

## FATHERS AND THEIR AFRICAN AMERICAN DAUGHTERS: HAIR PIECES CREATING TIES THAT BIND

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*Barbie never told Black girls they are beautiful.*  
Essex Hemphill, "Soft Targets (For Black Girls)" (2006)

Writing about the "mother-daughter dance over hair" in her article "For Black Girls, Hair and Self-Esteem Are Interwoven," Karen M. Thomas (2006) asserts that hair is both "a mother's way to pass judgment and a daughter's way to rebel." Thomas sees hair as "a sign of independence and self-identity [that] announces to the world who we are," but for little African American girls, the hair "dance" is more complicated, often signaling "a daughter's entry point into racial differences and America's standard of beauty" (E3). Culturally and racially-specific hair stories represent nuanced intersections between adults' choices about girls' hair and young black girls' ability to make their own informed hair and identity-forming choices in an adult world. Kim Green's reflection in "The Pain of Living the Lye" underscores the effect of "good hair" on an African American child's psyche: "I grew up mad at my hair because it wasn't like the swinging manes of white children who surrounded me" (1993, 38). To achieve the "good hair" ideal, heated iron combs or lye-based chemicals become the tools of destruction and temporary construction. African American women routinely talk and testify about a loss of innocence by pinpointing the moment their hair journeys toward selfhood began, testimonials revealing an evolution from hair-straightening to eventual acceptance of self and hair. The beginnings of these self-defining moments in young black girlhood are clear and long-lasting, and ultimately shape the public and private images of black womanhood.

Indeed, the rhetorical ploys that associate straight and relaxed hair care with "good" mothering tugs at the emotional and spiritual bond between African American mothers and their young daughters, evident in this advertisement for a popular children's relaxer: "Mommy gives us PCJ Pretty-N-Silky *because* she loves us!" (Luster Products, 1996, 123 emphasis added). Another such advertisement by Luster Products (1991) offers a similar appeal: "For your daughters, playing 'dress-up' can be wonderful make-believe fun and games. But as their mother, you know that looking out for them also has a serious side. And that includes caring for their hair. That's why you use PCJ Relaxer" (65). Decidedly mixed signals equate mother-daughter love and nurturing with hair relaxing and blur lines between the assumed carefree make-believe of childhood innocence and play with pleas to mothers that they are doing what is best for their daughters. The final tag of the ad is profoundly ironic, a claim that the product is "an original just like your daughters."

If we take our cues solely from Disney and its most recently released 3-D animated flick *Tangled* — yet another spin on the Rapunzel narrative featuring its celebrated long, straight, silky haired blonde damsel — we sense that some things about beauty aesthetics seem never to change. Even the social and political

implications of straight hair for Disney's first African American princess Tiana, from *The Princess and the Frog*,<sup>1</sup> reveals minimal efforts to challenge prevailing ideals about "good" and "bad" hair. On the other hand, perhaps **CHANGE** really is in the air, and in this case, it's all about little African American girls and their hair. This **CHANGE** may or may not have anything directly to do with the running platform of then-Senator Barack Obama and his subsequent election as the first African American US president. Or, perhaps the reality of the first African American First Family with its three generations of Obama females inhabiting the White House residence at the same time creates a new level of social, cultural, and political awareness about difference, especially racial and ethnic difference. Indeed, while public scrutiny of hair has followed past First Family females — Jacquelyn Kennedy, Hillary and Chelsea Clinton, for instance — this current media attention to race and gender as related to hair seems another first.<sup>2</sup>

A decidedly new attitude about the race and gender politics of little African American girls and hair is being attributed to the early October 2010 *Sesame Street* segment that has gone viral on YouTube, in which the spunky brown girl puppet sings with gusto and full commitment the catchy, upbeat tune "I Love My Hair!" This little brown female puppet's bold embrace of her nappy hair is precisely the companion to neo-Soul singer India.Arie's self-affirming "I Am Not My Hair" (2006): "I am not my hair/ I am not this skin/ I am not your expectations, no, no/ I am not my hair/ I am not this skin/ I am a soul that lives within." This same message about loving one's hair as an African American girl interfaces with messages of self-acceptance and African American cultural affirmation projected in a bevy of children's picture books about African American girls and their hair — Carolivia Herron's *Nappy Hair* (1997), Natasha Tarpley's *I Love My Hair* (1998), bell hooks's *Happy to be Nappy* (1999), Joyce Carol Thomas's *Crowning Glory* (2002), and Dinah Johnson's *Hair Dance* (2007), to name a few. Together and individually, these children's books challenge prevailing assumptions about a single beautiful hair ideal: long, flowing, silky, bouncy, capable of being wind-tossed, manageable, and blond. Indeed, "good hair," according to these alternative children's book narratives, is hair that we are born with and hair that makes us happy with who we are. Reiterates poet/ playwright Ntozake Shange (1972) addressing black adults about the hair ideal for African Americans: "the roots of your hair/ what turns back when we sweat, run,/ make love, dance, get afraid, get/ happy: the tell-tale sign of living/" (n.p.).

In addition to planting and nurturing this positive message to African American girls that chemically untouched hair is desirable, acceptable, healthy, manageable, versatile, and a source of pride, socially and politically conscious fathers are stepping in to assist socially and politically conscious mothers already challenging the many forces that negatively impact our brown daughters' sense of their most positive selves. Through this lens of hair, fathers address the sins of glamorizing the straight and silky hair ideal. Chris Rock identifies the impetus for his comedic documentary *Good Hair* (2009) as his five-year-old daughter who, after playing with Barbie dolls, presented him with this disturbingly loaded question: "Daddy, why don't I have good hair?" With this question so steeped in cultural folklore and written so indelibly upon the fabric of America's distinct history of black and white

race relations, Rock set out to explore why this prevailing notion of “good hair” as straight hair, presumably like white people’s hair — even though all whites don’t necessarily have straight hair — still exists and has reached his and surely other young African American daughters. When asked how Rock talks to his little girls



*Figure 1. Like father, like daughter: hair's family tapestry. Neal A. Lester with daughter Jasmine Z. Lester.*

about their hair, he responds both seriously and humorously: “Like any dad, I just tell my daughters they’re beautiful as much as possible. And I keep chemicals out of their hair until they’re old enough to make that decision. Because if you put chemicals in a kid’s hair, she’s addicted. It’s like making the kid a vampire” (Fireman, 2009, p. 122). Another African American parent acknowledges the profound pain at witnessing his/ her child’s feelings of inadequacy that can only be countered through creative re-messaging: “I think that at some point, if you have a little girl, we all

deal with the day your child comes home from school and says, ‘I don’t want my hair to look like this; I want it to look like Annie’s.’ And Annie’s hair is blond and long and not what she has” (Sims 2010).

Paternal nurturing and social and political responsibility are at the heart of *Sesame Street* writer Joey Mazzarino’s response to his adopted Ethiopian daughter when “he noticed as she played with her dolls that she wanted long, straight blond hair” (Gray 2010). His politically-charged creative response was the two-minute, upbeat video meant to remind his daughter that her hair was “nice just as it is” (Gray 2010). That the Italian American father’s song for his brown daughter addresses years of ambivalent emotions from many African American adult women about their subscribing to a straight hair ideal has been unexpected for Mazzarino, as summarized by an NPR staff writer (2010) in “I Love My Hair’: A Father’s Tribute to His Daughter”:

In writing the song, [Mazzarino] wanted to say in song what she says to his daughter: “Your hair is great. You can put it in ponytails. You can put it in cornrows. I wish I had hair like you.” That simple message has caused an outpouring of responses from women. Mazzarino got a call from an African woman who told him the song brought her to tears. “I was amazed, ‘cause I sort of wrote this little thing for my daughter, and here this adult woman, it touched her.”

This message has resonated loudly and clearly with African American women and girls as they navigate the politics of personal decisions; says one African American woman:

I embarked on a hair journey to revive my curls after getting bored with the polished, broadcaster's look. Tired of wearing my strands bone-straight and looking like "everyone else," I stopped using the flat iron for six months, wore my hair in protective hairstyles like braids and twists, and then had a big chop three months ago to remove the straggling straight ends so that my curls could grow back healthy and strong. And while it took over a decade to embrace my natural hair, when I watch this two-minute Sesame Street video, I can't help but fight back the tears as it sends a much-needed message to young black girls at a pivotal point in their development that will reaffirm why they should love what they've got on top. Who knows if I would've yielded to the hot comb or "kiddie" relaxer had I been exposed to such a positive image of black hair at an early age. I can only hope that little girls who've watched this [video] know that, as the Muppet sings, "there's nothing else that can compare to their hair" (Oliver 2010).

As an African American scholar who is also a parent, I began researching, teaching, and lecturing on the race and gender politics of head hair when our daughter was born twenty-one years ago. This work started not because our biracial daughter had ever asked questions about her hair, but rather because others were so consistently preoccupied with labeling our first-born's hair as "good hair" or "nice hair."<sup>3</sup> During our daughter's childhood years, I was her primary hair groomer because my more flexible job schedule as a university professor allowed that morning ritual. Plus, my Italian-Argentine spouse hadn't a clue what to do with our daughter's hair. As our daughter has moved into the young adult world, I have missed those days of bonding through detangler and hair-grooming sessions that united us on what I hope was some spiritual level. That she consciously alternates between flat-ironed straight and curly hair means that some spoken or unspoken lesson about her hair's healthiness and about self-acceptance must have been absorbed. Joey Mazzarino shares details of a similar bonding-through-hair grooming-ritual with his young daughter: "My wife is an actress and if she was away I would be in charge of my daughter's hair. I made sure it looked good ... I'm still not great at braids, but I try. I do standard braids. I don't know what I'm doing. It was hard to get used to but I love doing it with my daughter.... [The song I created] really comes from a place of love for my daughter" (Darden, 2010). Basking in the glory and creative possibilities of braids, afro puffs, afros, dreadlocks, and plaits, and then with various fun and funny hair adornments, this little unnamed brown girl puppet's proclamation and dance performance underscore Joyce Carol Thomas's (2002) message of self-affirmation: "What is good hair?/ I ask my daddy/ And Mama answers, 'Why it's understood,/ Sister, if it's on your head it's good!'" (n.p.) Even Willow Smith, the tween child star of actor parents Will and Jada Pinkett Smith, sends a message of self-affirmation in her chart-topping single, "Whip My Hair" (2010), wherein she uses her proportionally too-long braid extensions as a metaphor of resistance to those who demand conformity to another's unreasonable and arbitrary expectations:

“Don’t let haters keep me off my grind/ Keep my head up I know I’ll be fine ... I whip my hair back and forth/ I whip my hair back and forth (just whip it)/ I whip my hair back and forth.”<sup>4</sup> Since we fathers and mothers are also trying to help our African-American daughters find their voices of self-acceptance, it seems appropriate to leave this final word on the race and gender politics of hair to our newest young cultural warrior as she prances confidently across the *Sesame Street* stage and onto our computer screens belting out this challenge and declaration of “I Love My Hair!” to every brown woman and girl — and by extension every brown man and boy — caught in this maze of American beauty aesthetics:

Don’t need a trip to the beauty shop,  
 ‘cause I love what I got on top.  
 It’s curly and it’s brown and it’s right up there!  
 You know what I love? That’s right, my hair!  
 I really love my hair.  
 I love my hair. I love my hair.  
 There’s nothing else that can compare with my hair.  
 I love my hair, so I must declare:  
 I really, really, really love my hair.  
 Wear a clippy or in a bow  
 Or let it sit in an afro  
 My hair looks good in a cornrow  
 It does so many things you know, that’s why I let it grow  
 I love my hair, I love my hair  
 I love it and I have to share  
 I love my hair, I love my hair!  
 I want to make the world aware I love my hair.  
 I wear it up. I wear it down. I wear it twisted all around.  
 I wear braids and pigtails too.  
 I love all the things my hair can do.  
 In barrettes or flying free, ever perfect tresses you’ll see  
 My hair is part of me, an awesome part of me  
 I really love my hair!

African American women and girls still journey toward a day when their sense of themselves and their assessments of other African American women and girls are not based on futile efforts to achieve a hair ideal rooted in someone else’s limited and limiting constructions and images of beauty. This hugely important and popular vocal and visual cyber performance of “I Love My Hair!” in a little brown female puppet’s own exuberant voice extends this father’s message of positivity to his daughter far and wide in ways that books alone simply cannot and will not. African American parents can only hope that the combination of this father’s effort and other parents’ will be the **CHANGE** that nurtures, celebrates, and sustains their African American daughters as who will become African American women and mothers.

## NOTES

1. See Lester 2010.
2. See Eleveld 2008, Desmond-Harris 2009, and Jones 2008.
3. See “Nappy Edges and Goldy Locks: African American Daughters and the Politics of Hair” and “Roots that Go Beyond Big Hair and a Bad Hair Day: Nappy Hair Pieces,” in Lester 2007, 79-111.
4. The popularity of “I Love My Hair!” has led to a mash up with the *Sesame Street* video and Willow Smith’s hit “Whip My Hair”: <http://hiphop.popcrunch.com/willow-smith-whip-my-hair-sesame-street-i-love-my-hair-mashup/>.

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