

## Is My Uniform Too Kinky?

by Elizabeth Johnson

December, 2003, I remember crying hard, as I was taking out my braids to prepare to straighten/relax<sup>1</sup> my hair for my first job interview as a college professor. Everything had to be just right to have acceptable business attire: Navy blue suit, starched white button-up blouse, two-inch, closed-toed pumps, and **straight** hair. I did not want my hair to be an immediate dismissal factor for the search committee in determining if I was the right candidate for the position. I was crying because I could think of no other group of people, present or past, who had to go through this cutting away of their heritage to be in compliance with acceptable attire. Images of Melba Tolliver flashed in mind because of her stand against changing her hair from a natural style as an anchorwoman with ABC© News in the early 1970s. She was eventually suspended from her position.<sup>2</sup> How unfortunate that one's hair styling choices can be interpreted to personify one's work ethic. Since I was four years old, I loved braids and hated the adornment process of making my hair "acceptable" through having a hot comb applied to my kinky<sup>3</sup> tresses. At the job interview, to my surprise, were two black professors with braids. It was at that moment, that instant in time, that I no longer accepted the Eurocentric emblem that acceptable hair has no equality with kinks!

It is understood that in certain occupations/professions hair can be used as a weapon and/or detriment, thus requiring a limit to grooming styles and lengths. But far too often, there are employers who force a hegemonic hair code that nullifies and even outlaws the natural hair adornment of black women in the workplace, arguing that styles such as braids, twists, and locs do not meet uniform code standards. Tolliver, like many others, may have opted to wear natural hairstyles for numerous reasons, but what needs to be investigated is why there was, and still is, resistance to what natural hairstyles represent/mean for black women. Critical race theory calls to question the structure under which

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<sup>1</sup> Marilyn Singleton defines the relaxer as a chemical process, which permanently alters the natural structure of the hair. Singleton, Marilyn. *Black Hair is... The Complete Hair-Care Guide for Today's Black Woman*. Atlanta, GA: Image Perfect Communications, Inc., 1992.

<sup>2</sup> Melba Toliver was a Black woman television anchorperson for an ABC affiliate in New York. Tolliver, like many others, may have opted to wear the Afro for numerous reasons, against instructions by her employer to opt for a wig or straightening her hair.

<sup>3</sup> Bessie Radcliff-Darden defines "kinky hair" as the hair texture of African diasporic women having small tight curls and this is often contrasted to pliable hair that is easier to control. *Hair Matters: African Ancestry*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Co., 1996.

many biased dress codes are made, and serves as a viable theoretical construct for this paper to address issues of social justice in employment. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefanic explain that critical race theory seeks to investigate the transforming process of the relationships among race, racism, and power through economics, history, context, feelings, group- and self interest, and unconscious interests.<sup>4</sup> Critical race theory is used in this paper to help understand that the discriminatory practices of reading natural hair styles of black women by dominate society is tied to, but not always protected under, federal employment practices. The ultimate goal is to use this discussion to spread awareness on hair aesthetics for the purpose of transforming this knowledge for the better. Many critical race theorists are pigeonholed into being nationalists or essentialists or liberalists. While I do not feel these labels adequately reflect my position, I self-identify as a radical exceptionalist with regards to hair aesthetics because no other group of folk<sup>5</sup> have experienced the continued degradation with regard to the grooming of their hair as blacks.

Why are black women being challenged and affronted on their hair grooming standards? The better question may be: Why are black women being forced to take an assimilated view on hair adornment? These are the questions that this essay addresses, through the lenses of critical race theory, by looking at: (1) Cynthia McKinney – former GA Representative; (2) Judge Mablean Ephriam-former televised judge on Fox’s© “Divorce Court”; (3) upper- class business students at historically black colleges/universities majoring in business disciplines. By asking such questions, the concern is that black women may be stifled from living their lives to their full potential due to restraints of “uniform” conformity. This choice of not playing it safe through conformity has led to backlash and sometimes dismissal from employment for countless black women - from enslavement to present day. It is obvious that there is an unceasing clash of interest between many employers, who engage in a high-powered pursuit of unconditional assimilation, and employees, whose ultimate goal is to be read as non-rebellious staff who welcome “kink”. Yet the outcome in the aforementioned situations is that those in control dictate the requisites and the conditions of hair ascetics’ requirement to those who have no power. The irony is that this principle is applicable subconsciously to the masses of compliant hair groomers, who are even now under the hand of domination. I argue that black women have been taught both consciously and subconsciously, to attribute to whiteness or a white

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<sup>4</sup> Delgado, Richard and Jean Stefanic. *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*. New York: New York University Press, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> This statement does not discount nor minimize how many American Indians were forced into assimilated hairstyles and clothing in the 1800s. But the reason I use the absolute that no other group of folk that had such a battle with hair aesthetics is because even today, an American Indian woman do not have the same history of their hair being labeled “kinky,” “nappy,” “unruly,” etc.

Western look a “better” standard; therefore, black women receive messages that they are not beautiful when their hair is left in a natural or kinky state. Hair culture for black women involves values, ideas, customs, and a system of representation. Because hair is an ethnic signifier, the choice of a natural<sup>6</sup> hairstyle, can be read by the dominant culture as a troublesome sign, even as a defiant one.

This research focuses on the incongruent effects of racial discrimination on the victims of hair tyranny. Even if dress codes noting hair dynamics are not the direct product of conscious hostility, they can nonetheless be traced to the long-term institutional effects of racism, and as such, require us to address the underlying conditions of those disparate effects. From the critical race theory point of view, rights of hair grooming choices are imprecise and therefore can be interpreted in ways which serve to reinforce existing social hierarchies. This writing serves as an appeal to a well-ordered moral universe, to end solid conception of appropriate behavior which shuns rational reflection, and which is shared by both speaker and listener. Because I address semiotic messages connected with hair grooming, I contend that black women send messages by their hair styling choices, thus making them the speaker. They speak through the grooming options that they choose for their hair, sometimes through compliance or the avoidance of dominant standards of beauty. Nowhere in their speech, through the hair style, are black women allowed to take the neutral fence of doing nothing. That involves an agency that does currently exist in mass. Those who read the hairstyles of the black women are the receivers and they relay messages of acceptance or disapproval of what they’ve read. The dilemma is that often the receiver encodes the message as negative or “too radical a hair style” based on his/her compliance with dominant cultural standards of beauty.

In addition, this writing theorizes race by a black woman, in order to effectively theorize gender and bring effective resistance to both white supremacy and patriarchy in the workplace for the empowerment of black women. Seldom has the discussion of hair grooming of black women in the workplace by black woman been investigated. Just as Derrick Bell struggled with the decision to confront the authority of Harvard’s Law School in demanding that they grant tenure to a woman of color, I find the struggles of Cynthia McKinney, Judge Mablean Ephriam, and upper-class business students at historically black colleges/universities, and many who have gone on before them to be passionate protests of the political and cultural issues of hair grooming dress codes.<sup>7</sup> This paper seeks to construct a critical race theory understanding of how black

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<sup>6</sup> Throughout this paper I use the term “natural hair” which I do not want confused with a “Natural” or “Afro.”

<sup>7</sup> Bell, Derrick. *Confronting Authority: Reflections of an Ardent Protester*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994.

women, based on their race and gender, are objectified and why this oppression must stop

### **McKinney Labeled a Mad-Hairer**

In 1980, Tamara Dobson (former model and actress best known for from the blaxploitation film “Cleopatra Jones”) appeared on an episode of “Buck Rogers in the 25<sup>th</sup> Century” (a sci-fi television show that ran from 1979-1981) as Dr. Delora Bayliss. What was ironic about Dr. Bayliss’ character is that she had cornrows wrapped in pink silk cloth to match her outfit. Did her ethnic hair accentuate her outfit and make her character even more erotic? One could read into [Dobson’s] hair that she, though a character in the future and still living on Earth, was a connection with an African past that was being accepted as a norm instead of being othered as “less than.” While it is not ironic that Dobson was cast for this role, since her trademark as an actress revolved around her African-adorned hairstyles, her cornrows did not represent a costume, rather an appreciated identity. She was appreciated because she was viewed as a competent, intelligent, and strong doctor. One can only hope that Dr. Baylisses, by the 25<sup>th</sup> century, are a reflection of what is going on in society and are a hope for centuries to come. All the other characters in this episode were white, with hairstyles that matched the 1980s feathered style credited to the episode’s Emmy-nominated hair stylist Jerry Gugliemotto. But this 25<sup>th</sup> century example did not apply to Cynthia McKinney in 2006, when she was ridiculed for her hair grooming practices and sometimes labeled as a “wild woman” because her hair did not fit into dominant cultural standards of grooming and was interpreted as being too ethnic. Insults were hurled at McKinney by Neal Boortz, a nationally syndicated radio host, when he said:

She [referring to Cynthia McKinney] looks like a ghetto slut... It looks like an explosion in a Brillo pad factor... She looks like Tina Turner peeing on an electric fence...She looks like a shih tzul. I saw Cynthia McKinney’s hairdo yesterday-- saw it on T.V. I don’t blame that cop for stopping her. It looked like a welfare drag queen was trying to sneak into the Long worth House Office Building. That hairdo is ghetto trash. I don’t blame them for stopping her.<sup>8</sup>

What provokes such statements of discontent by Boortz? The mindset of Boortz is neither new nor unique to American racist rhetoric. McKinney was attacked because her hair uniform was seen as out-of-place by dominant society, and this called into question her effectiveness as a politician. McKinney’s choice in natural hair styling went beyond an individual interest to an act of radical resistance

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<sup>8</sup> Neal Boortz Cox Radio syndication, “The Neal Boortz Show” 3/31/06

outside the black community. By making such a choice, critical race theory explains that those in power (dominant society) concluded that McKinney's choice must be ostracized, and this is just what McKinney's choice attempted to withstand. Boortz's attempts to humiliate and McKinney's actions are echoed in Cornel West's deductions, "All black Americans have some interest in resisting racism... Yet how this 'interest' is defined and how individuals and communities are understood vary. So any claim to black authenticity - beyond black struggle - is constricted on one's political definition of black interest and one's ethical understanding of how this interest related to individuals and communities in and outside black America."<sup>9</sup> Resistance on the part of McKinney in adorning a kinky uniform was hermeneutically interpreted as "less than." This stands in direct contrast is Donald Trump, a man with clout, who is not questioned on his ability to be a savvy business executive and entrepreneur, though he dons a comb-over hairstyle. It is ironic that his coiffure is not read as worthy of "You are fired." Critical race theories argue that such verbal degradation in concert with other racist actions keep victim groups in an inferior position.<sup>10</sup>

In April 2007, when Don Imus insulted the Rutgers University black female basketball players by calling them "nappy headed hoes," he was actually, in my opinion, insulting their identity. By identity, I mean the manner in which we come to understand who we are as human beings within any society and how others perceive us. Our identity announces to the world who we are and what we seek to become. And in this sense, identity is self-constructed from within, that is, it's a project that we do ourselves and it is not defined from without, or imposed on us by our physical appearance or our behavior. Identities are always multiple, in that all of us are many things simultaneously, and we are all defined by more than one factor. A woman's identity may be expressed concurrently through the prism of her gender, sexual orientation, race, religion, ethnicity, language, class background, and political beliefs. Identities are related to the structure of power, privilege, status, and the patterns of ownership within any given society. For those who exercise power or effective control within a society, images or identities are highly praised and valued. For those without power, identities are denigrated, ignored, and devalued. The identity that I refer to focuses on an identity of female beauty, and I argue that a struggle arises because the foundation of black female beauty is seldom recognized when black entertainers

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<sup>9</sup> West, Cornel. "Black Leadership and the Pitfalls of Racial Reasoning." *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power*. Ed. Toni Morrison. New York: Pantheon, 1992. 390-401.

<sup>10</sup> Matsuda, Mari J. "Public Response to Racist Speech: Considering the Victim's Story." *Words That Wound: Critical Race Theory, Assaultive Speech, and the First Amendment*. Eds. Mari J. Matsuda, Charles R. Lawrence III, Richard Delgado, and Kimberle Williams Crenshaw Boulder: Westview Press, 1993. 39.

willingly endorses certain hairstyles and products that promote the compliance of dominant cultural beauty standards.

These female basketball players represented something positive and fought against many obstacles to make it to the college basketball finals, while Imus opted to attack, belittle and insult the identities of the Black players. Without any provocations and rhyme to his reason, Imus chose an American historical element that set white females apart from black, good from bad, pure from dirty. Upon close examination of the players, only one black did not adorn her hair in a straight fashion, and that young lady had cornrows. It was at the split second that I heard Imus' statement that I thought about my December 2003 cutting out my braids and straightening my reversion-resistant hair. I could empathize with the basketball players' hurt. Victims of hate messages experience physiological symptoms and emotional distress. These are but two results.<sup>11</sup> What is frustrating is that while American popular culture reserves its most positive stereotypes of blackness for light-skinned blacks with straight hair, black women have never gained complete access to a beauty standard that is not superimposed by Eurocentric standards. Blacks sometimes accept the notion that white women possess superior beauty. However, it is probably the case that what is most often admired is not the assumed physical beauty of white women, but the benefits they have accrued to them by virtue of their social status.<sup>12</sup>

Imus' statement and firing has not remained hidden in a cellar; rather, it is alive and well in the New York Police Department (NYPD) 70<sup>th</sup> Precinct. Three days after Imus was fired, a NYPD sergeant ridiculed three female police officers during roll call by calling them "ho's." Another police officer added salt to the wound by saying, "Nappy Headed Ho's." However, this sergeant was shifted to another precinct (away from the Brooklyn station he was assigned to). This assaultive speech reflects the negative feelings they must have about the public they serve, since two of the officers were black and the third was Hispanic/Latino. White culture has succeeded in keeping many people unaware of the diversity surrounding them, including the unique culture of black hair and this impacts the wording and decisions on hair dress codes.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Matsuda, Mari J., Charles R. Lawrence III, Richard Delgado, and Kimberle Williams Crenshaw. *Words That Wound: Critical Race Theory, Assaultive Speech, and the First Amendment*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1993.24.

<sup>12</sup> Jordan, Glenn & Chris Weedon. *Cultural Politics: Class, Gender, Race, and the Postmodern World*. Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell Inc., 1995.

<sup>13</sup> Byrd, Ayana D. and Lori L. Tharps. *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001.

### Judge Mablean Ephriam

The fine art of hairdressing for many black women is a statement of their crowning glory, but the struggle arises when dominant cultural standards do not often recognize such care as signifying beauty. Challenging sexist thinking about the female body and overall appearance was one of the most powerful interventions made by the contemporary feminist movement.<sup>14</sup> It is my argument that black women are influenced to choose to chemically alter their hair to protect themselves from the objectification that comes about when one does not conform to dominant standards. A stark contrast in continuing to conform to dominant standards of hair dress codes is offered by the actions of Judge Mablean Ephriam. For eight years, Judge Ephriam was the judge on “Divorce Court,” but in April 2006, she expressed concerns as to why she would not return to the show for another session and one of these concerns was her hair:

“There will be no changes in the current hairstyle to avoid time consuming issues regarding her hair,” I found this to be offensive. The requirement also comes very close to a violation, if it does not in fact violate, the Fair Employment Practices Act. An employer cannot demand one to wear a particular hairstyle unless it directly affects or impacts the employee’s ability to perform his or her employment duties. My hairstyle does not meet this criteria, it is, however, a racial and ethnic issue.<sup>15</sup>

In essence, Judge Ephriam is arguing that the way Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation© read her hair was an unacceptable reading because of its short length and curly texture and thus a discriminatory practice of differentiation. Hermeneutically, Ephriam’s hair was read as unacceptable and the message she relayed was met with disapproval, which is tricky within the language of the Fair Employment Practices Act that obligated employers not to discriminate against persons of any race, color, creed, or nationality in matters of employment.

Historically, there is an ongoing debate concerning whether African diasporic women feel shameful of their hair in a natural state or a sense of liberation by chemically altering their hair, in relation to their overall identity. The position of

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<sup>14</sup> Wallace, Michele. “Anger in Isolation: A Black Feminist’s Search for Sisterhood.” *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*. Ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall. New York: The New Press, 1995.220-227.

<sup>15</sup> Press Conference Statement, Mablean Ephriam Discusses “Divorce Court” Departure. April 5, 2006, Los Angeles Sentinel, Los Angeles, CA.

many black feminists is that a critical or deep consciousness involves Black women accepting their hair in a natural state. Such a stance is not taken lightly, but Michele Wallace felt, “style that is dominant in the international market is the kind of hair that many women do not have: long, blond, and straight hair. This is the type of hair that most women do not have, so they want something that makes them look more like that.”<sup>16</sup> Often, hair grooming choices show the importance of heritage and individual experiences. There are forces at work that impede black women in the styling of our hair. These forces start attacking us from a very young age and are the second element of consciousness. Being able to engage the selection of hairstyles and norms from a critical vantage requires full self-examination of how the trick-witchery was brought to black women through racial domination. Trick-witchery is a state of confusion, in which a clear definition or understanding is never presented. Critical race theorists take note of the powerful repercussions with employers when hair dress codes are too ethnically defined. To make a free and autonomous choice is not easy for many black women when attempting to prove violations of the Fair Employment Practices Act, which is recognized as and declared to be a civil right.

### **Historically Black Colleges/Universities**

There is a struggle that takes place in the black community, whereby choosing to value and love one’s blackness causes a battle against white supremacy by whites and black alike. In Spike Lee’s film *School Daze*, the producer forced blacks to face their skin tone and hair issues and be honest about how they viewed their blackness. Lee tackled the subject of black female college students arguing over what constitutes good or bad hair. “Good hair” meant that it was closer to the appearance of white women – long, straight, and free flowing. “Bad hair” meant that it was of a shorter length, kinky in texture, often frizzy, and lacking movement.<sup>17</sup> In a scene set at Madame Re-Re’s, a fictitious hair salon, the females berated each other over hair being a means of beauty to secure a man. Moreover, if one kept their hair in a natural state, this meant one was ashamed of her race. In this musical number, the women with “good” hair sang to the females with natural hair and reminded them how they wished they had straight hair. Spike Lee’s fictional account involved acceptable hair grooming to get a man, but many historically black colleges and universities (HBCU) are enforcing a hair dress code for business majors on what is acceptable hair to get a job. One school that has been in the spotlight is Hampton University, but I stress that this is not the only school with a hair dress code for business majors. To my disappointment and anger, my own alma mater, Jackson State

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<sup>16</sup> Personal interview, April 5, 2001.

<sup>17</sup> For continued definitions, see Ginetta Candelario’s essay, “Hair Racializing: Dominican Beauty Culture and Identity Production.” *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*. 1.1 (2000): 128-156.

University<sup>18</sup>, where I was a student in the School of Business, now has a hair dress code that would frown on my twists.

Hampton University<sup>19</sup> finds merit of hair dress codes for upper class students in the School of Business. Sid Credle, Dean of the School of Business at Hampton, emphasized that “the dress, grooming and behavior rules are intended to prepare students for the starched business world.”<sup>20</sup> “When we look at the top 75 blacks in corporate America, we don’t see any of them with extreme hairdos,” he said.<sup>21</sup> Dean Credle initially gave an example of extreme hairdos for female students as a “Bo Derek style with beads and feathers.” How unfortunate it is that an example of a white woman, wearing cornrows would be the example of an extreme hairstyle for black female business students. Credle then gave a more fitting example of extreme hairstyle of “Patti LaBelle in the late 1980s with her high spiked, fanned up, hair.”<sup>22</sup> While I agree that the grooming practices of entertainers, with all of their personal beauticians, make-up artists, and wardrobe specialists is not the norm for a business student going on a job interview, the concern remains with connecting extreme hair to ethnic hair in the judgment of perspective employers. There is no difference of a perspective employer defining twists, braids, and locks as being too ethnic and not professional than blue Mohawks being an extreme hair style and not suitable for certain workplaces. It is most problematic that historically black colleges coddle to meet dominant standards when they, of all populations, really have the power to dictate non-conformism. Though I see the dress codes as problematic and harmful, I do appreciate the honesty of many academic deans who want to see students employed for the companies that are considered to be among the business elite, but again, this comes at the cost of limiting self-expression through hair adornment, which is often taken to the fullest extremes during one’s college years.

I ponder over the motivation HBCU’s toward not being resistant to hair dress codes for business majors, since non-conformity to “proper business attire” is

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<sup>18</sup> Jackson State University is a public historically black college in Jackson, Mississippi founded in 1877. Accessed at [http://promotions.jsums.edu/show\\_aboutjsu.asp?durki=454](http://promotions.jsums.edu/show_aboutjsu.asp?durki=454).

<sup>19</sup> Hampton University is a private historically black college in Hampton, Virginia founded in 1868 and Booker T. Washington is one of its most famous alumni. Accessed at <http://www.hamptonu.edu/student-services/admissions/tour/index.htm>.

<sup>20</sup> Phone Interviews, July 2006.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

summarized in racist propaganda as too radical and not worthy of equal treatment.<sup>23</sup> Each time that dominant groups demand a homogenized look, it has been connected with an economics stance and racism. The status of hair evolves from societal norms. These norms often dictate that alterations be made to hair to imitate white people's looks.<sup>24</sup> The first step is acknowledging that black women have been taught, both consciously and subconsciously, to attribute to whiteness or a white-look a better perception /false code. bell hooks stresses that aspects of blackness are devalued by white-supremacist culture, which in turn leads black women to believe that straight hair is better.<sup>25</sup> She continues, "Within white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, the social and political context in which the custom of black folks straightening our hair emerges, it represents an imitation of the dominant white group's appearance and often indicated internalized racism, self-hatred, and/or low self-esteem."<sup>26</sup> This phenomenon is not new and is traceable to the enslavement of blacks.

In my junior year at Jackson State, I shaved the left and back portions of my hair off, dyed it auburn, and sent my parents into a panic attack. When they asked me "why", I said, "I just wanted a change and to make a statement of difference." Honestly, I was mimicking the cut donned by Lisa Bonet on an episode of "A Different World" where she, too, as a college student was in the practice of having non-traditional hair styles. Today, if I were admitted to JSU's School of Business, I don't think they would welcome my kinky twists for interviews. While my hair styling choice is somewhat similar to my response to my parents 20 years ago, I take my position a few steps further. My choice is also influenced by convenience, cost, and scalp issues.

From receiving the messages that rejects one's blackness, black women face a crisis in identity; but I do not purport that there is but one identity. I agree with

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<sup>23</sup> Matsuda, Mari J. "Public Response to Racist Speech: Considering the Victim's Story." *Words That Wound: Critical Race Theory, Assaultive Speech, and the First Amendment*. Eds. Mari J. Matsuda, Charles R. Lawrence III, Richard Delgado, and Kimberle Williams Crenshaw Boulder: Westview Press, 1993. 26.

<sup>24</sup> hooks, bell. "Straightening our Hair." *Tenderheaded: A Comb-bending Collection of Hair Stories*. Eds. Juliette Harris & Pamela Johnson. New York: Pocket Books, 2001. 111-116.

<sup>25</sup> hooks, bell. *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery*. Boston: South End Press, 1993.

<sup>26</sup> hooks, bell. "Straightening our Hair." *Tenderheaded: A Comb-bending Collection of Hair Stories*. Eds. Juliette Harris & Pamela Johnson. New York: Pocket Books, 2001. 111-116.

Cornel West when he stated, “No one of us has one identity. We have many identities: region, family, religious, racial, gender, and so forth, but the fundamental question is what is the moral content of it”.<sup>27</sup> West further explains, “The major function of Afro-American critical thought is to reshape the contours of Afro-American history and provide a new self-understanding of the Afro-American experience which suggests guidelines for action in the present.”<sup>28</sup>

### Concluding thoughts

The search for voice, or the refusal of black women to remain silenced, constitutes a core theme of critical race theory. In order to exploit black women, dominant groups have developed controlling images or stereotypes that claim black women are inferior. The controlling images of Black women are so negative that they require resistance if Black women are to have any positive self-images. For black women, the search for voice emerges from the struggle to reject controlling images and embrace knowledge essential to their survival. As stated from the beginning of this essay, one of the goals of critical race theory is to work towards an end of eliminating racial oppression as part of the broader goal of ending all forms of oppression.<sup>29</sup> The lack of political activism on the part of oppressed groups stems from their flawed consciousness of their own subordination. We must realize that those who control the schools, media, and other cultural institutions of society prevail in establishing their viewpoint as superior to others. This is seen repeatedly in dress codes for hair. An oppressed group’s experiences may put its members in a position to see things differently, but their lack of control over the ideological apparatuses of society makes expressing a self-defined standpoint more difficult.

How can one fight against messages, scripts, and stereotypes that are embedded in the minds of one’s fellow citizens, and indeed the national psyche? Or more simply put, how does relief come about? While I do not purport to have the finite answer on solving discriminatory practices, because if I did, I would begin by removing glass ceilings, but I believe my equation is a stepping stone to finding agency and social change against those who argue that today, there is no “race” problem: Through offering another narrative + Through court cases + through self love, fighting against continued indoctrination of racist notions

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<sup>27</sup> West, Cornel. “Conversation on Race.” Speech presented at Indiana University - South Bend (IUSB) 11/14/97.

<sup>28</sup> West, Cornel. *Prophesy Deliverance: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982.

<sup>29</sup> Matsuda, Mari J., Charles R. Lawrence III, Richard Delgado, and Kimberle Williams Crenshaw. *Words That Wound: Critical Race Theory, Assaultive Speech, and the First Amendment*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1993.

(generation after generation) + Through exercising the power of resistance = A new understanding for action against the politics of difference.

You may ask: Do a mass number of black women want the remedy that I propose, or does it take every minority to stand in a kumbaya circle to achieve the goal of harmony? I believe that the answer is “no”, and far too often in this democratic capitalist society, change is dictated by economic motivators. Hair culturalists Annie Malone and Madam C.J. Walker saw this when they offered hopes of economic advancement to Black women in the first quarter of the 1900s through implementing concrete methods. They advocated entrepreneurial jobs, fitting into dominant society standards for work -appearance sake, positions within their businesses that afforded blue, white, and pink collar positions, and getting inside the cultural mainstream through forging an identity that attempted to erase a stigma on Black women over the long run.

I’ve reflected over utilitarian arguments that begin with, “What is the big deal about hair? Wear it straight, or wear it natural, it is no big deal if you just wear you hair according to your personal preference.” My first response to such an argument is there would be no big deal if the selection process happened in a vacuum, but it does not. I know that social standards of beauty have social rewards set up for me if I follow codes set through racial domination. Moreover, at the same time, there are social penalties if my hairstyle choices do not fall within the parameters of the oppressive state. But far too often, black women's Afrocentric consciousness remains unarticulated and not fully developed into a self-defined standpoint. In societies that denigrate African ideas and peoples, the process of valuing an Afrocentric worldview is the result of self-conscious struggle.

With all of this in mind, I turn back to the utilitarian argument and ask, “Can a black woman be a self-directing agent regarding her hair when there are unequal conditions set through racially dominated hair dress codes?” The difficulty in accepting this cultural legacy arises in an ethnically conscious society where black women are still struggling with how to present their physical image and still be accepted in society. I believe dominant cultural standards continue presently with regards to black female beauty and their hair styling choices in the workplace because, as mentioned earlier, those in control dictate the requisites and the conditions of hair ascetics’ requirements to those who have no power is absolute.

On one episode of the “Twilight Zone” (CBS 1959), “The Private World of Darkness,” Ms. Tyler went through 11 plastic surgery operations to alter her appearance to match that of the general population. Since this was the last surgery allowed, she knew she would be forced to move to a special area where people like her had been congregated. But Ms. Tyler knew that this was a segregation of undesirable “ugly” people where state law required the exclusion from normal people. Why are folk not allowed to be different? Who sets the

value system for what constitutes beauty? She resolved that she would wear a mask or badges to cover her imperfections. Ms. Tyler questioned why “different” people, different from birth, were forced to be segregated from the typical populations. While this episode was a construction of Rod Serling, it has merit for many of the obstacles of reality today. The irony is that the normal people were actually grotesque, pig-faced people and the special woman was actually the actress Maxine Stewart. The world that Cynthia McKinney, Judge Mabeline Ephriam, and upper-class business students at historically black colleges/universities in essence has a single norm, single approach, single philosophy and conformity to the model it commanded. Deviation from the norm involves backlash and segregation. The “Twilight Zone” episode ended with the message that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and I agree!