility to follow up unexpected themes without diverting from the focus of the research (Bennett, 2002).

### *Transcription and Data Analysis*

To transcribe the interviews, I used a method commonly adopted by social scientists, verbatim (Smith et al., 2009). All names however, were removed from the transcripts in order to uphold the anonymity of the participants. To analyse the transcripts, I used Dunn's (2016, p.177) 'five suggested steps for coding interview data'. Firstly, I went through each transcript and established a specific coding system for re-occurring themes. The coded texts were then grouped together in order for me to assess the data separately whilst comparing and contrasting it to the relevant literature. Coding my data in this way enabled me to efficiently place the data into 'meaningful categories' (Kitchin and Tate, 2000, p.237) and (de)construct complicated relationships between these themes (Hoggart et al., 2001; Dunn, 2016).

## *Ethics*

Research of this nature can be a sensitive process for participants, as questions may be invasive and force participants to reflect on experiences that may be deemed upsetting or uncomfortable. To address this, prior to conducting this research, participants were informed of their right to disclose only the information they felt comfortable sharing. The consent form I distributed to participants online also outlined that they had the right to withdraw from the research at any time up until February 2017 before the submission of my dissertation. In some cases, participants did not read the full details of the consent form, so I followed up their written consent with a phone call to explain the research and outline exactly what was required of them.

Conducting online Skype interviews was also a decision that was underpinned by ethical motivations. Online interviews gave participants a degree of agency in selecting the appropriate space for them to engage in the interview (Valentine et al., 2001) – most often it was in the participant's home. This however, may have not been possible if I was conducting face-to-face interviews.

Furthermore, during the write up process of this dissertation, it became apparent that participants' experiences could be effectively complemented with illustrious images. I therefore emailed all the participants requesting any images they may have of their hair, that they felt comfortable sharing. To uphold the anonymity of participants' identities, I requested images that did not expose their faces. 3 out of 11 participants were happy to share images of themselves. 2 of these images were taken by participants, and the image of Nana was taken by her friend. Nana was adamant that credit be given to the original author of the image, hence why I have not used a pseudonym to identify the photographer.

Ethics is an on-going process and does not end with the signing of the consent form (Longhurst, 2010; Dowling, 2016). Consequently, I am also aware of my duty to ‘provide participants with a summary of the research results and the completed project’ (Longhurst, 2010, p.111). I therefore took considerable time to thoroughly analyse this thesis in order to ensure that participants’ names and all identifying features were kept out of the research.

### *Participants*

In total I interviewed 11 young black British women. Pseudonyms have been used in order to maintain the anonymity of participants. The table below provides a brief introduction to participants, their identities and hair journeys. The final column labelled ‘Hair Type’, serves the purpose of illustrating participants’ present hair textures. Where indicated ‘(transitioned)’, this illustrates participants who have previously relaxed their hair but have now transitioned back to natural. 8 out of 11 participants are transitioned naturals, with 1 participant being relaxed and the remaining two being natural since birth.

**Figure 1:** Table of Participants

<b>Name</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>Hair Type</b>
<b>Aaliya</b>	Aaliya was born in England and to Ghanaian parents. She has spent most of her life living in London.	Natural (Transitioned)
<b>Leila</b>	Leila self identifies as British and Nigerian. She spent her early childhood years in Ireland before relocating to Nigeria to complete her secondary school education.	Natural (Transitioned)
<b>Michelle</b>	Michelle self identifies as black British. Her mother is mixed raced, of Sierra Leonean and Roma Gypsy heritage, and her father is Jamaican. She is a hair and beauty blogger who posts regular vlogs on YouTube. Michelle also has several disabilities: Fibromyalgia, Ehlers Danlos type 3, ME and Nerve Damage. Her mother is her full-time carer.	Natural (Transitioned)
<b>Fiona</b>	Fiona is British-Ghanaian. She was born in the UK but both her parents were born in Ghana. As well as having her	Natural (Transitioned)

	own YouTube channel, she has an online blog where she shares advice on make-up and hair. Fiona has also recently launched her own make-up line.	
<b>Lauren</b>	Lauren and Fiona are sisters. She is currently working on a combined business venture with her sister which is a make-up line that caters to women of colour.	Natural (Transitioned)
<b>Onyeka</b>	Onyeka is half Nigerian and half Jamaican, she self-identifies as black.	Natural (Transitioned)
<b>Nana</b>	Nana is Ghanaian, Italian and British. She spent her childhood years living in Italy before moving to the UK to complete her degree. She also has an online blog where she blogs about African diasporic experiences.	Natural (Transitioned)
<b>Yemi</b>	Yemi self identifies as British-Nigerian.	Natural (Transitioned)
<b>Janet</b>	Janet was born in South Africa and moved to the UK during her childhood years.	Relaxed
<b>Rachel</b>	Rachel is British-Angolan.	Natural (since birth)
<b>Samira</b>	Samira is a practicing Muslim of British-Somali heritage. She is currently an undergraduate student but has also co-founded of a successful online blog that seeks to raise awareness on social injustices.	Natural (since birth)



## Chapter Four: Narrating Childhood Experiences

Present identities are undoubtedly a product of past experiences (Jones, 2003, 2011). For this reason, identities remain inseparable from societal and cultural influences. In this Chapter, participants' childhood memories will be positioned within specific spaces in order to demonstrate the spatialities of their identities.

### *Hair Relaxing as the Norm*

A hair relaxer is a mixture of strong alkali components that are applied to curly hair for a duration of 6-15 minutes (James-Todd et al., 2011) in order to permanently straighten the hair. The process of hair relaxing is a practice that is common amongst people of African descent across the globe. Hair relaxing is 'pathologised as an inferiority complex' (Fritsch, 2014, p.2) (re)produced by black girls' attempts to emulate white beauty standards. However, it must be acknowledged that identities are always in production (Hall, 1990; Banks, 2005) and though black British girls are united by similar cultural influences, their personal identities are also informed by 'intersections with other structural categories' (Fritsch, 2014, p.1).

When participants were prompted to reflect on their hair experiences, nine out of eleven indicated that they had their hair relaxed at some point during their childhood years. Participants spoke of getting their first "relaxer" between the ages of six and sixteen. The decision to relax their hair was repeatedly regarded as an "uninformed choice", one which parents had ultimate control over (Brown and Gilligan, 1993; Cullen et al., 2001). Situating children's bodies within this complex array of power, or the lack of, serves to illustrate the contested nature of cultural and societal processes (Woodson, 1999) that control children's

identity performances (Gagen, 2000; Valentine, 2000; Ansell, 2009; Cartwright, 2012). Thus, understanding children's identities as situated within the context of particular histories (Hall, 1990; Levander, 2004) and geographies (Vanderbeck, 2008) enables us to illustrate how young black girls come to "naturally aspire" to obtain straight relaxed hair, and also how this acquisition is not as simplistic as performing whiteness (Banks, 2005) but instead illustrates the negation of multiple black identities.

*"Funny enough, I never wanted to relax my hair but used to like having it hot combed because I could always go back to natural."* (Lauren)

As illustrated by Lauren, obtaining straight hair whether it be through a relaxer or hot combing, is not always a one-dimensional process where one seeks to be white or attain white beauty. For Lauren it was about having the choice to explore the flexibility of black hair. Positioning childhood experiences within the appropriate contexts therefore serves to destabilise these normative black/white binary discourses that undermine the flexibility of black hair. Critically, though "kinky hair" and "straight and silky hair" are embodied characteristics that are associated with particular racial groups (Tate, 2010), there is a need to create space for style practices that do not limit black beauty performance.

Whilst all participants referred to the critical role that their parents played in informing their hairstyles, there was also a common acknowledgement of other institutional influences such as the media. Evident in Fiona's account, is the destructive effect that nonrepresentational media content has on young black British girls.

*"You're not exposed to black people with natural hair on TV, therefore you naturally pick the girl that has that look."* (Fiona)

The media as a powerful institution has also been critiqued by geographers (Woodson, 1999; Horton, 2014) for failing to distribute representational content. Children's television programmes and magazines have been characterised by Barbie's desirable femininity (Kuther and McDonald, 2004) that over glamorises particular body types (McRobbie, 1991) and ultimately excludes black girls' bodies that do not neatly fit into normative beauty ideals. When black bodies are presented in the media, the characters are either biracial, or black girls with straight hair. Thus by relaxing their hair, young black girls attempt to attain the "look" that has continuously been depicted as the beauty standard that black adolescent girls should aspire to achieve. Despite hair relaxing being a decision influenced by parents, this was a process that participants readily embraced as relaxed hair assisted them in negotiating their own negative perceptions of their hair.

### *Negotiating Exclusionary Spaces*

Participants repeatedly linked their hair experiences to particular spaces (Hoelscher and Alderman, 2004; Jones, 2011; Kraftl, 2013; McGeachan, 2013). School was a recurring location that served to govern the legitimacy of participants' identities. Notably, those who attended predominantly white schools repeatedly framed their experiences in narratives of marginalisation and exclusion. For some participants, the school setting is the site where negative perceptions of their hair began to develop. There are particular challenges that black females face when navigating white spaces (Banks, 2005; Thomas, 2009; Jeffries and Jeffries, 2014). Banks notes how these challenges are the direct result of 'ideological hierarchies often reinforced by school rules and policies' (Banks, 2005, p.191). Whiteness, which is governed at the institutional level (Ansell, 2009) functions as an epistemological view point. This way of knowing and experiencing the world requires an understanding of

what is different as well as the same (Dwyner and Jones, 2000). Black adolescent girls from a young age thus display a critical understanding of whiteness (Tatum, 2003). They are aware of the fact that they do not “fit in” to the norm and therefore develop the necessary practices required to negotiate this race and gender positioning (Collins, 2000). For Leila, her inability to perform white beauty resulted in being excluded from school shows.

*“When I moved to Ireland my hair was always a problem. I couldn’t do afro-puffs because it was too distracting for other children. I would always come home with school notes about my hair being an issue. I remember there was a school play and they said I couldn’t perform in it because I couldn’t put my hair in a bun so they made me sit out.” (Leila)*

Evidently, Leila’s positioning within racist institutional practices served to create a feeling of displacement. When Leila was re-narrating this experience, the detectable anger and frustration in her tone indicated a continued resentment. Reciting this memory also evoked various emotions attached to this experience (Schactel, 1959; Casey, 1987; Davidson and Milligan, 2004). It is as if she was taken back to that space, and experienced it once again, just as she had when she was a child. Following this ordeal, Leila relaxed her hair as she sought to permanently acquire a “manageable” hairstyle that would position her in a space away from societal ridicule over her natural hair.

Furthermore, this notion of not being able to put black “hair in a bun” is a recurring theme also discussed by Janet.

*“I was constantly called names because of my hair. There was this thing they used to say in Afrikaans, ‘jou hare kan nie in ‘n pony pony’. It mean’s your hair cannot be put in a ponytail, that’s how small my hair was.” (Janet)*

Janet proceeded to discuss her identity as a “coloured” within the context of post-apartheid South Africa.

*“Being Capetonian and being known as a coloured, but also being black it’s like a big thing because most coloureds have like straight hair. Their hair is pretty long and like, I just never fitted into that category. It made me feel more isolated from my friends. I would often look forward to having my hair relaxed, without it being relaxed I didn’t think it was pretty. But the process of getting your hair relaxed is like traumatic because it burns but I knew I had to go through it for my hair to come out nice.” (Janet)*

Despite Janet embodying a lighter complexion, which for some would have been perceived as personifying a degree of privilege, her inability to fully conform to the embodied characteristics of a “coloured” due to her “coarser” and “shorter” hair, resulted in her feeling isolated amongst her friends that identified as “coloured” but had “looser” or “straighter” hair textures. Janet’s experience not only illuminates the consequences associated with confining individuals to constructed racialised categories, but it also demonstrates the complexities of black adolescent girls’ identities (Banks, 2005). Evidently, black beauty performance for young black girls is not limited to hair texture and length, but also skin colour. These intersectional experiences result in the acquisition of privilege whilst manoeuvring specific spaces but can also be the result of marginalisation in other locations.

Moreover, black girls' identity construction within exclusionary spaces is also significantly dependent on what one perceives to be beautiful, and this is not always Barbie's desirable femininity (Kuther and McDonald, 2004). For example, whilst some participants recalled aspiring to obtain "white silky hair" that is more "manageable" than their own "picky or nappy" hair, Fiona did not necessarily aspire to this standard of beauty.

*"I remember feeling at the time that in society to be a really black person wasn't that cute. Even being a plain white person was not as cute as being mixed raced."* (Fiona)

In this particular case, beauty becomes a negotiated space between black femininity and white femininity. There appears to be a juxtaposed contention that what is beautiful is a mixture of both black and white. Nonetheless, identity production is heavily dependent on the individual. Therefore, despite beauty standards being heavily influenced by external factors, children should be rightfully acknowledged as agents that embody a degree of power to negotiate these ideals and construct their own unique identities (Kesby et al., 2006).

## Chapter Five: Black Hair and Identity

Hair is not just an immaterial follicle for black women, but a signifier of their historical and cultural identities. These collective experiences subsequently serve to inform their sense of place. Having discussed childhood experiences in the previous chapter, this chapter focuses on the ways in which black women negotiate their subject positionings as adults.

### *The Significance of Black Hair*

When participants were asked to reflect on the question, ‘is hair just hair or is it very much linked to your identity?’, all of them passionately discussed the different ways they felt that their hair informed their present identities. Historically, hair was an emblem used by some African communities to signify marital, monetary and community status (Byrd and Tharps, 2014; Rosado, 2003; Chapman, 2007; Jahangir, 2015). The Wolof, Yoruba and Mende societies in West Africa are known to have used particular hairstyles to carry messages (Johnson and Bankhead, 2013) to people in and outside of those communities. Critically, hair is not just hair, and participants demonstrate a strong appreciation and connectedness to the history of black hair.

*“Historically, hair has been important in the affirmation of identity. If you look at the way Egyptians represented themselves, their headdresses. The Black Liberation Movement, hair has always been important.” (Nana)*

Evidently, black women thus display a strong sense of historical and cultural awareness of their hair, which in turn evokes a grounded sense of self (Patton, 2014) and collective pride in the material richness of their natural hair. This acquired pride should be understood as a

transitional process, one that is accompanied by the acquisition of self-love, where one lets go of the negative connotations attached to their natural hair and instead embraces their difference (Brisbon, 2009). Historically, the demonisation of black hair projected through European enlightenment discourses, resulted in black women rejecting that aspect of their identity (Byrd and Sharps, 2014). Although society has moved away from these racialised discourses, black identities continue to be discussed in fixed ways (Phillips, 2003). As Gilroy (1993, 1994) and Hall (1997) have continued to reiterate, black identities are multifaceted and always in progress. Black women in this case, appear to have utilised their childhood struggles with self-acceptance (hooks, 1988, 1993) to negotiate negative perceptions of black womanhood (Pro'sobopha, 2005) in order to embrace and celebrate aspects of their identities that unite them (Synoff, 1987).

### *Black Hair is Political*

Black women's acceptance of their physical attributes is positioned as a politicised statement. Though black hair has historically been utilised in Black Power Movements as a symbolic resistance to white supremacist ideologies (hooks, 1982), not all black women perceive their decision to wear their hair in its natural form as a political declaration.

*"I don't think I've ever used my hair to represent something – like a political or social position. I think it's because my reasons for having this type of hair is rooted in my local experience. I say local experience, not meaning place but because I was a struggling student, I couldn't afford to spend much money on my hair." (Nana)*

The assumptions associated with having natural hair have been imposed on to all black bodies, whether relaxed or natural. If you are natural, the automatic belief is that you are a "conscious"



black person seeking to challenge structural inequality. However, relaxed hair is symbolic of the opposite, “white washed” individuals whose minds need decolonising (Haley, 1992).

For Nana, her natural hair and decision to go natural was informed by her economic status as



**Figure 2:** Amal Said (2016), *Nana embracing her dreadlocks.*

a student. With limited funds and the lack of time to maintain relaxed hair, which needs to be relaxed every 4-6 weeks, she chose a more permanent natural style - dreadlocks. Dreadlocks give her the economic freedom from constant maintenance as she is able to maintain the upkeep of her

own hair. What Nana’s account illustrates is how her decision to acquire dreadlocks was influenced by experiences of individual class positioning. Other participants however, did not discuss how or whether their individual class positionings influenced their hair options.

In contrast to Nana, Onyeka details politicising her own hair by attempting to make an outward statement regarding her pride in her beauty.

*“When I first went natural, I went out wearing my hair is a big puff and for me that was a statement saying, ‘I’m natural and I’m proud of it.’ Now, I don’t necessarily do it. Maybe if a girl with weave saw me with my natural hair out, she may assume that I am trying to make a statement.” (Onyeka)*



**Figure 3:** Onyeka (2016) *Onyeka's pride and joy, her afro.*

However, a critical point to reflect upon which is evident in Onyeka's personal account, is that beauty intersects with body image and hair (Patton, 2014) in ways that inform how one performs their identity, and also how performed identities are perceived by others. Particularly amongst the black British diaspora, the ways in which you wear or style your hair is perceived as signalling the presence of one's black consciousness.

Samira however, adds a whole new dimension to this debate on blackness and belonging.

*"The very act of covering my hair is linked to and reflects my identity. Because I wear a hijab, people cannot see my hair texture, and hair texture plays a role in defining blackness."* (Samira)

Samira self-identifies as black and Muslim. Her lived experiences are thus positioned as marginal to those with visible hair textures. When it comes to centring black hair narratives, it is important to note that only particular bodies and viewpoints are represented (Asante, 1988). The literature of black hair, is still yet to explore the gated-ness of black hair discourses and their confinement within the experiences of those with visible textures. Because Samira's hair is not visible, people cannot define it and therefore cannot "categorise" her. When one

fails to conform to the internal expectations of blackness, you are automatically rendered an outsider despite sharing similar identity traits, experiences and histories. This is where the relevance of the Afrocentric paradigm can be asserted. Its emphasis on centring African experiences and voices (Asante, 1988; Karenga, 1988; Mazama, 2001; Bob and Perry, 2014) provides the framework to capture individual experiences without overemphasising the collectiveness of identities by humanising marginalised voices (Asante, 1988; Mazama, 2001).

Though Samira's experience is an example of internal politics, black bodies should nonetheless be acknowledged as inherently political (McKittrick, 2000; Johnson and Bankhead, 2013). The historical racialisation and othering (Fanon, 1986; Said, 1993; Nimocks, 2015) of black bodies automatically situates the black body as marginal to whiteness (Kobayashi and Peake, 2000). When black women reject normative societal expectations, their actions are labelled political.

*"Remember that saying? When your hair is relaxed, white people are relaxed. When your hair is nappy, white people aren't happy." (Lauren)*

Lauren's point reiterates the ongoing discussion concerning the politicisation of black bodies and more specifically black womanhood. It also displays an awareness of the conditionality of whiteness (Frankenberg, 1993; Dyer, 1998; Ahmed, 2004; Reitman, 2006; Ahmed, 2007) that require black women to alter their physical appearance to gain acceptance (McKittrick, 2006, 2011).

### *Whiteness and "Fitting In"*

Black women frequently find themselves in uncomfortable circumstances when they are working or studying in predominantly white institutions. Though I have previously discussed

this in relation to participants' childhood, black women are constantly negotiating whiteness, even during adulthood. Childhood experiences are therefore preparations for latter encounters. Having had to negotiate whiteness and white beauty standards all their lives, they have an awareness of how to perform an acceptable, sometimes altered version of blackness in order for them to "fit in". As noted by Valentine (1993), the work place is the site where women suffer marginalisation influenced by white heteronormative expectations that are imbedded in the culture of the institution (Towns, 2016). These spaces are therefore pre-designed to be in conflict with black women's embodied subjectivities. However, Panelli (2004) identifies how black women and their unique navigation skills anticipate these struggles prior to entering the work place and consequently alter their blackness accordingly. When I posed the question to Lauren regarding whether she has ever needed to conform to a particular look, she gave me the following answer:

*"Yes, definitely. The corporate look. I wanted to do some big ass hair for my internship and it was more of a case of playing it safe because already your judging me by my skin colour. Whether you tell me you're not, you are, let's be real. I can't change my skin colour but I can change the appearance of my hair. Even at the internship I saw a black boy with braids and I was shocked that he felt comfortable to come into work like that – and another boy in dreads. I was like, 'you people are brave boy!' If I see a black young woman with a short afro or twist out, the first thing that comes to mind is that she must work in HR or in back office. I'm always pleasantly surprised when they tell me that they work in a client facing role."* (Lauren)

Though skin is perceived as the primary indicator dictating one's belonging in space (Howarth, 2002; Mahtani, 2014), Lauren's case reveals that it is also the style and texture of your hair. Natural hair carries with it negative connotations such as "messy" or "un-kept". For one to be considered worthy of being visible or placed within a client facing role for example, they have to "play it safe" by taming their blackness in exchange for acceptance. Lauren's internship took place in one of the top five investment banks in the world. Institutions such as these are governed by an unspoken culture (Leonardo, 2002; Zembylas, 2010, 2011), one that is invisible because 'by virtue of being numerically and politically dominant, whites share similar worldviews and identities' (Perry, 2001, p.67). Ignatiev and Garvey (1996, pp.35-36) identify these institutions as private clubs that 'grant privilege to those who conform to rules'.

*"In a strange way, for black women, the push has always been to conform and not stand out. I've definitely felt that a lot. The whole idea that you don't have to be better but you have to be 20x better. You don't have to be normal but 20x more normal in order to fit in." (Aaliya)*

"Fitting in" encompasses the complex negation of multiple intersecting individual identities (Okazawa – Rey et al., 1987; Crenshaw, 1995; McCall, 2005) such as body image, culture and language. Critically, there is a need for grounded academic research into the complex socio-political challenges black women have to navigate (Reid and Comas-Diaz, 1990) and the substantial impact this has on black women who re-construct their identities in exchange for success (Fordham, 1993; Tatum, 2003; Tan and Barton, 2008). Notably, the multiple oppressions that black women encounter (Collins, 1996; Settles, 2006;) has meant that 'unlike the "glass ceiling" white women have to break through, black women have to shatter the "concrete ceiling"' (Mattis, 2004, p.3).

As indicated by Lauren and Aaliya, whiteness is about dictating how one moves through space (Feagin et al., 1996; Dwyer and Jones, 2000; Gusa, 2010;). However, it must also be noted that wherever power is present, resistance is also at work (Weitz, 2001; Davidson, 1996).

*“Eventually my perceptions changed. I have the right to take up space, as much space as I need to naturally exist. I like having my hair in afro-puffs that are really high. I used to want to blend in but now I want people to notice my hair.”* (Michelle)

Notably, though black women who reject normative ideals can be seen to embody a sense of agency (Davidson, 1996), it does not mean that this resistance positions them away from the white gaze and Fiona’s encounter with a colleague at her work place indicates this.

*“This white guy just came up to me and grabbed my hair, I was just so confused. He thought he had the right to put his hands in my hair like I was some kind of exhibition. Why do I need to educate you on my hair? That sort of thing pisses me off! It’s my hair and this is how it grows out of my scalp.”*  
(Fiona)

Black women’s experiences of unlawful touching and the fetishisation of their hair not only opens up a discussion concerning how black bodies are perceived in white spaces (Finney, 2014), but also raises concerns about body and ownership. To whom does the black body belong to? Whilst there is no definitive answer to this question, it is one that academics

need to continue reflecting upon in order to dismantle the oppressive regimes that continue to “other” nonconforming bodies.

## Chapter Six: The Online Natural Hair Movement

The Natural Hair Revolution (NHR) is a Movement advocating for the emancipation of black women globally by encouraging them to abandon chemical relaxers in exchange for their natural hair. It is speculated that The Natural Hair Movement (NHM) began in the early 2000s (Luter, 2014) and has since gained an incredible following, which is why it is now commonly referred to as a Revolution. The terms NHR and NHM are regularly used interchangeably, however they both refer to the unprecedented rise of black women “going natural”. This Chapter will focus specifically on the extent to which the Movement has benefited black British women, and the ways it has contributed to the formation of their offline and online identities.

### *Social Media as a Source of Information*

As defined by the Oxford Dictionary (2017), social media refers to ‘websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking’. These sites have enabled information to be distributed at a faster pace than traditional value chains, and to a wider audience (Vromen, 2008; Graham, 2013; Valenzuela, 2013). Sites such as YouTube allow users to produce creative content (Longhurst, 2009; Kushin and Yamamoto, 2010) that can be distributed globally. User generated content therefore facilitates information sharing as well as community formations based on consumer interests. In relation to the NHM, social media has enabled black women to find alternative spaces (Wright, 2005) to discuss and address the negative experiences that many black women encounter because of their hair. It is a Movement that is centred on black visibility and challenging negative connotations attached to black hair, by producing a variety of black hair content with the aim to enhance black women’s knowledge of their hair.



*“Social media played a massive role in my self-acceptance and educating me along the way. Social media has been my only source of information to be honest with you.” (Nana)*

Websites such as YouTube, Instagram and Tumblr are continuously acknowledged by participants as educational tools.

*“YouTube taught me more about my hair maintenance than any other woman in my family ever did.” (Leila)*

Different sites are utilised for specific purposes by participants. When participants are seeking knowledge on hair maintenance and “tips” on how to execute specific hairstyles, they often turn to YouTube as it provides step by step tutorials on how to achieve desired looks. However, when seeking inspiration for future styles, they are more likely to utilise Instagram and Tumblr. This was true for all participants, however the only notable difference was the frequency at which they would visit the different sites. What is particularly interesting, is the fact that all participants have used or are currently using social media as a source of information to learn more about their hair.

For black women in particular, the internet operates as a ‘third space’ (Daniels, 2013, p.699) that facilitates discursive interaction in the same way hair salons once functioned as private spaces for personal discussions (Daniels, 2013). Though social media is used as a source of information, it also acts as a safe space to communicate race, gender and ethnic experiences (Papacharissi, 2009) that cannot be disentangled from black hair and identity discussions. In this way, the information not only equips black women with the confidence

to appreciate their natural beauty, but the process also enables them to become conscious of the oppressive systems that benefit from undermining the beauty and diversity of black hair. Black hair and beauty bloggers such as “Naptural85” and “Curly Nikki,” that participants frequently refer to as “natural hair gurus,” become key players in promoting individual and group identities.

Within the literature on social media and social movements, scholars have framed the presence of online communities in discourses of belonging (Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Ingacio, 2005; Gangadharbatla, 2008). Though the longing for acceptance is evident in some of the participants’ responses, their attraction to online spaces exceeds this narrative. For black women, online spaces are about identity reconstruction and re-education on social norms which continue to view black hair as unsightly and unprofessional. It is important to note that the tools and techniques required to maintain natural black hair were tactically eradicated through imperial and colonial processes. Participants were therefore unaware of the appropriate hair maintenance techniques until they began re-educating themselves using online sources. Thus, as well as representing different types of beauty standards, it is also a Movement that facilitates and maintains transnational networks (Wasserman and Faust, 1994; Jacobs, 2004; Meek, 2012) with the aim to unite black women across the globe in a space where they are able to exchange knowledges on hair practices.

### *Online Community Activism and Virtual Spaces*

The literature on social movements maintains the argument that online engagement by marginalised groups increases the probability of community activism (Austin et al., 2008; Kushin and Yamamoto, 2010). However, for Onyeka the concept of an “online community” remains a fallacy, one that is imagined and unreal.

*“Rather than a physical face to face reality, it is a virtual community.”*

(Onyeka)

For other participants however, the online community is real and lived. Consequently, referring to online interactions as “virtual reality” (Castells, 2000) downplays the authenticity of black women’s online interactions, which are not confined to online spaces but are simultaneously experienced in the physical form.

One of the most obvious ways that black women have illustrated the realness of their online experiences is through their transition to natural hair. In the case of participants, it is more complex than “going natural”, it is about challenging whiteness and systems of discrimination that deny black women access to safe spaces within schools, the work place and wherever black women are located. Black women as a result are outwardly saying that they have had enough!

*“Were all speaking out collectively. There’s more unity amongst black women now, people are realising that black women are coming together and we won’t take shit from anyone.” (Yemi)*

For Yemi, the Movement symbolises black women’s resistance of normative beauty standards and the construction of spaces that encourage collective values and beliefs (Martin, 2003). Hall (1997) identifies these narratives of ‘Us versus Them’ as encouraging togetherness (Hall, 1997, p.258). This collective identity undoubtedly signifies the “power” and “liberation” of black womanhood.

*“I am black. Unapologetically. And I am proud of my hair and proud of my identity.” (Onyeka)*

Not all of the participants reiterated the same view as Onyeka and Yemi. Rachel was apprehensive about the political motivations of the Movement. In Rachel’s case, the Movement “does not symbolise anything”. Whether there was a Movement or not, Rachel asserts that she would still be natural, just as she has been all her life.

### *YouTube, Disintermediation and Online Infomediaries*

As well as creating a social and cultural platform, social media sites such as YouTube, Facebook and Instagram have facilitated the rise of black hair entrepreneurs. Consumers are now able to purchase goods without having to navigate pre-defined value chains (Poon and Jevons, 1997). The distance which once existed between producers and consumers has now been ‘diminished or even eliminated’ (Graham, 2008, p.775). This process is termed ‘disintermediation’ (Porter, 2001; Wrigley et al., 2002; Bruns, 2006). Many black women, including two of the participants, Michelle and Fiona, have made a successful career by selling hair and beauty products online, or reviewing products on behalf of consumers and companies. However, there is a need to distinguish disintermediaries from infomediaries. Infomediaries have been referred to by Wrigley et al. (2002) as champions that assist consumers in making informed decisions when purchasing goods. These black hair champions have been heavily criticised by participants.

*“I don’t really look into the YouTube Gurus telling me what to do, I feel like I’ll start buying things I don’t really need.” (Yemi)*

Participants have questions the moral motivations of infomediaries within the natural hair community as they feel as though vloggers and bloggers are paid to release bias reviews of products (Spaulding, 2015). As argued by Aaliya, “people forget that these [vloggers] are sponsored, they are paid money to sell you certain things.” Similarly, the process of disintermediation has been critiqued by Humphreys and Grayson (2008), who have argued that disintermediation has in fact paved way for the rise of new intermediaries. Power has not been eliminated, it has simply shifted. These new intermediaries and infomediaries have interacted with the NHM in ways that dictate who and how one participates in the Movement.

*“The production of material is exclusive. The material supplied is very telling of who’s part and who’s not part.” (Nana)*

Because the Movement originates from the United States, a significant number of entrepreneurs and product reviewers are also located in the US. The products being reviewed are therefore not always available in the UK. Purchasing them on E-commerce sites such as Amazon and EBay can be expensive, particularly when delivery costs are taken into consideration. Consequently, despite the NHM being recognised as a global phenomenon, it undoubtedly remains very localised through limited global provision of products and the lack of representational content from black British vloggers.

### *Black Hair and Online Representations*

Physical space and “virtual spaces” alike are socially constituted (Martin, 2003). Therefore, the same prejudices that are prevalent in offline interactions, can also be found online (Graham, 2011). Within social movements, voices are not equally represented, as some

groups of people are afforded greater visibility than others (Massey, 2005; Graham, 2013). Consequently, the over assertion of the internet as a de-territorialised space (Kitchin et al., 2013) is somewhat problematic as it assumes social media spaces to be free of social stratifications.

*“Social media is sort of creating a new standard which for some women is unachievable, by giving black women another route which is just as straight as the Eurocentric one because there is no opportunity for diversity.”*  
(Aaliya)

The natural hair community has been criticised for constructing a new standard of beauty, the “natural beauty”. For one to “fit in”, you need to have chemically unprocessed natural hair. These divisions and entry criteria raise pressing questions regarding the social justice aims of the Movement. Black women are reproducing offline identity struggles in ways that reinforce exclusionary practices of texturism and colourism online. When participants were questioned about who they felt was represented in the NHR/NHM, they all pointed to the range of contradictions that are prevalent.

*“Women like me who still wear weave and women with relaxed hair are excluded. That’s why I said it’s quite religious to me. A new religion of hair and who fits in to what box and stuff. I don’t think that it’s a good one because if someone perms their hair it does not mean the hair on their head is not natural.”* (Janet)



**Figure 4:** Michelle (2016), Michelle's curly hair.

This narrative of natural versus relaxed is a reoccurring theme. Most participants view non-natural hair as excluded from the Movement, with looser curl patterns (see figure 2) and lighter skinned women being overrepresented in vlog contents.

*"Unsurprisingly the people at the top just happen to be super light skinned and angel curled people. Colourism and texturism. They always seem so interlinked."* (Michelle)

Arguably, light skin and loose textures are not the only characteristics that have been glamorised by the movement.

*"The standard of beauty in the black African community is that if you're very light your beautiful or if you are very dark your beautiful. You are not praised for being the middle ground. Its either, lovely and light or deep and dark. This is the same in the natural hair community."* (Aaliya)

These intracultural discriminations (Carbado and Gulati, 2013) consequently serve to undermine the diversity that is represented by black women of various textures and shades.

The overrepresentation of light skinned bodies with “looser” textures is perceived by Michelle as “damaging because you are replacing images of white people with images of black people who mirror whiteness”. Though Michelle’s light skin and “angel curled” hair arguably affords her a degree of privilege that those with darker skin and kinkier hair are denied, the conversation on black hair and mobility is not limited to colourism and texturism. For Michelle, her disabilities also influence how she navigates ableist spaces and discourses, both offline and online.

*“Disability is not represented anywhere, everyone forgets about us... There are no natural hair bloggers online who get any kind of love that appear visibly disabled.” (Michelle)*

There are very few, almost non-existent, vloggers that produce content catering specifically to black women with disabilities. Natural hair requires frequent washing, conditioning and protective styling; and depending on one’s disability, this may prove demanding. As a movement centred on community development and information access, it has in fact failed to accommodate the intersectional identities embodied by all black women. Thus, to achieve black women’s “liberation”, the Movement needs to transgress the narrow aims centred on deconstructing beauty norms, and instead seek to promote self-interrogation amongst all black women in order to address inherent discriminations. These diasporic contestations continue to influence individual and group identity (Harris-Perry, 2001) formations in ways that dictate how black women move through offline and online spaces.



## Chapter Seven: Conclusion

### *Conclusion*

Young black British women are increasingly engaging with the online NHM in order to learn more about their hair. This is due to several factors including childhood experiences in predominantly white spaces (Banks, 2005; Jeffries and Jeffries, 2014) which serve to undermine black visibility and knowledge regarding black identities. As a way of acquiring mobility within these restrictive spaces, black girls chemically alter the texture of their hair in order to negotiate the beauty standards they encounter (Kutner and McDonald, 2004). Nonetheless, as exemplified by participants' experiences, relaxing one's hair is a lot more complex than alluded to by the literature on black hair. Critically, it is about negotiating white standards as well as black beauty ideals in ways that merge together to foster complex and hybrid identities. This is something specifically discussed by Fiona (p.25). As a child, she perceived mixed raced beauty, a mixture of black and white ancestry, as the ideal beauty standard.

These perceptions are not bound to the fixities of space and time. Instead, they are continuously challenged, accommodated and negotiated well into adulthood. However, as black British women come to realise the material richness of their natural hair, hair relaxing becomes a style preference and a way of exercising individual agency. Nonetheless, there continues to be a need to alter one's blackness in the work place (see Lauren p.32-33) in order to obtain economic and social mobility. Black women's new profound consciousness thus becomes undermined by whiteness and anti-blackness ideologies which label black hair as unprofessional. It is this politicisation of black hair which motivates young black British women to engage in the NHM.

Social networking sites such as YouTube, Tumblr and Instagram act as '*third spaces*' (Daniels, 2013) that enable discussions on black culture and identities to take place away from the white gaze. Participants however, did not over glamorise the credibility of information provided on social media platforms. Due to the increasing commercialisation of black natural hair, participants fear that infomediaries have abandoned their roles as distributors of viable material and instead focus on obtaining profit from the Movement.

Despite the above criticism, black women perceive online spaces as sites that facilitate identity reconstruction in ways that enable them to embrace their natural beauty and unlearn Eurocentric ideals. However, as indicated by participants, colourism and texturism still take place in online spaces particularly through the overrepresentation of lighter skinned bodies with "looser" textures and curls. Furthermore, the Movement has also been critiqued for constructing a new beauty standard that celebrates natural hair whilst undermining chemically altered afro hair.

Black women's offline and online hair experiences remain complex. This thesis has started what I hope will be an ongoing discussion within the discipline of geography. Identities are personal and black hair is intimate, this dissertation therefore does not seek to homogenise black women's experiences but instead introduce a conversation that is taking place amongst the black British diaspora.

### *Suggestions for Further Research*

The geography of black hair has the potential to span across various internal disciplines, there is undoubtedly an emotional, economic and political geography to embodying afro hair. Further research could focus on how the NHM inattentively impedes those who have

difficulty performing hair techniques in conventional and normalised ways. Critically, is it evident that there is a need for the discipline to increase its engagement with black experiences and narratives. In doing so, I advocate the use of Afrocentricity (Bob and Perry, 2014) as a useful framework to begin contextualising black experiences in ways that challenge dominant Eurocentric ways on viewing the world (Asante, 1988, 2007).

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### Images

Amal Said (2016) Figure 2 - *Nana embracing her dreadlocks*.

Onyeka (2016) Figure 3 - *Onyeka's pride and joy, her afro*.

Michelle (2016) Figure 3 – *Michelle's curly hair*.

## Appendices

List of Appendices enclosed:

1. Participant Information Sheet
2. Participant Consent Form
3. Interview Prompt Sheet
4. Rachel's Sample Interview Transcript
5. Michelle's Sample Interview Transcript
6. Aaliya's Sample Interview Transcript
7. Glossary and Terms

## Appendix 1: Participant Information Sheet

### **Project Title - Black Hair: Centring the Offline and Online Geographies of Black British Women**

The aim of this research is to explore how black British women are using social media to learn more about their hair. The research will involve Skype interviews with participants who self-identify as black or of African/Caribbean ancestry. The study is interested in black women's hair journeys in order to understand how these experiences have been affected both positively and negatively by social media.

All interviews will be carried out over Skype Video Call during August and September 2016. Interviews are expected to last approximately one hour. Participants will not be expected to disclose any information which they are not comfortable sharing. The findings derived from this research will be used for my final year dissertation, which will be completed in February 2016. Only the audio from the Skype call will be recorded and all data collected from this research will be treated as personal and stored securely in line with the 1998 Data Protection Act. All transcripts from interviews and data used in the final report will be anonymised and it will not be possible to identify participants.

For further information on this research, please get in touch with me:  
Esther Chidowe - via my email: [ec226@student.le.ac.uk](mailto:ec226@student.le.ac.uk).

## Appendix 2: Participant Consent Form

### **Participant Consent Form**

I agree to take part in the above research. I have read the Participant Information Sheet, which is attached to this form. I understand what my role will be in this research, and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

I understand that I am free to withdraw from the research at any time, without needing to give reason. I have been informed that the confidentiality of the information I provide will be safeguarded and I consent to any of the data I give being used in the final research report, providing it is anonymised.

I am free to ask any questions at any time before and during the study.

I have been provided with a copy of this form and the Participant Information Sheet.

Data Protection: I agree to the processing of data that I have provided during the interviews for any purposes connected with the Research Project as outlined to me.

Name of participant (print)

.....

Signed.....

Date.....



## Appendix 3: Interview Prompt Sheet

### **Semi-Structured Interview Prompt Sheet (45mins – 1hr)**

#### Introduction

- Briefly re-introduce yourself and the research
- Mini introduction from participant

#### Early Life

- Brief background into interviewees hair journey whilst growing up
- Perceptions of their hair
- Relaxed or natural?
- School/home

#### Society

- Do you perceive your hair as accepted by society?
- Have you ever felt the need to conform to a particular look, if yes what is it?
- Work, university, friends, family, partners' views of your hair
- How do you feel natural hair is perceived by society as a whole? – how about the black community?
- How do you feel relaxed hair is perceived by society as a whole? – how about the black community?

#### Identity

- Is hair just hair or is it very much linked to who you are?
- Tell me more about how you use/ have used your hair to express who you are

#### Social Media

- How have you used social media to learn more about your hair? – what have they learnt?
- What particular sites do you use and why?
- Specific bloggers, vloggers, pages you follow or prefer and why?
- How have they shaped/changed your views of your natural hair?
- Would you say you are an active contributor that helps to shape peoples' views of their natural hair too? Do you blog/vlog/share opinions with the public?
- Would you say you trust the information distributed online? – overall is the information accessible? – if not what are the factors prohibiting access and how can they be addressed?
- What impact (both positive and negative) do you think social media has had on the natural hair movement?
- If any, what kind of support do you think social media offers you or black women as a whole?

## Online Natural Hair Community

- Are you aware of the Natural Hair Movement? If yes, what does the natural hair movement symbolise?
- Who is included or excluded in this community?
- Is the natural hair movement political? – If so what message do you think the movement is trying to get across
- Do you consider yourself as part of the community... why?
- Do you feel that you are able to contribute to information sharing and discussions without restriction? - How do you contribute?
- Would you say that there are particular black women that are excluded/marginalised in the movement and why?

## Appendix 4: Rachel's Sample Interview Transcript

**Rachel - 12:10 - 09/09/2016**

**E** – Rachel could you just give me a brief background into your hair journey whilst growing up, were you relaxed or natural?

**R** – I have never relaxed my hair, I've always been natural. When I was younger I used to wear my hair in an afro in primary school, just wash it and let it go. In secondary school, I had a ponytail. Basically same style every day. And in 6<sup>th</sup> form I decided that I wanted to grow my hair so I started taking it seriously in terms of protective styles. I wore weaves, done braids and that kind of stuff. University is when I became more creative and started to change my hair every few months. I would do braids, weave, wigs, afro. I pretty much just explored more in terms of my hair.

**E** – Most black women get their hair relaxed at some point in their life, what motivated you to stay natural?

**R** - It's not really motivation, it's just that in my house that's what we do. It's so permanent I wouldn't even want to relax my hair so it wasn't even an option.

**E** – Would you say that your hair in its natural state or however you may style it is accepted by society?

**R** - Sometimes, depending on the style. In secondary school, I went to a mixed school, so it was okay. As I grew older and started applying for jobs and stuff, going into interviews I would think about how other people who didn't grow up as ethnic or whatever would perceive my hair. So, for interviews I would always buy a black straight wig just to be formal because I'd wonder if they would perceive my natural hair as informal, even braids as informal.

**E** - Have you ever felt the need to conform to a particular look, if so what look it is?

**R** – When I was younger people used to tell my mum to “get your daughter's hair done”. My mum would say to me, “your hair is fine”. I never felt it but there is obviously pressure around. Other people who aren't even in my family trying to tell my mum how to do my hair, but because my mum was always like ignore them and leave it, I never felt the need to conform even when my friends told me to relax my hair.

**E** – You've spoken about your family's perceptions, could you elaborate on how you feel your hair is perceived amongst your friends, your partner – if you have/ have had one?

**R** – In terms of guys, if they don't know you're wearing extensions, fake hair or whatever and you have to explain it, sometimes I'm a bit nervous as to how they will react. Different people can react in different ways but if we are in a relationship I need him to react in a good way. So I'm always a bit nervous. If I'm going out with a black person I just expect

them to know – I don't have to tell you. But, if a white guy is touching my head and is like, "what's this"? I just say I have extensions and the conversation passes. I never say its braids, wigs or weaves. They don't understand – they're just like, "okay". They don't know how it's done. When I say extensions it kind of signifies that all of it is my hair apart from a bit, they don't know that none of it is my hair. I don't think they know even when I change styles completely, they just think my hair magically changed. It's simpler not to explain, I don't know if they'd understand if I said I'm wearing a wig, you know I can take this off and you can put this on if you want. He might get freaked out and I don't want to freak him out. One thing I always think about is, if a guy reacts well he might be the husband because when you're at home and you just want to take off your wig, they do need to understand. If it is a long term partner I would consider living with, then I would need to explain.

**E –** How do you feel your hair is perceived by the black community?

**R –** It's only recently that people are like "oh I like your hair how long have you been natural?". And I'm just like, I've never been anything other than natural. Before, they always used to say, "oh when are you going to get your hair done?". As the trend to be natural is coming out more, people complement my hair even though I've had the same hairstyle forever. People's perception of my hair basically depends on the trend. My hair is a texture not a style. I was born and I will die like this.

**E –** Would you say hair is just hair or is it very much linked to your identity?

**R -** Hair is more than hair. It's really really important to me. If I lost my afro, it would be a huge huge thing because it takes so long to grow back. Sometimes I like to change personality depending on my hairstyle. When I have long weave I feel more attractive. When I have an afro feel more like me. Having weave is more fun and I feel like I'm putting on an outfit. Funny enough, I also get more attention from more races which is obviously more people.

**E -** What kind of attention and from who?

**R -** Male attention, it's just different when I have on a weave or wig. It changes how I act and how I perceive myself.

**E –** So, we are going to move on to talking about social media, Rachel how have you used social media to learn more about your hair?

**R -** I use YouTube the most. I used to use Instagram a lot to follow people with interesting hairstyles. I like my natural sisters. They're the first ones that got me into finding things online, and they have different hair types and styles so it's really good to experience that. There's also Naptural85, just because she has really beautiful hair. I try to only look at people with 4c hair because mixed raced hair is very different.

**E –** Has social media and the people you follow on different sites helped you in any way to change the perceptions you had of your own hair?

**R** - They have explained how to manage my hair in a way I didn't know before. My mum has natural hair but all she does is wash and braid it, she doesn't know how to do particular styles and retain length so I had to learn it from other people.

**E** - Do you blog, vlog or share information online about your hair with others?

**R** - I have a Facebook album called afro. I put all my afro pictures from year 11 on there. If people ask me about my natural hair I just direct them to my Facebook account.

**E** - What are your motivations behind the album?

**R** - So I can see the length change. So I remember the different styles I've had. So I can recreate styles, it's personally really for myself.

**E** - Would you say that you trust the information distributed online?

**R** - Yes, because it's tried and tested for them. It might not necessarily work for me though. There are some things I don't agree with actually. There was this girl who was saying that if you want to look after your hair you should blow-dry it to protect your hair by stretching it. I agree with stretching it but heat is not good for your hair.

**E** - Do you feel that there are factors stopping other people from accessing information online, if so what are they?

**R** - If you grow up in a house that doesn't know about your hair you may be denied access to information. For example, there is this mixed raced girl who grew up with her white father. Her father didn't necessarily know how to manage her hair and stuff. I'm not sure what happened to her mum but all I know is she was living with her white side of the family. Her dad wanted to learn more about her hair and basically messaged the black hair group on Facebook and asked if she could come along to one of their lunch in the park meet ups. They said yeah, but asked if a female accompany her instead. I think it's good that he made that effort because the little girl needs to see more people like herself and interact with people who share that aspect of her identity. If you grow up in a house, regardless of race, that doesn't know how to deal with your hair then how are you going to learn? You can have friends and communities but in your household is where it should start.

**E** - What kind of impact do you think social media has had on the natural hair movement?

**R** - Positive. It has made it more popular. If you can see it's happening it happens even more. But the question "how long have you been natural?" is a really strange question for me. I'm just like errm since birth.

**E** - What kind of support do you think social media offers black women?

**R** - It's good when vloggers and people who don't just do videos but also talk about their experiences with race. But, the information is predominantly American because they do it

more. I understand that their struggle is stronger than here because of the race divide. I also like accessing the information because I want to know what people are going through.

**E** – What do you think the online natural hair movement symbolises?

**R** - In like the 70s and 80s when everyone had afros and the flared trousers. But I don't think it symbolises anything, it's just a style change again. It's nice that you're going back to your natural hair but it's not a really big deal, either way weather there's a movement or not I would still have my hairstyle...

## Appendix 5: Michelle's Sample Interview Transcript

**Michelle – 12:30 – 13/09/16**

**E** – Could you tell me a bit more about yourself? Just a brief introduction to you.

**M** - I have a natural hair and beauty blog, and a YouTube channel where I do makeup and hair tutorials. I am disabled, I have fibromyalgia, Ehlers Danlos Type 3, ME and Nerve Damage. It's basically chronic pain and chronic fatigue and a bad leg. My mum is my carer.

**E** – What is your background?

**M** - Both my parents are black but my mum is mixed. My mum is Sierra Leonean and Roma Gypsy and my dad is Jamaican, but if anyone asks me I just say I'm black. I am in touch with all my cultures.

**E** - Could you tell more about your relationship with your hair in terms of your early life, perceptions of your hair when you were young, were you relaxed or natural and how did you sort of navigate those perceptions in school and at home?

**M** – There are no deep rooted issues as far as my family perceives hair. Even the older women in my family wear wigs but I think they wear wigs because that's what you do when your old. I've never had negative comments from my family about my hair. I was natural for a long time until I moved a couple of schools and I ended up in this really white small town and basically when I started school with all these white people that's when my hair issues started. That's the first time I ran into negative perceptions of my hair. I eventually asked my mum if she could straighten my hair and she did straighten my hair, she like worked really hard to look after my hair in its natural state. She would straighten her hair as well just because she liked how it looked, so I asked her to straighten my hair and she did it and it looked really nice. Eventually if you keep straightening your hair, it is not going to look very good, for me it never got properly straight so I started to relax my hair. It would relax, but it would not be properly straight so we started to straighten my hair on top of that. Pretty soon it was not healthy. Eventually it broke off and I ended up with shoulder length hair that looked awful, at that time I felt like I couldn't go back to my natural hair because I was too scared to go natural again.

**E** - Do you perceive your hair, as it was or as it is, as accepted by society?

**M** - My family being very accepting of natural hair isn't completely the norm. I know that some black people have internalised issues with natural hair. I know also that most non-black people and white people have huge issues with natural hair. When I was at school I went so fast from not thinking anything of my hair and it took maybe a term for me to believe that my hair was really ugly, dirty, messy, my perceptions changed really fast.

**E** - Have you ever felt the need to conform to a particular look, if yes what is it?

**M** - Yeah, definitely. Because me going natural was when I was 18 or 19, that was when I was studying law as well, so I would have work experience in a barrister's chamber or I'd be going for a job interview and I'd look at my hair because it was quite short then as well. I feel like when you are black and you have short hair that's like a double thing because people aren't going to look at you and say she's so stylish and edgy, they're going to look at you and be like, that bitch's hair doesn't grow. I'd have moments where I'd think should I straighten my hair for this or for that. If you have curly hair, big curly hair you're sexy. But if you have coiler hair or kinky hair that's just like, if you want to do grown up things or see real people then you need to hide it. So I'd feel like either way my hair was going to be seen as inappropriate and I needed straighter hair to be seen as fashionable and intelligent.

**E** –How do you feel your hair is perceived by your partner or previous partners?

**M** - I've only had one partner, my current partner. When we got together I wasn't natural and then I cut off my hair and went natural. He's white, he was really accepting of natural hair in general and would ask me why I constantly straightened my hair and why he never saw my natural hair. That made me think, I was at the point where I didn't think of why I was straightening my hair but I just had to keep on straightening it as part of doing my hair. It was kind of like I had forgotten I had natural hair. The reason he started being vocal about that is because I was always nervous about him seeing my hair. If I was going to wash my hair or straighten it or whatever, he couldn't come over because I didn't want him to see it because I felt like it wasn't an attractive thing.

**E** - How do you feel your hair is perceived by the black community?

**M** – It's a huge difference this year since my hair went from chin length to shoulder length. All of a sudden it's gone from like, why don't you straighten your hair again, to, oh my God your hair is so nice. It can be frustrating when people are shitting on their own hair and saying, God I wish it was like yours.

**E** – Would you say that hair is just hair or is it very much linked to your identity?

**M** - I think your hair is really linked to your identity because of two things. 1, a lot of our cultural styles are linked to hair which I think is really positive and people have different cultural styles in terms of their dress and physical adornments or whatever they would see as a big part of their identity. 2, another reason is like what happened to me when I was younger. When you are around people who look like you your hair isn't a big thing but when you are living in a society that focuses on whiteness and is like constantly alienating you then you become more attached to your hair and your hair signifies something. When you know that people are going to look at your hair and think of something beyond, that's just hair, it becomes more than just hair.

**E** – Building more on that point, how do you use your hair to express who you are and your identity?

**M** – I'm nervous about my hair getting bigger. When I was young people used to say, "I can't see past your hair", when we were watching a film or in lessons. Eventually my perceptions



changed. I have the right to take up space, as much space as I need to naturally exist. I like having my hair in afro-puffs that are really high. I used to want to blend in but now I want people to notice my hair. I dye my hair a lot of different colours now.

**E** – How have you used social media to learn more about your hair?

**M** – It's the only way that I learnt to do my hair. My mum would do my hair how her mum did it with her. Neither she or I understood why we would braid my hair or the benefits of doing what we were doing. I knew more about my white friends' hair and they would always come to me for advice, but I knew nothing about my own hair. The only way I found out about hair was through social media. It made me very confident to go natural. For example Instagram, with people posting pictures of products, tips and their results. That's why I started posting on Instagram, I really wanted to keep it going for more people to find. People who may want to leave their natural hair out but don't necessarily know how to do it. Social media has done a lot for black people because it's a space where we can talk about whatever we want and no one can tell us to shut up. I definitely feel like the increase in natural hair has been fuelled by social media.

**E** – What particular site do you prefer and why?

**M** - Naturallycurly.com, it's simple and provides basic information for beginners. I actually hate that site now, it's now full of white people with wavy hair. I also use Instagram, it has a lot of pictorials.

**E** – What specific vloggers and bloggers do you follow?

**M** - On YouTube I follow 'naptural85' and 'MahoganyCurls', because they make good tutorials and they have similar hair to me, look like me and stuff. When it's for styling my hair, don't care about the texture of the tutees but I don't like watching people whose texture is too loose.

**E** – How have they shaped or changed your views of your natural hair?

**M** - Because we moved to this really white area, until I started uni, I wasn't around black people day to day. They've definitely made me realise that having a certain type of hair doesn't make you this or that. It's just weird that I'm a person with that certain type of hair and I still require confirmation.

**E** - What kind of discriminations do you feel are present in the natural hair community?

**M** - Within the natural hair community there is the usual issues but just hyper magnified. Things have become monetised and commercialised, which has put some people on top and others at the bottom. Unsurprisingly the people at the top just happen to be the super light skinned and angel curled people. Colourism and texturism, they always seem so interlinked. It's a big issue is the natural community, makes me wary to get involved in things.

**E** - Considering your disabilities, do you feel as though you are represented in the natural hair community?

**M** - Definitely not. Disability is not represented anywhere, everyone forgets about us. The natural community is really image based so I do stuff and people will send me complements and stuff which is obviously a big thing online. Because generally I don't look disabled, I try and talk about it a lot but I know that when people complement me, If I looked disabled then they wouldn't. There are no natural hair bloggers online who get any kind of love that appear visibly disabled

**E** - Do you feel that you receive the complements you get because you don't have a visible disability?

**M** - Yes basically. If I just take a picture of myself and post a selfie everyone is just like oh my gosh you're so pretty but, if I talk about my disability for a bit or talk about my new walking stick, I have curious cats linked to my twitter and it's all like anonymous questions and stuff. I get loads of anonymous abuse about being disabled. When people are able to forget about disability they like you a lot more.

**E** – Regarding the information you access online, do you feel that it is accessible?

**M** – It's more accessible than it was at one point, but it could be made a lot more accessible. It's saturated with the same stuff that works for people with particular textures, conditions or abilities. So they will say, "braid your hair every night for length retention," and it's like, some people can't do that because some people can't put their hair up every night. When I try to write blogs and post videos, I always try and mention things for people who may not be able to do this or that. I let them know not to feel bad. Nothing bad is going to happen if you just can't physically take perfect care of your hair the way people say you should. I'm meant to wash my hair every week or braid it every night and sometimes I can't. I can't, I just physically can't...

## Appendix 6: Aaliya's Sample Interview Transcript

**Aaliya – 20:00 – 06/09/2016**

[cut text]

**E** - Do you contribute online, blog or vlog, or comment on posts?

**A** - Not at all. Around my friends I'll talk about hair, but that's it.

**E** – Would you say that you trust the information you access online?

**A** - Not 100%. YouTubers can tell you to buy 100% miracle grows and they can all just be water with some fancy herbs in it. You don't really know what people are selling you unless you have a degree in chemistry. You don't know half of the things you put in your hair. You basically have to keep looking up the ingredients. I'm lucky because my sister studied pharmacology so I always ask her about ingredients. I don't think a lot of people have that so I think they just go online and follow people's comments. People forget that these people are sponsored, they are paid money sell you certain things. I know a YouTuber who puts up rubbish products but it's her job and she's just doing her job, not everything that they're selling you is going to be good for you

**E** – In all honesty I never buy what is recommended on YouTube, I'm more likely to take advice from friends who've previously tried good products. But moving on to the following questions, would you say that the information distributed online is accessible?

**A** - Yes. You can actually google everything now a days. If I can't find it I just ask my sister. I'm sort of lucky because I have a sister who's been through almost what I'm going through.

**E**- Would you say that there are particular women or hair types that are over or under represented online?

**A** - I think it's either light skinned women or very very dark skinned women. I do not see girls of medium tone skin colour. Very rare to see someone of my skin colour with my hair texture. People with mixed raced sort of hair, or dark skinned girls with thick 4c hair. The standard of beauty in the black African community is that if your very light your beautiful or if you are very dark your beautiful. You are not praised for being the middle ground. Its either, lovely and light or deep and dark. This is the same in the natural hair community.

**E** - What support do you feel social media offers you or black women?

**A** - I think it's just the community aspect. It's rare to see black women with natural hair on TV. The good thing is just being able to go on social media and seeing so many people with natural hair and also having a place you can go to, where there are other women who look like you with my hair too who are happy to share their experiences of their hair and talk about how they grow their hair, maintain it, wash it, dry it, what products they use. You don't get that in Cosmo's or Elle. You can't pick up a magazine and say "oh I'm going to try

out this hairstyle” because it is not a hairstyle made for your hair. On social media you can see a video and you’ll be like I really wanna try out this hairstyle, and you can because it is a black girl doing it and it is made for your hair

**E** - What does the natural hair movement symbolise for you?

**A** – Liberation. And another way a sort of entrapment. Liberation in the sense that if you have your natural hair you’re not an oddity because there are so many black women who have their natural hair now. But it makes other black women who don’t promote their hair in the same way feel like their letting that side down. Whilst that is you as yourself, this is myself. For some women it’s liberating but for other women, they wonder if they are wrong for not promoting the same message. Every time I see a girl with natural hair, even when I see you with your beautiful natural short hair, I’m like I wish I could just get to the level where I could cut all my hair off and feel comfortable with it and just walk around just free and happy. I’m not even at the level where I can just go out with my afro and not feel self-conscious. One that doesn’t wear their natural hair is selling out, still being asleep, not a woke black woman and falling under these standards of beauty that have been set by your slave masters. And it’s like no! I just really like my weaves. It’s just how I prefer to wear my hair.

**E** – What do you think is the message being communicated by the natural hair movement?

**A** – The same thing they were trying to get across in the 60s and 70s. The whole black is beautiful thing. You know, you don’t have to fit this western standard of beauty. Social media is sort of creating a new standard which for some women is unachievable, by giving black women another route which is just as straight as the Eurocentric one because there is no opportunity for diversity.

**E** - Would you say that you are part of the natural hair community?

**A** – I never consciously became natural. It was never a big thing for me. It’s not an awakening or anything like that. I have natural hair and I will always have natural hair. But I never transitioned to become part of a movement. I’m not quite sure if I can join the club if I didn’t consciously do it.

**E** - Do you feel comfortable sharing and contributing to discussions on natural hair platforms?

**A** - I do. I still do have natural hair and I am a black woman. I am not going to be cut out of a conversation simply because I don’t view it in the same way that you view it. I don’t think all black women have their natural hair as a political statement, so why should I sit quietly simply because I don’t politicise my hair? ...

## Appendix 7: Glossary and Terms

**Ableist/ Ableism:** Intentional or unintentional prejudice against people with disabilities.

**Afro:** Tightly coiled hair positioned evenly in a rounded shape around the head.

**Afro Hair:** This term refers to the hair textures of continental and diasporic Africans.

**Afro-Puff/s:** Afro hair that has been gathered into a ponytail and subsequently leaving a mass of tight curls near the crown of the head. The term afro-puffs refers to two or more ponytails.

**Blog:** A post on a webpage written in an informal style.

**Braids:** A hairstyle that is achieved by interweaving three or more strands, this can be in the form of one braid or several.

**Chemical Relaxer:** A mixture of chemical components used to permanently straighten curly hair.

**Coarse:** Thick textured afro hair which is regularly referred to as lacking a curl pattern.

**Coily:** Often but not exclusively used to refer to kinky afro textured hair whose strands interlock with one another.

**Colourism:** Prejudice against those with darker skin tones.

**Dreadlocks:** Hair that has been permanently interwoven into rope-like strands (see Figure 2).

**Hair Bun:** When a person's hair is pulled back from the face towards the crown of the head and twisted or wrapped around itself to form a bun-like shape.

**Hijab:** Traditionally known as the head scarf worn by Muslim women. However, the term in Arabic is quite a vague term, it is taken to mean one's modesty or covering.

**Hot Comb:** A metal comb with metal teeth. It is heated and passed through afro hair in order to temporarily straighten it.

**Kinky Hair:** Refers to afro hair that is tightly coiled and often perceived as lacking a curl pattern.

**Loose Curls:** Hair that has distinctively clumped curls (see Figure 4).

**Loose Hair:** Hair that has not been braided or permanently locked into a style, but is worn loosely in its natural state or temporary style (see Figures 3 and 4).

**Nappy:** A derogatory term used to refer to short natural hair that is tightly coiled.

**Natural Hair:** Hair that has not been chemically altered.

**Perm:** A mixture of components used to chemically alter the natural curliness of black hair, either through straightening or loosening the curl pattern.

**Picky:** Short hair that appears uncombed with mini clumps formed around the head.

**Protective Style:** Natural hair is delicate. Protective styles are therefore durable hairstyles that protect afro hair from constant manipulation, tangles and knots.

**Relaxed:** Hair that has been permanently straightened using chemicals.

**Straight Hair:** Hair that is straight in appearance, whether naturally straight or altered to achieve that appearance.

**Texturism:** Prejudice against those with tightly coiled hair.

**Transition:** Process by which those with chemically altered hair grow out their relaxed hair and slowly return to natural, or completely shave their hair in order for their hair to grow back in its natural state.

**Vlog:** A post on a webpage consisting primarily of video content.

**Weave:** Hair extensions that are sewn in or glued into a person's existing hair in order to change the length or texture of the hair.

**Wig:** False human or synthetic hair that is used to partially or fully cover the head.