

## Article

# Why We Need a National CROWN Act

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**Abstract:** Discrimination and intersecting forms of oppression directed at Black women influence how they look, live, work, interact with others, and even view their bodies and identities. Black hair has been and remains a target of this discrimination and oppression by obligating Black women to strive toward White beauty norms. Still under consideration in several states, the Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair (CROWN) Act provides a legislative intervention to protect Black women (and men) from hair discrimination at work, during school, and as they go about their daily lives. This article examines the politics affecting Black hair. The data for this study came from semi-structured interviews with 22 Black women who define their hair as natural. The results indicate that racial history and stereotypes continue to create unachievable standards for Black hair; that Black women continue to encounter discrimination when embracing their natural hair; and that wearing Black natural hair is often an uplifting decision for the women who elect to do so. The fact that others continue to challenge and discriminate against Black natural in multiple venues confirms the need for a national CROWN Act.

**Keywords:** Black women; CROWN Act; hairism



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## 1. Introduction

Mostly, I marveled with sadness that something as simple as a black woman's hair continues to threaten the social, political, and economic fabric of American life. (Caldwell 1991, p. 367)

The Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair or CROWN Act (SB-188 2019) is a revolutionary piece of legislation that seeks legal support for Black women (and Black men) to wear their natural hair without fear of discrimination, discipline, or dismissal from school, work, or public spaces (Donahoo and Smith 2019; SB-188 2019). As Caldwell (1991) laments, this legislation is indeed necessary because Black women routinely encounter hairism (preference for or rejection of certain types and textures) (Cobb 2019; Norwood 2018; Webb 2020) as they navigate life in a society that marginalizes their bodies, their history, and their identities. Whereas hairism promotes White beauty norms and preferences for hair that is long, straight, and silky as standard, thereby forcing Black women to chase these hair goals, the CROWN Act acknowledges and legally supports the right of Black women to pursue hairstyles of “their own cultural vocabulary, which change depending on mood, life circumstance, and who exactly will be seeing us on any given day” (Cooper 2018, p. 148).

Utilizing the principles developed by the Combahee River Collective (The Combahee River Collective 1977), this article argues in favor of national CROWN legislation that will allow Black women the legal foundation needed to assert control over their hair. The article begins with a description of the CROWN Act and its intended purpose. From there, the article details the principles of The Combahee River Collective (1977) and their applicability in examining and seeking to dismantle hairism as it intersects with other forms of oppression to unfairly burden and malign Black women. Next, I apply the principles of The Combahee River Collective (1977) to elements of hairism, including its history, its influence on discrimination, and analysis of how it manifests in the everyday experiences

of Black women. This application includes the presentation and analysis of data provided by Black women who chose to accept their natural hair, the politics that influenced the reception of their hair and styling, and how their hair decisions shaped their perceptions of their beauty, their Blackness, and themselves.

## 2. The CROWN Act

The Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair or CROWN Act seeks to provide legislative support for Black natural hair. This Act makes it illegal to discriminate against Black women (and Black men) in school, work, and public spaces because of how they choose to wear their hair. Eight states—California, Colorado, Connecticut, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Virginia, and Washington—have passed versions of the CROWN Act ([The CROWN Act n.d.](#); [Jackson 2021](#); [Donahoo and Smith 2019](#); [Oré 2021](#)). However, state laws only protect the women who reside there, thus failing to offer equal protection to all Black women. Sponsored by 31 members of the House of Representatives, a federal version of the CROWN Act received an official introduction on 5 December 2019. Passed on 21 September 2020 in the House, the bill moved to the Senate for consideration the next day. As of 31 March 2021, the Senate has taken no action on this legislation ([Congress.gov n.d.](#)).

As written, the federal CROWN Act identifies hair discrimination as a racial and civil rights issue. Specifically, the federal CROWN Act contends that policies and practices that label Black natural hairstyles as unprofessional and unwelcome violate the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Although arguments supporting hair policies contend that they apply to people of all races equally ([Caldwell 1991](#); [Collier 2012](#); [Greene 2011, 2017](#); [Macon 2015](#); [Donahoo and Smith 2019](#); [Powell 2018](#)), Black women feel the effects more than others because compliance with these policies mandate that they make significant alterations to their natural hair textures and presentation. Within the workplace, Black women are 3.4 times more likely to have others perceive of their hair as unprofessional, 1.5 times more likely to have an employer send them home because of their hair, 80% more likely to change their natural hair, and twice as likely as White women to straighten their hair to fit in at work ([JOY Collective 2019](#); [McGill Johnson et al. 2017](#)). Even though Black women have more positive views of Black natural hair, they still indicate an implicit bias against Black natural hairstyles especially in professional settings, even as the general climate has become more neutral toward these styles ([McGill Johnson et al. 2017](#)). Federal legislation will not eliminate implicit bias against or emotional responses to Black natural hair. Even so, enacting the federal CROWN Act challenges the implementation of discriminatory hair policies because they frequently have little connection to the work of employees, the academics and activities of students, or the ability of anyone to utilize and function in public spaces ([Congress.gov n.d.](#)). Thus, the federal CROWN Act will provide legal support for Black natural hair that can also help to reduce implicit bias against these styles by supporting individuals' rights to control their bodies, including their hair.

## 3. Conceptual Framework

I use the politics of Black feminism as defined by the Combahee River Collective to examine the political nature of Black women's hair decisions. The Combahee River Collective was a group of Black women activists who left the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) to create their own group in 1974. Although the members of the Collective supported many initiatives championed by the NBFO, they felt that the initial organization lacked inclusivity because it refused to acknowledge or address the concerns of Black lesbians ([Napikoski 2019](#)).

### 3.1. The Collective

Issued in 1977, the Combahee River Collective Statement outlines the purpose and principles of the group. First, the purpose of the Collective (The Combahee River Collective Statement ([The Combahee River Collective 1977](#))) was to challenge "racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression" (para. 1) recognizing that these forms of oppression re-

inforce and sustain each other while also promoting the overall oppression of Black women. Second, [The Combahee River Collective \(1977\)](#) acknowledges that history documents the continuous oppression Black women have endured and seeks to end its lingering influence.

Third, [The Combahee River Collective \(1977\)](#) resolved that the personal experiences that Black women encounter result from intersecting oppression and are political because they result from social and governmental systems. As the objects of this intersecting oppression, only Black women can truly recognize, understand, or explain and will fully invest in ending the inequities and inequality experienced by Black women.

[The Combahee River Collective \(1977\)](#) also embraced inclusivity. Within [The Combahee River Collective \(1977\)](#), accepting all Black women regardless of the experiences or perspectives that they bring to the group was fundamental. [The Combahee River Collective \(1977\)](#) also pursued an inclusive agenda by seeking justice for all Black women and challenging all forms of oppression rather than limiting their initiatives.

Finally, [The Combahee River Collective \(1977\)](#) accepted the inevitability of change. With that in mind, these women recognized that new knowledge and contexts would require them to reconsider their priorities and approaches to dismantling oppression. Thus, the principles of [The Combahee River Collective \(1977\)](#) were evolving and provided opportunities for reconsideration and expansion as needed.

### 3.2. *The Politics of Black Hair*

#### 3.2.1. Historical

The politics and conditions identified by [The Combahee River Collective \(1977\)](#) remain applicable to Black women and Black hair. The history and contemporary oppression directed at Black women includes specific criticism and degradation of Black hair. European observations of and interactions with people of African descent in all parts of the world noted the difference in Black hair textures compared to what they saw at home ([Camp 2015](#); [White and White 1995](#)). In this way, hairism supports racism by classifying Black hair as “bad” (short, kinky, wooly, and coily) because it is the antithesis to White hair, which is straight, long, smooth, and, therefore, “good” ([Banks 2000](#); [Bellinger 2007](#); [Byrd and Tharps 2014](#); [Cobb 2019](#); [Lake 2003](#); [Donahoo 2018](#); [Donahoo and Smith 2019](#); [McGill Johnson et al. 2017](#); [Robinson 2011](#); [Webb 2020](#)).

Hairism also intersects race with gender by placing the highest expectation for hairstyling changes on Black women without necessarily affecting Black men ([Banks 2000](#); [Craig 2002](#); [Kelley 1997](#); [Lake 2003](#); [Robinson 2011](#); [Rosette and Dumas 2007](#); [Russell-Cole et al. 2013](#); [Weitz 2004](#)). Whereas some choose to label Black women with certain natural styles (Afro, short, and sometimes dreadlocks) as lesbians ([Banks 2000](#); [Norwood 2018](#); [Weitz 2001, 2004](#)), many regard Black women with straight hair and styles that emulate White women as more welcome and physically attractive ([Banks 2000](#); [Byrd and Tharps 2014](#); [Djanie 2015](#); [Ellington 2015](#); [Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003](#); [Morrison 2010](#); [Rosette and Dumas 2007](#); [Tate 2007](#); [Thomas et al. 2011](#)). Additionally, hairism intersects with class because many people, including employers, assume that Black women wearing White hairstyles are more educated, sophisticated, and capable of succeeding in higher paying positions ([Bankhead and Johnson 2014](#); [Bellinger 2007](#); [Collier 2012](#); [Collins 2009](#); [Craig 2002](#); [Davis 2018](#); [Greene 2011](#); [Macon 2015](#); [Donahoo 2018](#); [Donahoo and Smith 2019](#); [Morrison 2010](#); [Opie and Phillips 2015](#); [Patton 2006](#); [Robinson 2011](#); [Rosette and Dumas 2007](#); [Thompson 2009a](#)). Notably, racism limits the economic opportunities available to Black women because emulating White hairstyles deemphasizes but does not fully eliminate their Blackness ([Collins 2009](#); [Donahoo and Smith 2019](#); [Morrison 2010](#); [Rosette and Dumas 2007](#)).

#### 3.2.2. Inclusivity and Discrimination

Black hair also influences the discrimination and inclusivity that Black women experience. Veritably, discrimination and inclusivity work together. Society marginalizes and oppresses Black women as a group, thus including all Black women regardless of their indi-

vidual choices and characteristics (Caldwell 1991; Collins 2009; Donahoo 2017; Harris-Perry 2011). For example, long-established stereotypes such as Mammy (dark, kinky-haired servant), Jezebel (hypersexual, often mulatto with hair that mimics White women, while luring all men to their doom), and Sapphire (deceptive in actions and appearance, never quite clear who she is until she reveals her loud and malicious demeanor) apply to all Black women (Collins 2009; Crenshaw 2019; Donahoo 2017; Griffith 2020; Harris-Perry 2011; Harvey Wingfield 2019).

While she does not resemble the physical traits attached to Mammy, a Virginia mayor quickly associated now-Vice President (VP) Kamala Harris with Aunt Jemima in response to the announcement that now-President Joe Biden selected her for this position (Griffith 2020). In doing so, he and many others categorized VP Harris with every other Black woman, making her equally unworthy and unqualified for such a high elected office simply because of her Blackness. Evidently, the straightness of her hair, her training and successful career in law and public service, her interracial and intercultural background, and even her marriage to a White man were not enough to allow VP Harris to escape the characterizations and oppression directed at Black women. If serving as the second highest elected official in the country does not allow a Black woman to escape discrimination, then clearly it is impossible for any Black woman to rise alone. Oppressed as a group, Black women must seek change and justice as a group for any one person to attain it. Inclusive oppression requires inclusive action and solutions.

### 3.2.3. Personal and Experiential

Finally, *The Combahee River Collective* (1977) accepted the inevitability of change. With that in mind, these women recognized that new knowledge and contexts would require them to reconsider their priorities and approaches to dismantling oppression. Thus, the principles of *The Combahee River Collective* (1977) were evolving and provided opportunities for reconsideration and expansion as needed.

The hair experiences of Black women provide evidence of discrimination and intersecting oppression. The physical prominence and phenotype characteristics of Black hair make it an easy target for attention, ridicule, and restriction. White beauty norms define women's hair as long, straight, smooth, and feminine (Banks 2000; Bellinger 2007; Byrd and Tharps 2014; Cobb 2019; Lake 2003; Patton 2006; Randle 2015; Robinson 2011; Thompson 2009a). Most Black women do not naturally grow straight hair, thus making it difficult for them to appear as feminine or beautiful without changing their hair (Banks 2000; Bankhead and Johnson 2014; Cobb 2019; Craig 2002; Donahoo 2018; Donahoo and Smith 2019; Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003; Morrison 2010; Patton 2006; Randle 2015; Rosette and Dumas 2007; Thompson 2009a). In aspiring to assert their beauty and femininity, Black women use varying approaches to make their hair emulate White hair and hairstyles (Bellinger 2007; Cobb 2019; Craig 2002; Djanie 2015; Donahoo 2018; Donahoo and Smith 2019; Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003; Lake 2003; Morrison 2010; Patton 2006; Randle 2015; Robinson 2011; Rosette and Dumas 2007; Thompson 2009a). However, attempts to acclimate to White hairstyles and beauty norms produce different results for each Black woman depending on their natural hair, the products used, and the look that they want to achieve (Byrd and Tharps 2014; Collier 2012; Johnson 2013; Onwuachi-Willig 2010; Rosette and Dumas 2007; Stilson 2009; Thompson 2009b). These results are not always physically or emotionally positive because conforming to White beauty norms may lead to hair breakage, alopecia (hair loss), skin irritation, low self-esteem, fibroids, breast cancer, etc. (Bankhead and Johnson 2014; Djanie 2015; Donaldson 2012; Maclin-Carroll 2020; Oney et al. 2011; Stiel et al. 2016; Thompson 2009b; Wise et al. 2012).

Moreover, hair is also the object of political oppression as illustrated by laws and policies that allow employers, schools, and government agencies to dictate how Black women wear their hair. Employers in multiple industries have and continue to restrict the hairstyles that Black women wear at work (Caldwell 1991; Collier 2012; Donahoo 2018; Donahoo and Smith 2019; Greene 2011, 2017; Lake 2003; Mele 2017; Onwuachi-Willig 2010).



Examples of Black women losing their jobs due to their hairstyles in the workplace include the following<sup>1</sup>:

- Beverly Jenkins lost her job at Blue Cross Insurance for wearing an Afro and was accused of organizing dissension among the other female employees while doing so;<sup>2</sup>
- Renee Rogers lost her position after 11 years with American Airlines after she started wearing cornrows to work;<sup>3</sup>
- Velma Jefferson lost her position as a security guard for wearing a wig that had black hair with red streaks, which her employer deemed “to [sic] light” even though another Black female coworker dyed her hair blonde without consequence;<sup>4</sup>
- Chastity Jones lost a job offer to serve as a telephone customer service representative because she had dreadlocks even though she wore them during the entire interview process and customers would never see her hair.<sup>5</sup>

To varying degrees, each of these women argued that their employers enforced discriminatory grooming policies. By rule, the employers prohibited all employees from wearing braids, Afros, dreadlocks, and other “unprofessional” hairstyles in the workplace. In practice, these policies place special obligations on Black women who must alter their natural hair to meet such standards because most hairstyles they might easily achieve are on the prohibited list (Caldwell 1991; Collier 2012; Donahoo 2018; Donahoo and Smith 2019; Greene 2011, 2017; Lake 2003; Morrison 2010; Onwuachi-Willig 2010). As such, these policies politicize Black hair by making conformity to hairism and White beauty norms a condition of Black women’s employment.

### 3.3. Combating Hairism

Although not specifically identified by *The Combahee River Collective* (1977), the primary goal of challenging all forms of oppression includes hairism. As Audre Lorde ([1983] n.d.) proclaims, “I do not believe that one aspect of myself can possibly profit from the oppression of [any] other part of my identity” (para. 4). Discrimination against Black hair both maintains and disguises intersecting racism and sexism directed at Black women. Applying the principles of *The Combahee River Collective* (1977) to examine hairism helps to clarify the history of oppression attached to and communicated through Black hair, reveals the ways that hair supports the oppression of all Black women, and delineates how Black women’s hair experiences illustrate the politics surrounding this issue and the need for legal intervention to address them.

## 4. History and Politics of Black Women’s Hair

Hairism is a long-standing element of racism, especially as projected at Black women. Serving as a visual marker of difference, hair influences legal and social status, controls employment and economic opportunities, and affects how Black women and others view their personal and racial identities. Additionally, context (historical era, geographic location,

<sup>1</sup> Caldwell (1991), Collier (2012), Greene (2011, 2017), Macon (2015), Donahoo and Smith (2019), and Powell (2018) provide a more detailed discussion of these and other court cases where Black women challenged employer hair policies as racial and gender discrimination. Macon (2015) examines hair policies as applied to students in educational settings.

<sup>2</sup> *Jenkins v. Blue Cross Mut. Hospital Ins., Inc.*, 538 F.2d 164, 168–169 (7th Cir. 1976) (although the appellate court held that Title VII of the Civil Rights Act supports the legal right to wear an afro, the court did not rule in Jenkins’ favor based on the facts in the case. Instead, the appellate court remanded the cases to the lower court for further consideration on the facts).

<sup>3</sup> *Rogers v. American Airlines, Inc.*, 527 F.Supp. 229, 233 (S.D.N.Y. 1981) (the court found that Rogers failed to prove that policy prohibiting her from wearing cornrows was discriminatory (based on race or gender) in its application. As such, the court did not see her hairstyle as eligible for protection under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act).

<sup>4</sup> *Jefferson v. Securitas Sec. Servs.*, Civil Action No. 3:08CV00024 SWW, at \*1, \*2, \*8–9 (E.D. Ark. January 16, 2009) (the court found that Jefferson did not establish that she had valid discrimination claim. The court maintained that the other Black female employee who did not lose her job for wearing blonde hair challenges Jefferson’s assertion that her former employer was discriminatory).

<sup>5</sup> *Equal Employment Opportunity Commission v. Catastrophe Management Solutions*, 852 F.3d 1018, 1031–1033 (11th Cir. 2016) (the appellate court found that the company grooming policy is race-neutral since it prohibits all employees from wearing locs. Also discussed the issue of race as a biological and a cultural concept as the latter supported the plaintiff’s argument that the grooming policy did not affect all races since locs do not have the same cultural significance for all races. Chose not to define race and instead, encouraged Congress to bring clarity to this issue).

community structure) also frames hierarchies attached to hairism along with the rewards and consequences associated with how Black women respond to this oppression.

#### 4.1. Enslavement

Black hair has always mattered. Even before European contact, hair helped to illustrate status, culture, and beauty for both men and women throughout the African continent (Banks 2000; Ellis-Hervey et al. 2016; White and White 1995). Black hair consistently drew attention from and notably influenced European descriptions of African people (Camp 2015; White and White 1995). For example, Hindu holy men (Sadhus), Ethiopian priests, and more recently, people of the West Indies wore locked hair for religious purposes and often inspired fear and “dread” in others because their hair mimicked a lion’s mane while also connoting its strength, power, and overt Blackness (Burgess 2007; Byrd and Tharps 2014; Chevannes 1994; Donahoo and Smith 2019; Gabbara 2016; White and White 1995). Recognizing the cultural value of Black hair, traders and slave owners shaved and mutilated the hair of enslaved men and women to destroy their cultural identities and individual pride (Byrd and Tharps 2014; Johnson and Bankhead 2014; Patton 2006; Weitz 2004; White and White 1995).

Under the tyranny of slavery, Black hair continued to matter to both Black women and slaveholders. Miscegenation resulted in slaves with lighter skin, European features, and straighter hair, thus adding colorism (the notion that having physical features that resemble White women make Black women more attractive) to the other hindrances of slavery, race, and life in North America (Ahmed 2012; Awad et al. 2015; Harris-Perry 2011; Orey and Zhang 2019; Robinson 2011; Russell-Cole et al. 2013). With Blackness serving as the inferior antithesis to the beauty and dominance of Whiteness, kinky Black hair became synonymous with ugliness, absence of femininity, and oppression (Banks 2000; Bellinger 2007; Byrd and Tharps 2014; Cobb 2019; Patton 2006; Thompson 2009a; White and White 1995). Yet, slaves with unkempt hair and disheveled appearance reflected badly on their owners and thus led to Black women covering their hair or finding ways to fashion styles after White women (Bellinger 2007; Byrd and Tharps 2014; Patton 2006; White and White 1995). Black women with hair textures that resembled White women might escape hard labor in the fields. However, they encountered constant sexualization, vengeful retaliation, and multiple forms of maltreatment from slave masters, mistresses, and even other slaves frequently directed at their hair (Byrd and Tharps 2014; Patton 2006; Weitz 2004; White and White 1995). Indeed, the use of the term “kinky” to describe both Black women’s hair and deviant sexual behavior helps to permanently sexualize Afrocentric hair textures and styles regardless of the wearer, her context, or her intent (Johnson and Bankhead 2014; Norwood 2018).

Supported by social and political structures, hair helped to maintain slavery. In a decision issued by the Virginia High Court of Chancery in 1806, Jackey Wright used her long, straight, dark hair as evidence that she was of White and Indian descent, and therefore, it was illegal to hold her and her children as slaves<sup>6</sup> (Collier 2012). Conversely, printed descriptions of runaway slaves used hair to help identify fugitives (Powell 2018; White and White 1995). In one instance, President George Washington offered a USD 10 reward for the return of Oney Judge, described as “a light Mulatto girl, much freckled, with very black eyes, and bushy black hair” (Claypoole’s American Daily Advertiser 1796 as cited in Tucker 2019). Aware of the practice, female slaves combed through their hair prior to escaping hoping that these styles would make it easier for them to evade capture (White and White 1995).

<sup>6</sup> *Hudgins v. Wright*, 11 Va. 134, 137, 139 (Va. 1806) (In issuing its decision, the court specifically described the hair of people of African descent as “wooly.” Since Wright had long, straight hair, she was not Indian and not African making it illegal to hold her as a slave).

#### 4.2. Assimilation

The dissolution of slavery did not end the negative perceptions directed at or attributed to Black women's hair. Social and economic pressures encouraged many Black women to pursue expensive and sometimes dangerous chemical treatments, processes, and tools to alter the texture and appearance of their hair (Byrd and Tharps 2014; Collier 2012; Craig 2002; Gill 2010; Harvey 2005; Johnson 2013; Johnson and Bankhead 2014; Patton 2006; Powell 2018; Randle 2015). The Black hair industry developed by Madame C. J. Walker and other pioneers in the early 20th century promoted haircare to help Black women be healthy, feel beautiful, and access contemporary fashion trends (Banks 2000; Craig 2002; Gill 2010; Harvey 2005; Johnson 2013; Patton 2006; Randle 2015; Simeon 2021; Thompson 2009b; Weitz 2004).

Utilizing beauty products to straighten or otherwise alter their hair also helped to illustrate class differences among Black women. Just as having looser and longer hair allowed slaves to obtain work assignments in the plantation house, this same hair helped free Black women obtain what many perceived to be better jobs, social circles, and business opportunities (Craig 2002; Ellis-Hervey et al. 2016; Thompson 2009a). Supported by the notion that "Whites were not supposed to see nappy hair" (Craig 2002, p. 27), employers also gravitated towards Black women with straight and mainstream hairstyles. Whether a preference or an express requirement, many employers communicated to Black women that they must straighten their hair to obtain and keep employment in all types of work environments (Bellinger 2007; Byrd and Tharps 2014; Caldwell 1991; Collier 2012; Donahoo 2018; Donahoo and Smith 2019; Randle 2015; Thompson 2009a; Yohannes 2014). Examining the specific value placed on straight hair, Morrison (2010) contends that, "Straightening is whitening. Whitening is bettering. Therefore, straightening is bettering. It is bettering in that it makes Black women more acceptable in environments dominated by whites" (p. 89). Despite the personal reasons Black women may identify when selecting these hairstyles, the political and social connection between straight hair and racial issues positions such hairstyles as evidence that these Black women have conformed to at least some elements of Whiteness (Collier 2012; Morrison 2010; Patton 2006; Randle 2015; Rosette and Dumas 2007).

#### 4.3. Integration

While expense and identity have always kept some Black women from pursuing significant hair alterations, many Black women accepted the notion and obligation of straight hair throughout much of the 20th century. It was not until the 1950s that the Nation of Islam challenged the conformity and racism embedded in hair straightening and encouraged Black women to stop acquiescing to Whiteness, thus paving the way for the Black is Beautiful social and political message of the 1960s (Camp 2015; Craig 2002; Johnson and Bankhead 2014). Within this context, many Black female dancers, other entertainers, and members of the middle class stopped straightening their hair and, instead, opted to wear it in natural (hair as it grows without chemical straighteners; see Donahoo and Smith 2019; Gill 2015) styles such as Afros (Craig 2002; Kelley 1997).

Even so, what began as an element of racial positivity and self-love in the 1950s became more socially and politically divisive in the 1960s and 1970s. Socially, the idea of Black women wearing short, natural hair emerged as a challenge to Black masculinity. As Weitz (2004) contends, "Perhaps the most widespread cultural rule about hair is that women's hair must differ from men's hair" (p. xv). Wearing natural hair may have saved Black women the time, expense, and discomfort associated with hair straightening, but "when black women wear their hair close-cropped, they are constructed as being unfeminine, unattractive, masculine, and lesbian" (Banks 2000, p. 95; Norwood 2018). Even as many promoted the idea of Black Power for racial uplift, this did not always include confronting gender norms (Banks 2000; The Combahee River Collective 1977; Craig 2002; Kelley 1997; Russell-Cole et al. 2013). In this way, Black masculinity supported and encouraged the continued adoption of hair straightening.

Politically, linking Black natural hairstyles to the Black Power Movement made them the targets of venom and criticism. Whereas some viewed the Afro as an obscure personal choice in the 1950s, its adoption by many members of the Black Panther Party and its demand to end racism made the hairstyle a divisive political symbol (Banks 2000; Caldwell 1991; Craig 2002; Johnson and Bankhead 2014; Kelley 1997; Opie and Phillips 2015; Orey and Zhang 2019; Patton 2006; Thompson 2009a; Weitz 2004). In addition to solidifying the Afro as a male hairstyle, the connection to the Black Power Movement classified the Afro as threatening, rebellious, disruptive, and anti-White. Recalling the reception that her Afro received, a participant in Craig's study (2002) recalled the way her students boycotted her class in 1965 when she premiered her Afro while working as a college professor at a historically Black college and university (HBCU). Similarly, Beverly Jenkins lost a promotion, was accused of leading the other female employees in a revolt, and had her supervisor state that she could never represent Blue Cross Insurance with that hairstyle. Despite three years of successful employment without incident, the Afro led Blue Cross Insurance to fire Jenkins who failed to prove this was illegal after she accused her employer of race and sex discrimination<sup>7</sup> (Donahoo and Smith 2019). Highlighting the commonality of these experiences, Weitz (2004) contends that, "Employers refused to hire or retain women who wore Afros, and deans at some black colleges threatened them with reprimands or even expulsion as 'discredits to the race' who looked unacceptably 'country' or 'low class'" (p. 23). While the Afro allowed Black women to assert their Blackness and communal connection to other members of their race, the political assumptions attached to the hairstyle led to mainstream rejection, including denial of many economic opportunities.

The notions of masculinity and militancy attached to the Afro made it a bold and even dangerous hairstyle choice for Black women. By the late 1970s, improved processes, decreased costs, and increased availability of chemical straightening products (commonly referred to as relaxers) made hair straightening easier and cheaper for many Black women (Craig 2002). The positive benefits associated with straight hair (attractiveness, conformity, and economic opportunities) combined with the limitations and disadvantages of wearing an Afro promoted a climate that supported traditional views and devaluations of Black hair.

#### 4.4. Self-Definition

The new millennium has helped to generate more interest from Black women in exploring both processes and hairstyles that embrace Blackness. For many, this starts with abandoning chemicals that require significant investment of time, finances, and other resources. At its height, Black women spent USD 206 million in 2008 on just chemical relaxers and the straight hair that these treatments produce. Five years later, this segment of the Black beauty industry declined by 26% to USD 152 million (Mintel Press Team 2013). Relaxer sales declined an additional 36.6% by 2017 (A hair care boomlet 2017). Put another way, relaxers accounted for 60% of the ethnic hair market in 2009, but only 5% ten years later (Simeon 2021). However, the Black hair industry remains strong, generating USD 2.51 billion (A hair care boomlet 2017; Holmes 2019). While relaxer use declined, natural hair products grew in variety, availability, and marketability, going from 6% of the market in 2011 to 35% in 2015 (Simeon 2021). As industry data illustrate, Black haircare continues to produce significant profits even as many Black women elect to avoid the harsh chemicals found in relaxers.

The continued strength of the industry demonstrates Black women's commitment to taking care of their hair. Instead of purchasing relaxers, Black women are now buying products dedicated to hair health. In place of relaxers, women are purchasing cleansers, moisturizers, and styling products, often preferring items that support rather than alter their natural hair textures (Gill 2015; A hair care boomlet 2017; Holmes 2013, 2019). In this way, Black women are embracing their hair for what it is instead of lamenting and decrying their hair for what it is not.

<sup>7</sup> *Jenkins v. Blue Cross Mut. Hospital Ins., Inc.*, 538 F.2d 164, 167 (7th Cir. 1976).



The decline in relaxer sales illustrates a change in how Black women approach their hairstyling, but it does not explain why. One motive for adopting hairstyles more commonly associated with Blackness is as a way of rebelling against White beauty norms and expectations (Bankhead and Johnson 2014; Banks 2000; Caldwell 1991; Craig 2002; Djanie 2015; Donahoo 2018; Donahoo and Smith 2019; Morrison 2010; Norwood 2018; Opie and Phillips 2015; Patton 2006; Thompson 2009a; White 2005). As Norwood (2018) explains:

Embracing the natural Black aesthetic is often read as rebellion—and, in some ways, it has to be. It is the reality of Black-skinned people, who can decide that they are fine just the way God made them and choose not to adhere to Western, white standards. Not to stand invisible or neutral within the white norm essentially means standing deviant and in rebellion. (p. 81)

Wearing hairstyles regarded as Black reflects a positive attitude toward Blackness and thus, challenges the notion that only hairstyles and textures attributed to Whiteness are acceptable or beautiful.

Additionally, women also elect to wear hairstyles associated with Blackness to illustrate self-control and self-definition. Embracing Black hair provides evidence that Black women embrace both the beauty and the value of their Blackness (Donahoo 2018; Donahoo and Smith 2019; Ellington 2015; Norwood 2018; Opie and Phillips 2015; Randle 2015; Rowe 2019; Thompson 2009a; White 2005). Frequently described as a hair journey, the process of going natural helps Black women express higher self-esteem and more confidence as individuals while learning to appreciate Blackness without comparing it or their hair to Whiteness (Donahoo 2018; Donahoo and Smith 2019; Ellington 2015; Gill 2015; Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003; Norwood 2018; Patton 2006; Rowe 2019; White 2005). Although some Black women choose to straighten their natural hair, many select this option out of convenience, familiarity, and ease of care (Donahoo 2018; Donahoo and Smith 2019; Gill 2015; Patton 2006; Robinson 2011). Regardless of what styles they choose, the mutability and visibility of hair makes it a prime mechanism for displaying beauty and confidence in their appearance, race, and identity.

## 5. Methods and Procedures

I obtained the data for this article from 22 Black women who were graduate students and/or employed by higher education institutions at the time of collection. The women participated in semi-structured (Patton 2015) phone interviews conducted by a graduate student and me. The full protocol for the study included 10 questions as well as a closing prompt for additional comments about their hairstyling and the way that others respond to how they wear it. Data for this study came from the closing prompt as well as three protocol questions: Why did you go natural? When/how did you realize hair matters? How have others responded to your hair decisions? In responding to these prompts, the participants provided a range of information that expressed the connections between their hair, hairism, history, discrimination, and their personal experiences as identified in the principles of The Collective 1977.

My interest in this topic began with questions from Black female graduate students as they pondered how to style their hair while participating in professional activities (presenting, job searching, working fulltime, etc.). Indeed, multiple posts to a Facebook group that caters to Black professionals and graduate students in student affairs sought advice on this same issue. Recognizing that platform as a place where others were already discussing Black hair, my graduate student and I posted and recruited Black women to participate in the study after receiving approval to conduct human subjects' research. Our recruitment efforts yielded 22 participants who participated in the data collection process. Each woman consented to interviews that we audio-recorded and transcribed. Participant involvement included and terminated after each woman received the opportunity to review (member-check) the content and accuracy of and to clarify her interview transcript (Jones et al. 2013; Patton 2015).

The 22 participants in this study fall into an age range of 22–45 years with a median age of 33.43 years. All of the women have completed a bachelor's degree. At the time of their interviews, four of the women were pursuing master's degrees, 12 were working towards doctoral degrees, and all of the women had an affiliation with traditionally White postsecondary institutions (TWIs) as students and/or employees. Most of these women attended and/or worked for public institutions (17), with three women working and attending private institutions and two others working for public institutions while enrolled in graduate programs offered at private institutions. As presented in Table 1, the hairstyle terms reflect those that each woman selected individually.

**Table 1.** Characteristics of Study Participants.

Name	Age	Highest Degree Earned	Current Degree Sought	Region of Residence/Employment	Hairstyle
Afiya	28	Master's	Doctoral	Great Lakes	Natural/Sew-In Weave
Dhakiya	35	Master's	Doctoral	Southwest	Natural-Twist Out
Etana	45	Master's	Doctoral	Great Lakes	Curly
Faraja	25	Bachelor's	Master's	Southeast	Natural-Wigs
Ghanima	41	Master's	N/A	Great Lakes	Yarn Braids
Hisani	22	Bachelor's	Master's	Great Lakes	Small Afro
Intisar	28	Master's	Doctoral	Great Lakes	Curly Fro/Weave
Jina	30	Master's	Doctoral	Great Lakes	Locs
Kiburi	22	Bachelor's	Master's	Great Lakes	Afro
Lesha	38	Master's	N/A	Great Lakes	Tapered Teeny Weeny Afro (TWA)
Marini	33	Master's	Doctoral	Great Lakes	Natural-Locks
Murua	38	Master's	N/A	New England	Wash and Go
Nafasi	35	Master's	Doctoral	Plains	Transitioning to Natural
Noni	28	Bachelor's	Master's	Great Lakes	Natural
Penda	30	Master's	Doctoral	Plains	Natural-Wash and Go
Razina	26	Master's	N/A	Great Lakes	Natural-Twist Out
Subria	26	Master's	Doctoral	Great Lakes	Natural/ Sew-In Weave
Tendai	43	Master's	Doctoral	New England	Natural-Twist Out or Afro
Uniqua	33	Master's	Doctoral	Plains	Natural-Locks
Waseme	30	Master's	Undeclared	Plains	Natural-Twist out, Wash and Go, Afro
Yeva	31	Master's	Master's	Plains	Natural-Twist Out
Zuri	35	Master's	Doctoral	Plains	Natural-Afro or Braided

The women in this study lived in various parts of the United States at the time of their interviews. Based on the regions identified by the U.S. Bureau of Economic [U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis \(2012\)](#), 12 of these women resided in the Great Lakes, six in the Plains, two in New England, one in the Southeast, and one in the Southwest. Seeking to illustrate both Black hair and Black women in a positive manner, I purposely assigned each woman an Afrocentric pseudonym (see [Lahman et al. 2015](#) for more on the issue of pseudonyms, race, and power).

Table 2 shows how each theme connects to the principles of [The Combahee River Collective \(1977\)](#) through the coding process.

**Table 2.** Connecting Themes and Coding to [The Combahee River Collective \(1977\)](#).

Themes (Selective Codes)	Categories (Axial Codes)	Terms (Open Codes)	Principles of <a href="#">The Combahee River Collective (1977)</a>
Hair and the Body Politic	Politics, Laws, Social Norms, and Expectations	Power; Militant; Society; Norm(s); Perception; Dominant; Politic; Lesbian; Stereotype; Natural	Inclusion and Discrimination Historical Personal and Experiential
Hair Not to Wear	Inclusion, Discrimination, and Oppression	Ugly; Pretty; Straight; Relaxer; Good; Bad; Natural; Choice	Inclusion and Discrimination Historical Personal and Experiential
Hair Love is Self-Love	Self-Definition, Consciousness, and Identity	Natural; Straight; Relaxer; Healthy; Good; Bad; Choice; Free/Freedom	Inclusion Personal and Experiential

I employed a multi-step coding process to identify data provided by the participants that address the political nature of Black hair. In the initial phase, I used open coding by reviewing transcripts for comments from the participants that connected Black hair to politics, power, discrimination, and experiences and feelings of inclusion/exclusion. Although I did not identify or search for specific terms during this phase of the coding process, words mentioned by the participants included “power”, “militant”, “society”, “norm(s)”, “perception”, “dominant”, “politic”, “lesbian”, “ugly”, “pretty”, “natural”, “straight”, “relaxer”, “healthy”, “stereotype”, “good”, “bad”, “choice”, and “free/freedom”. Next, I utilized axial coding to cluster the concepts identified during the open-coding phase into categories. These categories were inclusion, discrimination, and oppression; politics, laws, social norms, and expectations; and self-definition, consciousness, and identity. After the initial clustering, I revisited the principles of [The Combahee River Collective \(1977\)](#) and repeated the axial coding process to ensure consistency in the categorical assignments of the data. With [The Combahee River Collective \(1977\)](#) in mind, I moved some elements of the data to different categories from the one where I initially assigned that information. I followed the second implementation of axial coding with selective coding where I identified themes that emerged from the data and categories as examined through the lens of [The Combahee River Collective \(1977\)](#).

Limitations for this study include the recruitment and diversity of participants and the primary focus of the research protocol. The selected Facebook group provided a convenient place to recruit participants for research on Black hair because many users already illustrated an interest in the topic. However, this page also targeted Black women with college degrees, those working in higher education, and many who held or were pursuing advanced degrees. As such, this study does not include voices from Black women who did not attend college or those who work in fields outside of higher education. Similarly, the study’s emphasis on Black natural hair denied Black women who have yet to explore wearing their natural hair the opportunity to share their hair perspectives and experiences with hairism. Even so, the data provided by the women who did participate illustrate the continued existence of hairism, its influence on Black women’s identities, and the politics that emphasize the need for a national CROWN Act that will confirm every Black woman’s right to control her hair.

## 6. Data and Discussion

The experiences and reflections provided by these 22 Black women illustrate that hairism functions as a form of oppression. By choosing to embrace their natural hair, these women are challenging the assumption and expectation that Black women should seek to style their hair in ways that comply with White beauty norms. As [Gay \(2014\)](#) points out, “When a black person behaves in a way that doesn’t fit the dominant cultural ideal of how a black person should be, there is all kinds of trouble” (p. 257). Black women wearing their natural hair does not fit the dominant ideals of beauty and femininity, thus leading to many negative and introspective incidents connected to hairism.

Within these data, three themes emerged that illustrate the existence of hairism and the need for national CROWN legislation. Hair and the Body Politic is the first theme. This theme concentrates on policies, laws, and social norms that govern Black hair in the public sphere and, therefore, require mechanisms to overturn them. The second theme, Hair Not to Wear, focuses on the ways that hairism intersects with other forms of oppression to influence the discrimination and inclusion that Black women encounter related to their hair texture and hairstyles. Hair Love is Self-Love serves as the third theme and refers to the ways that Black women utilize their hair experiences and presentations to cultivate new definitions of beauty, femininity, and self that value Black hair and Blackness.

### 6.1. Hair and the Body Politic

#### 6.1.1. Blatantly Political

Many of the Black women in this study discussed the ways that politics intersect with hair. Dhakiya and Jina both refer to the wave of Black women embracing and wearing Afrocentric hairstyles as the “Natural Hair Movement” (Cooper 2018; Gill 2015; Rowe 2019). Explicitly linking the contemporary movement with the Black Power Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, Dhakiya contends that in the 1970s:

If you were wearing your own style, your own hair and you liked your kink style and all of that then you were a pro black and back to Africa and all this stuff and I think it's just one more stereotype for black women that you know if you're wearing your hair um kind of natural and free then, you are that person. You are the spokesperson for black people. And they're gonna look at you as [an] intimidating, an independent strong woman with black girl magic.

Dhakiya recognizes Afrocentric hairstyles as political because they echo previous Black political action. While not every Black woman selects Afrocentric hairstyles for political reasons, these hairstyles still carry political implications. Indeed, the motivations of Black women wearing Afrocentric hairstyles has little influence because the mere act of wearing a hairstyle that both connects to and promotes a positive image of Blackness is, by nature, an act of political resistance (Banks 2000; Caldwell 1991; Craig 2002; Dione-Rosado 2004 as cited by Bellinger 2007; Kelley 1997; Thompson 2009a).

Describing their personal approaches to natural hair, both Tendai and Etana emphatically proclaim the political nature of their personalities and their hair. Recalling her choice to wear Black natural hair, Tendai depicts her decision as “straight up political. I was like Iiiii'm Black and I'm proud” [emphasis original]. Likewise, wearing an Afrocentric hairstyle only added to Etana's strong political identity. She labels herself as “Betty Boycott, I'm the militant one so you know, when it comes to me, the least of your worries is my natural hair.” Etana continues:

I am fortunately and unfortunately known as the angry Black woman right, or the angry Black lesbian and that's totally fine. I think people look at me and define me as those things because I have natural hair or I'm rocking an afro that day or I'm wearing a dashiki that day or you know like I think they see that and go oh that's just you know a part of that angry Black revolutionary person.

Both Tendai and Etana knew that others would see their Black natural hair as political because they were already highly political women. Similar to the members of [The Combahee River Collective](#) (1977), both of these women proudly embrace the political connotations attached to their hair as part of their active efforts to confront the oppression of Black women.

#### 6.1.2. Challenging Social Norms

Although not as blatantly political as Tendai and Etana, other participants recognized that donning Black hairstyles is a form of rebellion because of social norms that favor Whiteness over Blackness. Referencing social norms dating back to slavery that made Black hair synonymous with ugliness (Camp 2015; Gill 2004; Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003; Patton 2006; Tate 2007; Weitz 2004), Razina, Yeva, and Faraja contend that Black natural hair does not reflect the look that we are socialized to expect. As Razina points out, “I don't think that natural hair, a lot of times, afros and curly hair is what society deemed as attractive or pretty, historically.” Reiterating this same point, Yeva argues that, “Afrocentric hairstyles and Afros and curls, that's just not the norm. Eurocentric beauty styles are still the law of the land.” Personalizing the application of these beauty norms, Faraja maintains “that society expects my hair to be long and straight and silky and more like a white person's hair than, you know, kinky, afro.” Faraja further unpacks these social norms:



I think it's because as a Black woman I've been conditioned to think that my hair is supposed to be like White peoples and it's just—it's not. So we do all these things to make our hair more like theirs. Whether it's getting weave or you're chemically straightening your hair, we're changing our hair texture to fit their criteria; to fit their social norm. We've been conditioned to think that's what makes us beautiful. That's what's pretty, that's what's acceptable. Desired.

Echoing Black intellectuals from the 19th century, these women recognize that the perceived unattractiveness and worthlessness attributed to Black bodies including Black hair “was either the result of environmental circumstances or a product of whites’ limited imaginations. It was not innate” (Camp 2015, p. 684). Wearing their Black hair in natural hairstyles allows these women to challenge these artificial social norms by clarifying that the perceived inferiority of Blackness is contrived, not absolute. Enacting a national CROWN Act will shift this responsibility from Black women to the government and the law where it belongs.

### 6.1.3. Hairism and Gender Identity

Related to social norms, these Black women also connected politics and hairism as elements of femininity and gender identity. For Jina, supporting Black women’s identities is a key component of the natural hair movement:

[F]or young ladies who also have, again these layered identities; the intersection of being female, feminine or masculine presenting women with certain body types and skin complexions in terms of thinking of our racialized community, I can appreciate the natural hair “movement” encouraging women and men for that matter to wear their hair in its natural state.

[emphasis original]

For Jina, natural hair provides an opportunity for Black women to appreciate multiple aspects of their identities. Conversely, for Waseme, wearing natural hair led others to question her identity. Specifically, an aunt “asked my little brother if I was a lesbian, because cutting your hair completely off was equated to being a lesbian, because men normally wear their hair cut low, and if you wear your hair cut low, then that means you’re trying to be a man.” While Waseme views wearing her natural hair as a way of affirming her identity as a Black woman, her aunt interpreted her hairstyle as something that Waseme did not intend. By promoting the idea that Black women with short hair are lesbians and/or trying to emulate men, Waseme’s aunt illustrates the importance of the natural hair movement that Jina describes. The politics of Black hair influence how all members of society view Black hair regardless of their characteristics or identities.

While Waseme’s aunt questioned her sexuality when she chose to wear her natural hair, other participants maintain that conforming to dominant definitions of femininity is more costly. Viewing Black women’s hair holistically, Tendai argues:

women in particular, I think it's important because so many of us have tried to change and adapt, not just our physical, but our emotional, our spiritual, the way we speak, what we wear in order to conform to the dominant group and by that, to be clear, I mean Whites as the dominant group and I think it's been harmful to us. I think that's the reason why so many of us are sick. We are experiencing trauma in our bodies as we are trying to navigate and environment that is hostile to us that has something to say about how we look, what we say, how we appear, how we speak right so it's important we have to now claim those spaces.

As Tendai indicates, asserting the right to control their hairstyles is not just about hair, but the overall right for Black women to control their bodies. Marini concurs with this sentiment declaring the following:

I would love for all women to be natural; all women of color to be natural. Just because I mean that is the hair that was given to us and we don't have to allow

society to tell us that beauty is a Barbie doll. We don't have to conform to that and we don't have to damage our hair or wear [other] hair to be beautiful.

Both Tendai and Marini agree that efforts to make Black hair appear and function like White hair expose Black women to trauma on a regular basis. Wearing Black natural hair is one way that Black women can rebel and overcome this trauma. Indeed, Tendai insists on battling hair conformity directly.

I was like I must do this because, to me, when you think about Black women and how this—you know, we encounter so much hatred you know in terms of our bodies, how we're shaped, our lips, our skin color, our hair, all this kinda stuff that's why it felt political to me and I was like I must do this! I must do this! Girl and all that kinda stuff . . . but for me, it was a decision and I feel like one of the first decisions I made for ME [hits table] as a Black woman.

Tendai's willingness to fight against the limitations imposed by hairism, racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression is valiant and profound. However, the longevity and comprehensive influence of body politics means that no matter how hard Tendai or any of these other women fight, they will not win the war against oppression without legal mechanisms such as the CROWN Act that acknowledge and support their rights to construct their identities and hairstyles for themselves.

#### 6.1.4. Limits of Personal Politics

Constructed by history, social oppression, and White beauty norms, the politics of Black hair are inescapable. Wearing Black natural hair allows Black women to openly challenge these politics by refusing to conform and acquiesce to the status quo expectation that they emulate White women. Yet, choosing natural Black hairstyles does not give Black women full control over their hair, which is only possible if permitted by hair and body politics, such as the national CROWN legislation.

#### 6.2. *Hair Not to Wear*

The political struggles over Black hair exist in social arrangements and the law, but they also manifest in the everyday experiences of Black women. While Tendai, Jina, Etana, and Dhakiya recognize and accept that embracing Black natural hair communicates a political message, participants also acknowledged that hair affects the discrimination and inclusion that they encounter.

##### 6.2.1. Discrimination against Black Natural Hair

Hairism<sup>8</sup> promotes discrimination against Black women regardless of how they choose to wear their hair even from a young age. As children, Penda, Kiburi, and Jina all had long hair, which allowed them to don styles commonly displayed by White girls, notably long pigtail braids. Rather than gain acceptance, each drew ridicule from other children who called them names such as Pocahontas, Sacajawea, and Pippi Longstocking, implying that they were not Black or at least, mixed raced. Specifically, Kiburi endured an assault when another little girl cut her hair when she was in kindergarten. Conversely, Subria and Hisani experienced childhood trauma for having short hair. Noting that this is not just a historical issue, Afiya mentioned incidents where, in recent years, schools suspended kids for wearing Black natural hairstyles as examples of the continued discrimination directed at Black hair (See also [Macon 2015](#)). Clearly, Black hair is a site of discrimination, ridicule, and rejection no matter the age or style of the wearer.

<sup>8</sup> None of the participants in this study filed lawsuits related to hair discrimination. Subria came closest due to discrimination that she received from an employer related to her race, including her hair and other elements of her appearance. She attempted to seek consideration from her employer through her supervisor, but she did not believe the individual seriously considered her perspective. After failing to obtain any intervention or consideration for the bias and discrimination that she experienced, Subria chose to obtain another job rather than continue to work for the employer where she encountered routine discrimination. Subria did not encounter hair discrimination by her new employer.

For adult Black women, work environments often influence and even provide directions as to how they wear their hair. Although her workplace does not seek to control how she wears her hair, Razina admits, “Every time I meet people, every time I changed to a new job. I started working with new people, moved to a new city. Like literally, people comment on my hair, and I have lots of conversations.” While Razina did not have an emotional response to this regular interest in her hair, Ghanima and Faraja interpreted similar comments as a hairstyle preference. Describing similar workplace experiences, Ghanima states, “My coworkers, whenever I relaxed my hair, I get probably a lot of compliments around that time, so I can tell like that’s your preferred choice of hairstyle.” Recalling her experiences in class, Faraja identified her peers as presenting

some negative reactions whenever I wore my natural hair. I haven’t felt as confident or as beautiful I guess you could say I got more of a positive reaction whenever I was wearing my weave that was long and straight and I sort of internalized that and became really uncomfortable with my natural hair.

As adults, each of these women sought to control their hair and style it according to their own moods and desires. Yet, much like the childhood experiences described by Penda, Subria, Hisani, Jina, and Kiburi, the hairstyles worn by Razina, Ghanima, and Faraja generate often unwanted attention that reinforces social preferences for straight hair and discriminates against Black natural hair.

Moreover, the discrimination directed at Black hair is not so simple as a preference for long and straight over short and curly. Some of these women encountered specific criticism for their decisions to wear specific natural hairstyles. At some point during their hair journeys, both Yeva and Tendai chose to completely shave their heads. Yeva shaved her head as an act of solidarity with her mother who was undergoing chemotherapy and fighting cancer. Even as her mother recovered and kept most of her hair, Yeva wore her shaved hairstyle because, “I was 26 at the time. It was the first time that I really was like ohhh, this really is me and I’m seeing me for the first time.” True to her highly political nature, Tendai wore her head shaved for three years purely as an act of rebellion. Reflecting on her decision, Tendai proclaimed

I’ve never felt so liberated in my life, but People were like—they did not understand—one day I’m sitting in a meeting and my boss looked at me, black man, looked at me, and he looked at me again and he was like [imitation of boss looking at her and her looking at him back and forth] “I just can’t get used to what it is you’re doing, I can’t,” and he was like “this, I can’t” (puts up hands in a blocking gesture).

Tendai also described a similar encounter she had in a bank when “this latino man walked up to me and says “I’m just curious, why would you do that?” And so, but at that point, I was affirmed that I was supposed to do it.” By shaving their heads, Yeva and Tendai violated the politics of hair by choosing not to have any hair at all.

Even so, the experiences described by these women suggest that wearing a shaved head is not the most egregious Black natural hairstyle. Marini, Uniqua, and Jina experienced a new level of discrimination when they started to loc (wear dreadlocks and similar styles) their hair. Comparing responses to wearing her hair in locs to how people reacted to her natural curls, Marini expressed, “when I was loose natural, people were a little bit more receptive to me. I never even thought about like how that was privilege.” Similarly, Uniqua received mixed reactions from her family members and significant other when she chose to loc her hair. Although her mother approved and one of her nephews and two of her nieces also chose to loc their hair, her father avoids commenting on her hair; her brother flatly stated, “I don’t like it. I don’t like short hair on women”, and her boyfriend “likes the loose natural more than he likes the locked natural and I can tell. He tries to hide it, but I can tell.” Rather than just ask her to remove the locs, both her father and her grandmother routinely offered to finance a new hairstyle with her father emphatically saying, “I’ll pay you money to cut that stuff out of your head.” All Black natural hairstyles do not receive

equal treatment. While Marini, Uniqua, and Jina could ignore the prejudice against locs that they received from family and friends, this type of rejection can be far more damaging when it affects employment<sup>9</sup> (see [Donahoo and Smith 2019](#); [Greene 2017](#)). The fact that hair discrimination can lead to both personal rejection and loss of employment is strong evidence that national legislation is necessary to protect Black women's hair and their right to style it as they choose.

#### 6.2.2. Promoting Hair Inclusion

While hair serves as a site for discrimination from others, many of the Black women in this study viewed their hair as an area of inclusion. Rather than treat it as a debate or competition, multiple participants including Intisar, Hisani, Dhakiya, Marini, Etana, and Waseme supported the idea that “all hair is good” (Intisar), not just hair that is straight, long, and silky. Promoting active inclusion, Waseme commented:

black women, in particular, have just been so conditioned to think that lighter skin is prettier and straighter hair is prettier, and so whenever I see another woman that is an African American woman that's natural, I'm always obliged to start a conversation about [it]. It just empowers me to continue on my journey as well.

Instead of just including Black women who wear natural hairstyles, Etana challenges the interpretation of straight hair as self-loathing or anti-Black. Focusing on the aesthetic, Etana argues:

It's truly how they feel about themselves. I think they think I love my weave and all the different names they have for them, the yaki and all that stuff. I think they love the look. A lot of sistahs that wear weaves and relaxers and love being black and you can't tell them nothing else so for them it's just about how they feel about themselves and their hair.

Although wearing Black natural hair produces different styles than those that come from wearing weaves and relaxers, all styles are accessible and should be acceptable for Black women. The goal of and for the CROWN Act is not to prohibit hair straightening, but to create an environment where all Black women can comfortably wear the styles that they choose without fear of reprisal at home, at work, or in any other public venue (see [Donahoo and Smith 2019](#); [New York City Commission on Human Rights 2019](#); [Thompson 2009a](#)).

#### 6.2.3. Limits of Personal Empowerment

The experiences of Black women embracing their natural hair illustrate that discrimination continues to influence what they wear on their heads. While some of these women utilized this discrimination as inspiration and simply identified a different perspective on their hair, their personal empowerment does little to make the social or political climate more accepting. Instead, the additional work that these women must invest in bringing positivity to how they look and feel and explain their hair justifies the need for national CROWN legislation, as it clear that Black women can neither end nor overcome hair discrimination on their own.

#### 6.3. *Hair Love Is Self-Love*

The discrimination and oppressive climate surrounding Black women and their hair not only affects how others view them, but also how they define and perceive themselves. Illustrating an assertion by [Weitz \(2004\)](#) that women sometimes develop low self-esteem when our hair receives too much or too little attention, Faraja internalized the negative reactions others had to her natural hair. However, for most of these women, wearing Black natural hair provides a pathway to self-definition and self-love that encourages Black women to see value and beauty in Blackness even when others do not.

<sup>9</sup> *Equal Employment Opportunity Commission v. Catastrophe Management Solutions*, 852 F.3d 1018, 1031-1033 (11th Cir. 2016)



### 6.3.1. Internal Motivation

The pathway to wearing Black natural hair is different for everyone. Yeva (for her mother), Faraja (for herself), and Uniqua (for herself) cut off their chemically treated hair due to health issues. As she underwent treatment, Uniqua learned of the link between relaxers and health issues such as cancer and fibroids, both of which affected her. Similarly concerned about the health of her hair, Jina declares:

the stopping of the chemical processing was because it was breaking my hair off, and it did not feel like that was something that was fulfilling me, making me feel whole as a person, in terms of my beauty and my spirit and my energy.

For Jina, the chemical process of straightening her hair was costing her her hair. Unrelated to health and in a less dramatic fashion, Zuri simply lost interest in wearing chemically straightened hair.

I just remember sitting in the chair like I don't want to do this anymore. It was just too much. It just didn't feel right. It was not like I had this overly overwhelming Black Power Movement. Nothing like that. It was just, I'm done. I don't want to do this anymore. It just feels better. I feel more like myself. It just came natural.

These experiences reflect a desire by Black women to end their relationship with chemical straighteners not as racial statements, but because these processes no longer positively connect with their circumstances or how they view themselves.

Rather than focus on what they left behind, some of these Black women emphasized what they gained by wearing their natural hair. For Intisar, embracing her natural hair proved to be a truly liberating experience. She describes the process saying, "Natural, as a whole, just means that you're free." Resonating the freedom expressed by Intisar, Ghanima advises other women to "Just kind of embrace yourself, don't worry about what other people think." Likewise, Nafasi proclaims, "I just feel like it's my hair. I can wear it whatever kind of way I want and people really don't have to like it." Each of these women acknowledges that others may not approve of their natural hairstyles but chooses to disregard this negativity in favor of the freedom to control their hair.

### 6.3.2. Natural Hair Community

In addition to individual liberation, Black natural hair also served as a way of promoting community and pride among Black women. The beauty that Zuri sees in her natural hair paved the way to her seeing beauty and value in other Black women with natural hair.

It's so amazing how you could be in the grocery store, and you're like, "oh I love your hair. What do you use?" It's kind of like you automatically start bonding. You're like, "Yeah, I tried this, and I tried that." I'm like, "Oh that didn't work." I cannot tell you how many times I bonded with different women. I absolutely had no clue who they were because they asked me or I asked them questions about how they kept up their natural hair.

For Zuri, wearing natural hair allows her to connect with other Black women who have made this same transition. As such, Zuri acts on Murua's assertion that "Everyone can have natural hair. All of our hair is beautiful in its natural state." Combining Murua's sentiment and Zuri's actions, Dhakiya affirms:

I think the women who I have encountered and the women who have their children [who] are also natural, they seem to have this mindset of, you know, I can be anything I want to be, I can do anything I want to do, I can go anywhere I want to go, and I love that. I mean, I think we should embrace that. It's just black women. We've always been oppressed, we've continue to be oppressed, but if we can make this one statement and it kinda of trickles down into other parts of our lives and I think that that part has been pretty amazing to witness and I see that in those women and I see it as they are raising up their daughters, too and their sons, to appreciate women who are natural and who appreciate themselves.

As delineated by Dhakiya, the Black natural hair movement generates community and positivity for the Black women who participate. Wearing natural hair serves as a spark for some Black women that leads to more love for themselves, their families, and Blackness.

### 6.3.3. Hair Positivity

As they embrace their natural hair, Black women learn to appreciate their beauty and value, while also recognizing and fostering similar appreciation in others. This self-love and community positivity helps to improve these women's evaluation and representation of Blackness even as they face oppression and discrimination from others. Although passing national CROWN legislation will not undo or eliminate all elements of discrimination, this law can help to promote an environment that promotes or at least, limits the interference Black women encounter as they cultivate love for self, community, and Blackness.

## 7. Conclusions

To be a Black beauty liberationist means that you are not identified with the powers that be, but rather directly challenge the White supremacist hegemony that has kept your beauty and your body invisible, marginalized, and stereotyped. (Patton 2006, p. 44)

I don't feel accepted period as a black woman. I feel it[s] challenging to step out of anything outside of what is socially constructed to be acceptable in that environment. (Dhakiya)

Although it was not a stated priority, hairism is a fitting target for The [The Combahee River Collective's](#) (1977) efforts to dismantle the intersecting oppressions directed at Black women. Similar to other forms of oppression, hair has and continues to serve as a site for discrimination based on race, sex, gender identity, and other points of difference. The principles of [The Combahee River Collective](#) (1977) also illustrate that Black hair is a political issue because it affects how Black women access, navigate, and experience public spaces, as well as school and work environments.

Body politics affect Black women by limiting how they wear, treat, and view their hair. As both [Patton \(2006\)](#) and Dhakiya voice, historical, political, and social norms simultaneously devalue Blackness, while imposing invasive, time-consuming, and expensive obligations aimed at complying with White beauty images and expectations ([Bankhead and Johnson 2014](#); [Banks 2000](#); [Bellinger 2007](#); [Caldwell 1991](#); [Collier 2012](#); [Collins 2009](#); [Craig 2002](#); [Davis 2018](#); [Donahoo 2018](#); [Donahoo and Smith 2019](#); [Greene 2011](#); [Macon 2015](#); [Norwood 2018](#); [Opie and Phillips 2015](#); [Patton 2006](#); [Robinson 2011](#); [Rosette and Dumas 2007](#); [Thompson 2009a](#)). Yet, history, social structures, and the experiences of Black women indicate the limitations of compliance as all hair treatments and styles are temporary; do not fully terminate evidence of Blackness; fail to eliminate stereotypes and the assumptions associated with them; and simply do not free Black women from the existence or consequences of discrimination and intersecting oppressions.

The fact that compliance with White beauty norms does not free Black women from the discrimination and drama targeted at Black hair clearly substantiates the need for a national CROWN Act. The experiences of the Black women in this study illustrate the necessity of this legislation. Contrary to their experiences, Etana and Tendai deserve legal support for wearing their hair in any style they like without having their employers see them as angry Black women. Faraja, Razina, Yeva, and the others should be able to label Black natural hair as beautiful without facing scrutiny or backlash when interacting with others. Women, who like Jina and Zuri, feel inspired to stop straightening their hair should be able to do so without losing their current jobs, missing out on future opportunities, encountering problems at school, or feeling unwelcome in public. Without legal protection, Black women, as well as Black men and children, will continue to encounter animosity, conflict, and injustice related to how they style their hair. Besides the eight states that voted to provide CROWN Act protection to individuals wearing Black hairstyles, three counties and 13 cities including Cincinnati, Kansas City (MO), Philadelphia, and New Orleans also passed versions of this law. Legislative filings in 26 additional states mean the CROWN Act

is now receiving even more official consideration (Jackson 2021). By combating hairism and vindicating Blackness, the CROWN Act is a crucial step in realizing the goals established by The Combahee River Collective (1977).

Although a welcome change, city, county, and state versions of the CROWN Act are not enough. These existing laws protect women who live in certain jurisdictions but do not extend the same protection to others. Federal-level legislation will provide this protection to every city, county, and state, including those areas where the political climate and limited population might otherwise prevent action against hairism and Black hair discrimination.

Moreover, a federal CROWN Act will also clearly establish Black hair discrimination as a form and element of racial discrimination and, therefore, as a civil rights issue. From a legal perspective, federal civil rights laws provide the minimum standards for the protections individuals shall receive from private and public entities. Absent federal legislation, employers, schools, lower levels of government, and other organizations may choose to ignore or even promote racism through Black hair discrimination by refusing to see the connection to race. Only a federal CROWN Act will establish a sustainable and enforceable connection between racism, civil rights, and hairism in a manner that will support Black women as they seek to assert control over their crowns.

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