

The Familiarity of Hapticity Overrides the Rationality of Sight:
'Hair Aesthetics' and Photographic Seeing

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This project is dedicated to a few people: Firstly my late nana, Joyce Jacobs-El and grandmother Doris Diana Brown. Both women have taught me so much about poise, femininity, and intelligence.

I think about you every day.

Secondly, this project is dedicated to my mom, dad, twin brother, and Max, whose presence have been outrageously sacrosanct to all my endeavors. Lastly, this project is also dedicated to any and every hair braider and practitioner who's done my hair, as they've always given me lots to think about while helping me to look fabulous.

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Introduction

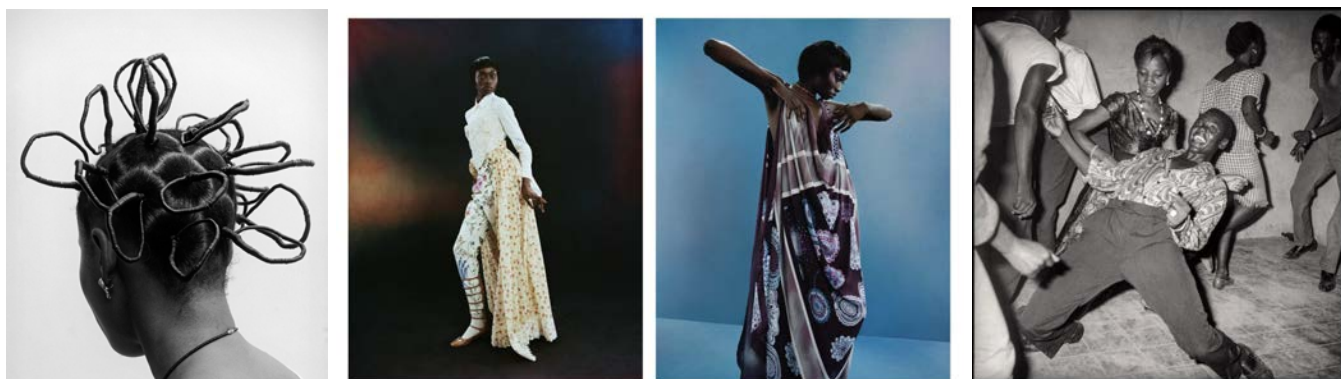
In early March of 2022, I was invited to a lecture given at Weis Cinema by Thomas Allen Harris, an American filmmaker and interdisciplinary artist who explores the work of family, identity, and spirituality through the use of archives. Begrudgingly I went, only to be surprised and highly inspired by his filmwork and effort to reach generations of communities through the language of art. Harris discussed his relationship with familial identity in searching for his own “Africa”. Africa in this case holds two different significant meanings in relationship to black identity. On the one hand, Africa is the geographical location in which many African-Americans are still culturally and physically trying to return to in hopes of tracing concrete familial and ancestral lineages. In metaphorical sense, Africa functions as a home away from home, a figurative place one returns to that gives them a sense of belonging. Harris discussed visual imagery introduced to him through familial archives that helped him to see Africa “through eyes that were not his”. Following, a guiding question for his work became “How do you search for your own Africa? What do you look at instead?”.



(fig.1, Kehinde Wiley, *The Death of Hyacinth*, 2022.)

His TV show *Family Pictures USA*, returned more centrally to his uses of the archive. Traveling across the country, *Family Pictures USA* engages with different communities and families in exploring how vernacular photo albums can be utilized to contemporarily shape collective social and cultural histories in the United States. In retrospect, this project—as lots of his work is— partially manifested itself as a result of the documentarian’s experiments with the archive in shaping personal and social histories. Here, Harris also mentioned that history has constantly been shaped and interrogated by the archive. This concept has been flirted with by a number of artists I’ve encountered in my academic work, including Carrie Mae Weems and curator Nana Adusei-Poku. The archive’s function as a reflexive object that transcends space and time, allowing for the interrogation of common histories and the shaping of future cultures and cultural habits. This symbiotic relationship is illuminated in Harris’s documentary *Through a Lens, Darkly: Black Photographers and the Emergence of a People*, in which he discusses the role of photography in the aspirational shaping of Black-American identity. Harris uses professional and vernacular photographs taken by African American photographers to explore vicissitudes of Black life. Conversely, artist Carrie Mae Weems discusses in the documentary the photographic image in relation to the inherent distortion of its subject. This process occurs both in the ways we’ve been trained to look at photographs and through the technical ability of the camera. This prompted me (again) to think about my own experiences and uses of the film camera and what purpose it serves in relation to my artwork. More than I enjoy the usefulness of it, I’m fascinated with the look and feel of the black and white photograph, and more broadly, the aesthetic feel of the archive. Socio-historically and technologically speaking, Weem’s comments also made me consider that at some point in time, my own photography will become an archival

object. This will partially happen simply because of the constant development of lens-based practices. The canon of the archive aesthetically changes every time new technology for lens-based practices are produced. We've moved from materials like the daguerreotype and tin-type, to the iPhone, and back to the nostalgic feel of the point and shoot. In this way, the aesthetic structures itself as a frequency or an overarching non-physical conduit in which the histories of memory and visibility are shaped.



(fig. 2. J.D. Ojeikere, *Hairstyle Series*, n.d : fig. 3, Nadine Ijiwera, *W Magazine*, 2023 : fig. 4, Malick Sidibé, “*Regardez-moi*”, 1962.)

In response to a question I asked Harris about his interest in the aesthetic of archives as a conduit for storytelling, he responded that aesthetics, to him, are spiritual. Moving on from the interrogation of photography and its materiality as an object, Harris' answer re-iterated my interest in interrogating visual material through the lens of my own experiences. Or rather, it re-focused the use of my own experiences to navigate visual material as an on-going process of exploring my positionality to the world. This became extremely influential in thinking about why this thesis was important to myself and its readers. Photography, and more importantly the history of photography have a habit of condensing the form of photographic seeing in that we exclusively read what we see, and see only what we read. This happens partially because the existence and viewing of a photograph inherently detaches itself from its moment of occurrence.

Following, the photograph in theory only outlines a narrow range of interpretation for the viewer because we are not there to witness the before, after, or during of the event. In turn, our interpretation derives from or symbiotically involves connoting what a photograph denotes, or denoting what it connotes. The framing of aesthetics as spiritual helps to distract this process of objectification. For one, the definition personalizes the materiality of our sight. The ways in which we see are now connected to *how* we see, allowing our interpretations to be fluxual rather than final. Secondly, it allows for aesthetics and methods of seeing to shift from objective to collective, in that we share collective experiences as much as we acquire our own. In the process of developing the subject of this thesis, I was often plagued with the fear that turning my personal experiences into a method for reading photographs was re-iterating exactly what I didn't like about photography. In centering my own ways of thinking, I was centering an exclusively individualistic way of viewing that produced even narrower lines for interpretation. Keeping Harris' response in mind helped me to contextualize that extrapolating aesthetics of hair to a method of image reading could help the reader to understand more about images and image practices.



(fig. 5, Nadine Ijewere, *Untitled* for *GARAGE* no. 16, 2019 : fig. 6, Ruth Ossai, *Untitled* for *Fenty*, 2019.)

This thesis also focuses on exploring methods of ‘diasporic seeing’¹. I’m tempted to use the phrase ‘non-normative’ methods of seeing, but *hair aesthetics* as a method for seeing feels very normative to me. I move away from the term ‘non-normative’ here because it connotes “adjacency” when a goal of this paper is to place the diaspora and the West in conversation. Furthermore, I offer similarities between Western forms and diasporic forms of image making that represent a significant dynamic relationship between the two spaces. Scholars like Krista Thompson and Teju Cole interrogate this engineered gap between the West and African diaspora to abolish preconceived notions that the West and the diaspora are inherently separated. Visual imagery and image making practices become a ripe source of study for this disconnect, in turn also making social and historical explorations of visual and cultural expressions across time and

¹ ‘Diasporic seeing’ in this case means forms of viewership that amplify the visibility of diasporic peoples.

space both an iconographic and iconological effort. Hair in this sense will both be an object of study and a frequency in which we can attune our eyes to look for its echoes in the aesthetics of larger spheres of visual culture.



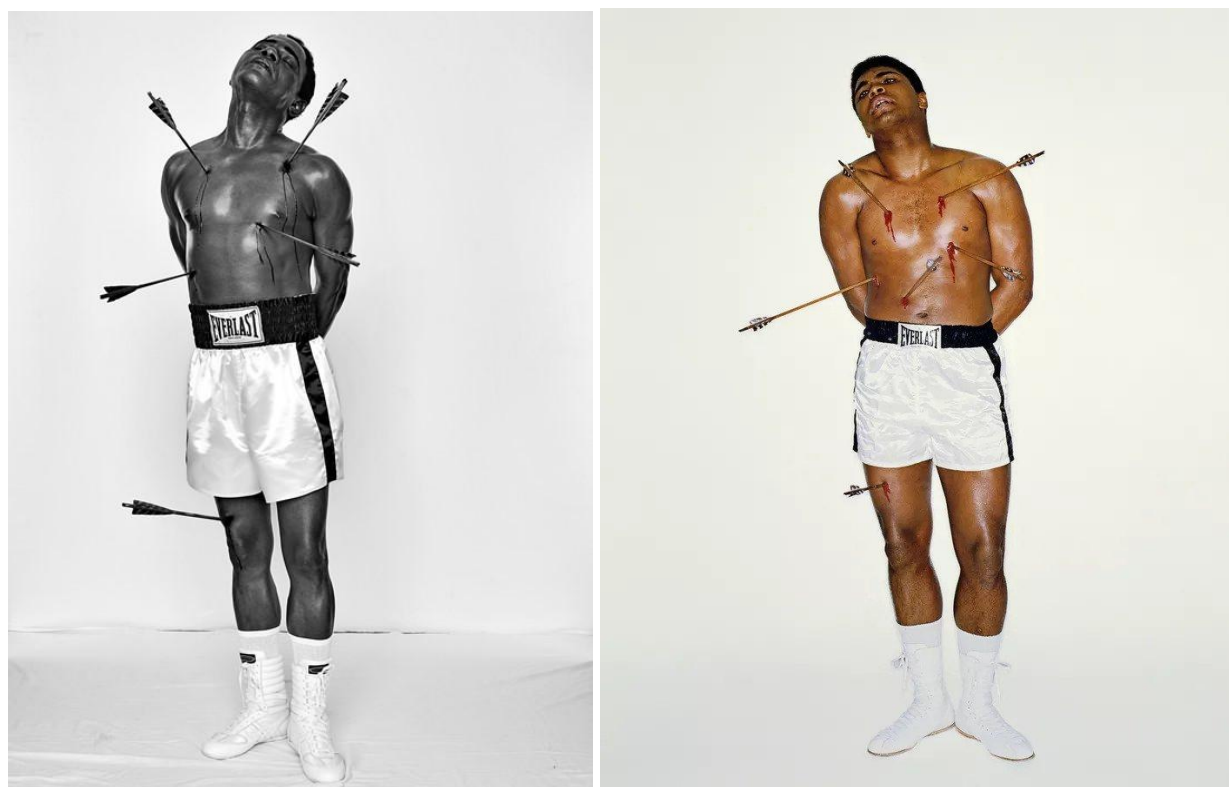
(fig. 7, Ruth Ossai, *Untitled for KENZO Folio #1*, 2017.)

In discussing this thesis's structure and format, I want to highlight Elizabeth Alexander's book *The Trayvon Generation*. The text expands on an essay written by the author in June of 2020, in response to George Floyd's death and ongoing issue of race in America. As a poet, essayist, and critical thinker, Alexander intertwines visual imagery and text in such a way that neither denote or connote the other. The two work in unison to illuminate reflections on Black life and its precarities in a world seemingly structured against the survival of black children. As an artist who works very visually, I myself have a habit of resorting to images when words cannot explain my emotions or ideas. Oftentimes this habit morphs into supplementing images in lieu of words, as it is sometimes easier to show than tell. What I enjoy so much about *The Trayvon Generation* is that Alexander weaves text and image in unison, creating a poetic—rather

than juxtapositional— basket of hope and remembrance. With that being said, the goal of placing imagery beside the text within this thesis is to let the visual express or display what the text doesn't. It is also to visually exhibit ideas iterated within the text in a way that neither centers the text or the image.

The body of this thesis is separated into three different chapters, each section building and responding to the last. Similarly to the introduction, I often begin bodies of writing with anecdotes in order to center concepts discussed within lived experiences that influenced how I think through and about my ideas. Chapter One, titled *A Black Gaze*, offers the reader a freeform exploration into the politics of photographic sight. By posing questions in response to introduced texts and artworks, I'm wanting the reader to interrogate their own experiences with viewership. I discuss the idea of witnessing and how traditional ideas of the witness negate certain networks of visibility. I also introduce the idea of alternate forms of witness harnessed by marginalized communities in thinking about the ways in which one can become an "active viewer." This structure is meant to facilitate the introduction of *hair aesthetics* as a method for photographic seeing that functions as a form of active witnessing. Chapter Two, titled *Mapping an Aesthetics of Hair*, introduces *hair aesthetics* as a method for photographic seeing and explores diasporic uses of aesthetics in lens-based practices. This chapter also maps and defines the tenets of *hair aesthetics* for the use of the reader. Following, I explore the work of J.D. Okhai Ojeikere and his hair photographic series *Hairstyles*. This work visually supplements the tenets of *hair aesthetics* while functioning as a point of focus in exploring how aesthetics can create or represent networks of visibility. Chapter Three, *Treatise*, functions as a treatise that comprehensively re-visits ideas brought up throughout each of the chapters. I offer reflections and pose questions

in hopes of defining parameters and limitations for the uses of *hair aesthetics* in relation to visual imagery. I also briefly analyze Kobena Mercer's essay *Skin Head Sex Thing*, returning back to the idea of personal experience, identity, and visibility, in relation to interpreting photographs. More than I aimed here to arrive at any answers or resolutions, Chapter Three functions as a space to pose resonant questions, and provide pause in order to reflect on a number of complicated concepts.



(fig. 8, Samuel Fosso, *Muhammed Ali* from *African Spirits*, 2008 : fig. 9, Carl Fischer, *Muhammed Ali as Saint Sebastian*, 1967.)

In interrogating forms of traditional witnessing by engaging with aesthetics practices of artists and communities, this paper builds on significant scholarship connecting practices in the West to culture production in the African diaspora. In considering lens-based practices as a sensibility through the exploration of aesthetics, photography shifts from being a tool to confirm

ontological beliefs to a practice of imagined self-identity. In that way, interpretation in this paper is also not a determination of what is 'real' or 'truthful' but rather an exercise of listening through the use of the visual frequencies. Afro-textured hair merely functions as a lens through which we can outline a set of aesthetics deriving from a diasporic object. In reading in-between and beyond the lines of objective visibility we can look to determine multiplicities of diasporic presence and representation in visual imagery. Furthermore, in the age of constantly evolving lens-based practices, *hair aesthetics* proposes a mode of viewership that interrogates personal positionality in an effort to visualize and connect collectives.

A Black Gaze

From fashion magazines to flash photography and video used in dancehalls, visual imagery has become a conduit for African diasporic communities to visualize and produce culture. I can proudly say that images have defined my life since I was a kid.



(fig. 10, Ruth Ossai, *Miu Miu Tale #13*, 2018.)

I am inexplicably drawn to them, who they represent through their technical language, and the types of narratives we're able to create by dissecting them. More importantly, I'm fascinated by why certain images 'speak' more than others. Or rather, why some images prompt arguably more radical forms of viewership than others. And following, what kinds of viewership must we engage in in order to further dissect and explore visual language? I pose these kinds of questions to both prompt and challenge the ways in which traditional forms of reading visual imagery offer singular and limited interpretations of expression. Tina Campt explores the work of Black artists engaging and informing new kinds of 'inherently black' viewership in her book *A Black Gaze*.

This reckoning of traditional viewerships in her text derive from what Campt calls a contemporary black artistic renaissance.² This renaissance features a new stream of artworks all made for and by black people. The resulting outpour of media allows for an era in which Black communities have ownership over the media they put out. This is important in distinguishing the current "Black renaissance" from other historically radical Black art movements. Campt says, "...The impact of the current [Black artistic renaissance] is structural—it is the power of creative genius combined with corporate ownership...and its accompanying cultural and economic capital."³ Following, the centralization of a black gaze not only acknowledges multiplicities of blackness, but lends a sort of viewership that accounts for precarity, vicissitude, beauty, and power through ownership. Campt traces new methodologies in which Blackness can be visualized and experienced in the wake of this artistic renaissance through a number of different techniques. In tracing Campt's toolkit of methodologies, the chapter "A Black Gaze" uses her theory as a structure to define *hair aesthetics* in the following chapters.



(fig. 11, Mario Sorrenti, Arthur Jafa for *i-D Magazine*, 2019.)

² Tina Campt, "Prelude to a Black Gaze" in *A Black Gaze: Artists Changing How We See*, (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2021), 5.

³ Campt, "Prelude To A Black Gaze," 6.

Writer, photographer, and art historian Teju Cole often explores themes of identity belonging and migration in his work as well as engaging in the medium of photography. His text *Black Paper: Writing in A Dark Time* covers a number of topics, including the idea of the passive witness. By interrogating the connotations of journalism through the lens of viewership, Cole explores themes of race, politics, and culture in thinking about his experience in America as a Nigerian-American. Visual imagery, photographs especially, are often reticent and entail different kinds of viewership to explore them. A quote I'll reference a few times throughout this paper is of Cole paraphrasing Campt in his text. Chapter *What Does It Mean To Look At This* discusses the photographer's habit in photojournalism of showing just enough but meaning much more than its original purpose. To read the photograph simply for its connotations, while dismissing its denotations. He says, "As Tina Campt has written, photographs don't speak, but they are not mute. They are quiet and solicit a kind of listening."⁴ Cole's use of Campt's hinting at the types of viewership we must develop to dissect and appreciate photographs is exacting.⁵ For Campt, viewing is not an act of seeing but also an act of listening that is communal. It is somewhat of a call and response⁶ in that 'seeing' is an opening action to interacting with a photograph or piece of visual material while witnessing is the following act of listening to the sounds a photograph makes.

⁴ Teju Cole, *Black Paper: Writing in a Dark Time* (London and Chicago: Chicago Press, 2021), 160, iBooks.

⁵ Here Cole is referring to an essay written by Campt titled *Break This Down: 'Listening to Images'*, 2017.

⁶ A 'call and response' interaction is something common throughout African dance culture. A leader will call out a dance break and the rest of the ensemble will answer back before starting or ending a dance.

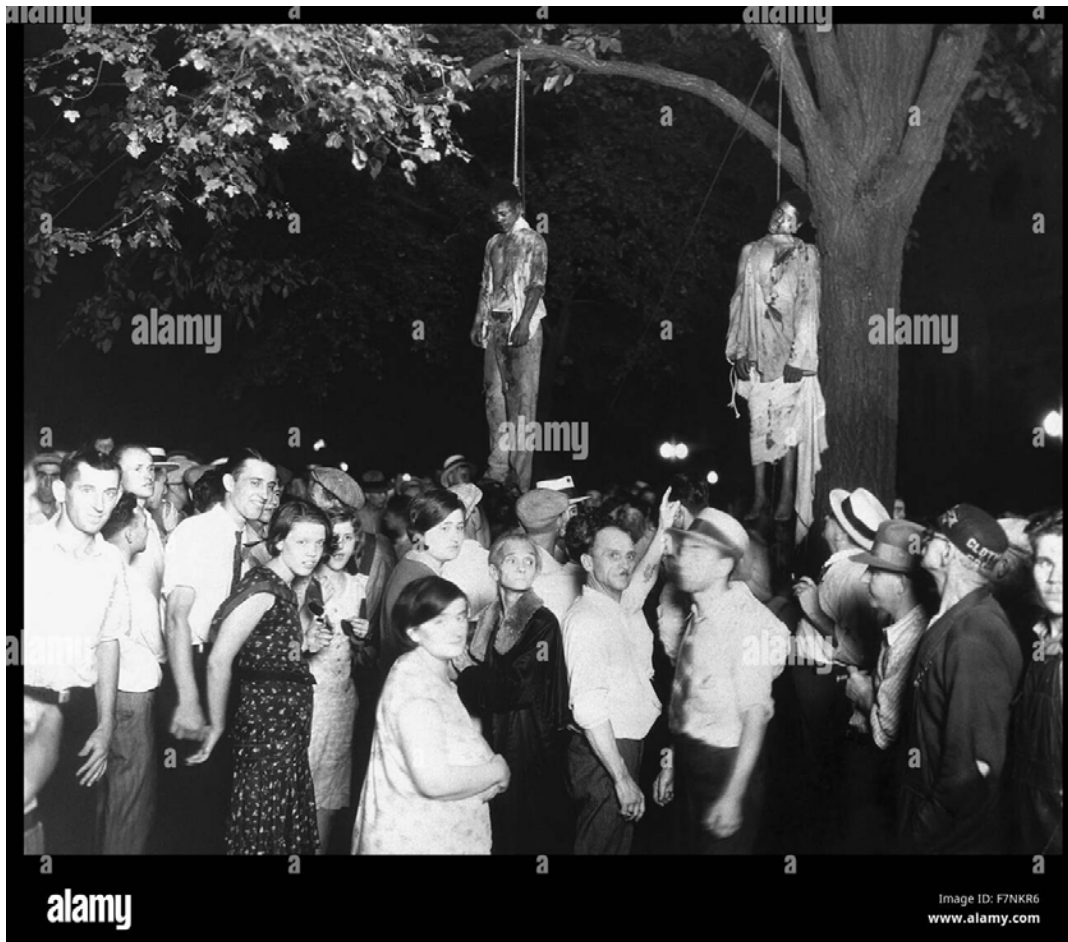


(fig. 12, Santu Mofokeng, *Shebeen, White City, Soweto*, 1986 : fig. 13, Santu Mofokeng, *Winter in Tembisa*, 1991.)



(fig. 14, Santu Mofokeng, *Afoor family bedroom, Vaalrand*, 1988 : fig. 15, Santu Mofokeng, *Train Church on the Soweto-Johannesburg commuter line*, 1986.)

It is through this project that I've realized how inextricable my experience as a photographer and hair practitioner informs my viewing. Hair is a thinly veiled gossamer in which my viewing of imagery cannot be detached from. In exploring alternative methods of viewing that illuminate presence through its absences, can reading an image by dissecting the visual language of black hair allow us to view photographs differently? Or from the positionality of blackness? What does it mean to develop viewerships that allow Black people to be visible, while traditional modes of viewing do not render them so? These are the kinds of questions that prompt me to explore what it means to have "a black gaze" through looking at hair and its aesthetics in visual imagery. The imagery chosen for this thesis excites me for a number of different reasons. This can be through their technical success, subject matter, color or through texture. Perhaps like American artist Kerry James Marshall and his relentless pursuit to achieve the expertise of the old masters, I find that a focus on aesthetics aids me in becoming a thoughtful image reader.



(fig. 16, Lawrence Beitler, *Untitled*, 1930.)

In early September, I entered my Photo in Africa class late and without a mask. As a precautionary measure, our professor asked us to be masked in class as he had a young daughter entering daycare. By the time I masked up and settled in my chair, I had barely noticed the large photo of a lynching being projected on our classroom's screen at the front of class. Thinking back on it now, it must have been a trauma response that allowed me to glaze over the fact of the two hanging men, seemingly rehung on our classroom's projector screen that swayed with the classroom's draft. The theme of class that week had been "Ways of Writing about Photographs"

and we were asked to analyze the photograph (fig. 16) in a 5-10 minute free write. Here is my reflection:

Beitler photograph, *Untitled*, 1930

The Beitler photograph is a photograph of the scene of a lynching. What looks like two black men hang from a tree while white onlookers either look at the men or point at the camera. Contextually, the photograph seems to be taken post-abolishment and it's clear that we are in the (first) Jim Crow era of the US. The scene is at night time so the photographer used flash, a common technique used in photography to illuminate or spotlight its subjects. The photograph reminds me of the 20th century photographer who used flash to document individuals and families living in halfway homes in New York during a period of heavy migration.⁷ Something that's particularly sickening is the range of facial expressions. Some white onlookers are smiling while others look bewildered or lost, maybe because of the occurrence of the flash. There is no love in this photograph. There is no solidarity, or feeling of protection. Only triumph and selfishness. To me the photograph screams 'The Hunt'. The hanged men are not regarded as humans, but as prey or game. While there is 'community' that is translated through this photo it displays no humanity.

The longer I sat with that projected photograph, the more the hairs on my body stood up. I wondered if the photographer ever felt the same feelings of disgust I did. Lawrence Henry Beitler, a local studio photographer set up his camera to photograph the hanging men, an image that later inspired Abel Meeropol's poem *Strange Fruit*⁸. It is unclear whether Beitler took the image to memorialize the culture of lynchings in America, yet the scene of strange hanging fruit sold thousands of copies in the following 10 days.⁹ I've spent a lot of my time in school trying to trace and explore the wake¹⁰ that these images of violence leave behind in an effort to gain a sense of belonging. At a certain point, it turns into the psychological phenomenon of

⁷ The photographer I'm referencing is the 18th century Dutch social documentary photographer Jacob Riis. Riis is most well known for his contributions to urban reform at the turn of the 20th century by entering New York City slums and tenement houses using flash photography to document living conditions. These photographs were used to publish a book later titled *How the Other Half Lives*. Riis was among the first American photographers to use the flash.

⁸ Diaries, Radio. "Strange Fruit: Anniversary of a Lynching." NPR, August 6, 2010, <https://www.npr.org/2010/08/06/129025516/strange-fruit-anniversary-of-a-lynching#:~:text=Local%20photographer%20Lawrence%20Beitler%20took,copies%20were%20made%20and%20sold.>

⁹ RHP, Rare Historical Photos, October 25, 2022, <https://rarehistoricalphotos.com/lynching-thomas-shipp-abram-smith-1930/>

¹⁰ A term used in Christina Sharpe's book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* to articulate living in the present of slavery's unfolding aftermath.

contextualizing one's emotions rather than feeling them and moving on. We can attribute a million reasons to *why* we feel as a way to avoid just *feeling* them. The intent within the eyes of the onlookers in the photograph remind me of the seemingly naivety of those years.

The photograph itself depicts the lynching of two young teens Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith (fig. 16). On a muggy August night in 1930 the white citizens of Marion, Indiana surrounded the county jail demanding the release of Tom Shipp, Abram Smith, and James Cameron. The three teens had been arrested that night as suspects in a robbery-murder-rape case that had yet to be heard in court. Intent on sending a message to the African American community, and seemingly motivated by the rape rather than the murder or robbery¹¹, the mob of nearly a thousand dragged the boys from their cells, brutalized them, and hung them in the town square. During the commotion, the third boy Jimmie Cameron was left un-lynched after a bystander in the mob admitted that he had nothing to do with the rape or the murder.¹² James Cameron is now the only known survivor of a lynching in the US. The bodies of Thomas and Abram hung for hours, attracting onlookers and gawkers—including the photographer Lawrence Beitler who sold prints of the scene for 50 cents in the following days.

Apart from the stunning tonality and details within the trees and leaves surrounding the bodies of the young boys, my curiosity lies in its complicated web of visibility. Who has visibility in this photograph? Is there any visibility at all? This photo is not meant to highlight the onlookers of the crowd, as much as their physical gestures may point to; and we already know the subject of the photo is not meant to commemorate the lives of Thomas and Abram. We know these things because of the nature of the photograph. Maybe my question instead should be:

¹¹ RHP, Rare Historical Photos, October 25, 2022, <https://rarehistoricalphotos.com/lynching-thomas-shipp-abram-smith-1930/>

¹² James Cameron, *A Time of Terror: A Survivor's Story* (Milwaukee WI: LifeWrite Press), 2016.

What is visible in this photograph? The photographer documented the scene in hopes of profiting off of a common event in the South: a lynching. In that case, how can we categorize this photo? Can we call it photojournalism? Documentary photography? Studio photography? Street photography? After all, it is recording a public everyday aspect of life in the South, but the onlookers are aware and are posing for the photograph. Nothing is necessarily striking or memorable about any individual, and no one in the crowd looks particularly prepared to be photographed either.



(fig. 17, Peele, Jordan, director. *Get Out*. Blumhouse Productions, 2017. 1 hr., 44 min.)

When looking long enough, I find that the photo almost transforms into a tableau-vivant of sorts. Maybe my mind leaps here because the actions that led to produce this scene are so violent it feels unreal. I'm reminded of the late 18th century Jacques-Louis David painting *The Intervention of the Sabine Women*. In an essay re-interpreting its visual aspects in relation to the cultural and historical impact of France's 18th century reign of terror, Lajer-Burcharth argues that David's choice of aesthetic experience articulated a fundamental change in the function of art at the time. The artist's choice to display *The Intervention of the Sabine Women* across from a *psyché* mirror forced bourgeoisie museum goers to place themselves within the tableau depicting familial strife and social uprisings of the time. For this she supplements Lacan's theory of the mirror stage, in which the young child begins to identify with his own image. While I could spend time using Lajer-Burcharth's argument to supplement a reading of the Beitler photograph in which the (white) viewer identifies with the white onlookers of the lynching in an effort to produce a feeling of safety and control over black bodies, I'm interested in the authors brief examination of the lower half of the painting as a figural frieze. She comments,

“The figural frieze spread across the lower part of the canvas acts as a kind of net that catches the crowd swarming behind, organizing it for the viewer's inspection. It is literally *through* the sculptural bodies of the foreground...that we are invited to perceive the background as a flat and discontinuous field, a kind of patchwork of fragments.”¹³

Beitler's photograph and David's painting have little to no contextual relationship, but Lajer-Burcharth's technical reading of the tableau's visual language—knowing they were all choices of the artist—helps me to articulate my pause with the Beitler photograph. My intrigue is twofold: How do the technical aspects of the Beitler photograph inform the visual language of the photograph, and how does the visual language of the photograph disrupt the context of the

¹³ Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, “David's Sabine Women: Body, Gender and Republican Culture Under the Directory” *Art History* 3, vol. 14 (September 1991): 405.

scene? Instead of the ‘figural frieze’ of white onlookers operating as a net that we are caught in and forced to parse through, the gravitational pull of the descending bodies is the driving force that brings my vision downwards. The bodies that hold both the photographer's best technical example of focus and tonality render the crowd below as secondary. Here, I’m brought back to Cole’s paraphrasing of Campt. “...Photographs don’t speak, but they are not mute.”¹⁴ The blurred crowd below Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith elicit a truncated hum while above, a louder noise continues to grow. In a photograph depicting the violent and prurient nature of white supremacy, the young boys—even after life has left their bodies—reign the only figures photographically and technically sound.

Shown in a classroom where discussion surrounds the kinds of methodologies photography use in order to dictate history, I’m prompted to think about the kinds of viewing this photograph triggers. Within the genre of photojournalism, Susan Sontag’s proposal that it is impossible to look at photos of violence without the inescapable passivity of spectatorship is echoed. Not only is this photograph intended for a prurient gaze, the aftermath of viewing produces a detached guilt. The lynching has already happened, and so we look and move on.

¹⁴ Cole, “What Does It Mean To Look at This?,” 160.



(fig. 18, Dread Scott, *A Man Was Lynched by Police Yesterday*, 2015 : fig. 19, NAACP, *A man was lynched yesterday*, 1936.)

Cole questions this idea of the radical other within photographic journalism, supplementing the theory of Ariella Azoulay to acknowledge and challenge the assumed disconnect photojournalism builds between viewer and photographed subject. In questioning Sontag's claim of voyeurism, Azoulay argues for a sort of collective or communal witness. "Azoulay reads images of conflict or atrocity as constituting a more interwoven set of actors, displacing the question from one of voyeurism, or even empathy, to one of participatory citizenship."¹⁵ Conversely, are our habits of passive viewing simply our hindered efforts to morally contribute and experience as fellow citizens? Here, I'm motivated to propose an aesthetic reading of Beitler's photograph through tonality and texture as an alternative witnessing. To view this photograph in its aesthetic clarity prompts a reading that perhaps illuminates the pervasiveness of

¹⁵Cole, "What Does It Mean To Look at This?," 156.

blackness in lens-based technologies. Additionally, it also offers the consideration of the transgressive nature that aesthetics bring to instances of white power. These are just a few interpretations out of many concerning a photograph that is ultimately inexcusable and awful. It is memorable, but it is also one of many. It chastises, and it infuriates. Yet I find that in the beginnings of an alternate interpretation prompted by a shift in reading methodologies, I'm allowed longer moments of pause in order to listen to the resonant sounds the Beitley photograph makes.

A Black Gaze provides answers and methods for unique forms of viewership that allow readers to witness photographs through a different lens. Campt maintains that while pop culture brings broader visibility to black life, its viewpoints continue to follow rather than challenge the fundamental frameworks in which blackness is presented. In other words, blackness is now *seen*, but is still not felt or heard. She asks "...What would it mean to *see oneself through* the complex positionality that is blackness—and work through its implications on and for itself?"¹⁶ To view visual culture through a Black gaze is to challenge your positionality in being an active viewer and use your witnessing as an entrypoint to engage with blackness.

¹⁶ Campt, "Prelude to a Black Gaze," 7.



(fig. 20, Carrie Mae Weems, *All The Boys (Profile 2)*, 2016.)

In highlighting artists who reside at the forefront of cultivating a black gaze, Campt asks us not only to look *at* but to look “*with, through, and alongside another*”.¹⁷ In the rest of the chapter I’d like to explore the types of methods and vocabularies Campt uses to engage with media that defines a Black gaze. Once covered, the framework of her theory can outline what a reading of visual imagery through *hair aesthetics* would look like as an extension of Campt’s theoretical ‘black gaze’.

Prelude to a Black Gaze details the labor in witnessing that both defines and unites the work of artists Campt defines as using a Black gaze. This labor is tied up in the politics of monolithic views of blackness in popular visual imagery. To be responsive rather than to respond is to allow for multiplicity and discomfort. In an act of positioning and repositioning through the

¹⁷ Campt, “Prelude to a Black Gaze,” 8.

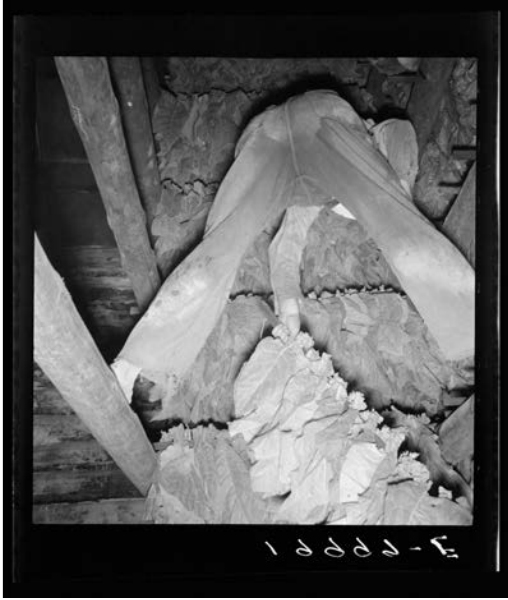
labor of viewing, precarity exists.¹⁸ Campt says, “...My choice of the indefinite article is intentional, for I am proposing that we think about *a* Black gaze (rather than *the* Black gaze) and understand it as both multiple and polyvalent.”¹⁹ To think oppositions in tandem and make new vocabularies for new forms of viewing can be thought of as productive counter-intuition. In viewing a range of footage featuring moments of black life, viewers become present. Campt argues that the splicing between both ordinary and discomfoting media allows us to “...Appreciate its moments of sublime reverie... It’s a discomfoting, aspirational defiant gaze. It is a *Black Gaze*.”²⁰ I find that her perception emphasizes a power in juxtaposition but also in range. It is the work of the viewer to connect the two to find vicissitudes of life. In the case of photographer Deana Lawson this form of labor partially takes place in physically altering one’s positionality when looking at her photographs. Campt details writing *to* the artworks rather than *about* them while sitting on the ground. “Looking up at [the artwork] both breaks up and down some of the traditional dynamics of spectatorship and visual mastery...Rather than viewing them, we are viewed by these subjects instead.”²¹ In refusing to render the subjects of her gaze to objects, Campt allows herself to be consumed by them rather than the other way around. This positional maneuvering (which in this case is physical) creates an intimacy between the witness and the material they view.

¹⁸ Campt, “Prelude to a Black Gaze,” 17.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

²¹ Campt, “Verse One: The Intimacy of Strangers,” 28.



(fig. 21, Dorothea Lange, *The Son of a Tenant Farmer Hanging Up Strung Tobacco inside the Barn*, 1939 : fig. 22, Deana Lawson, *White Spider*, 2018.)

Further in, Campit defines more vocabulary that is helpful in understanding how I'll be approaching and reading visual imagery through *hair aesthetics*. In *Verse Three: The Visual Frequency of Black Life*, Campit describes the ways in which images speak to her through frequencies. A term usually used in musicology, frequency in images is not what we see but *how* we see. It entails haptic, sonic, kinetic, temporal and visual techniques that provide capacities in which to view Black life. In relation to *hair aesthetics*, frequency will refer to the modalities in which visual imagery can be read: *Shine*, *Texture*, and *Tonality*. A reading of the Beidler photograph through a frequency of tonality and texture render a secondary denotative interpretation in which the white power present in the photograph is disrupted by the aesthetic accuracy in which the bodies of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith are depicted. This second reading also prompts a viewing in which our witnessing is slowed. This change of pace hints at "*Slow Ethics of Care*" a theoretical methodology Campit introduces in *Verse Four*. Prompted by

the quiet slowness in which the pandemic rendered many of our daily lives, a *Slow Ethics of Care* describes the temporalities in which having or using a black gaze entails.



(fig. 23, Jamal Nxedlana, *Untitled for Bubblegum Club*, 2017 : fig. 24, Jamal Nxedlana, *Untitled for Bubblegum Club*, 2017.)

In exploring the pace of ‘slowness’ as a radical form of ethics²², Camppt considers a Black Gaze as a slowed form of perception. “For what if we thought of a Black gaze as itself a particularly acute ‘velocity of living’? Here I’m also inclined to include the theory of French philosopher Marucie Merleau-Ponty and his theory on the phenomenology of perception²³. Merleau-Ponty argues that perception is neither purely sensation or interpretation but a combination of both as well as consciousness, and reasoning. To view something ‘slowly’, ‘durationally’, to read, perceive, and sense each aspect of our visual surroundings is to also render ourselves in relation to what we see. To help visualize her proposal for an ethics of slowness, Camppt examines

²² A theory formulated by choreographer and performance studies professor André Lepecki.

²³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Introduction to Part One,” in *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Donald A Landes. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012).

Dawoud Bey's *The Birmingham Project* (2012) and *9.15.63* (2013). Both in response to the 1963 Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombings, the works follow the steps four young girls walked before losing their lives in the church bombing massacre. *9.15.63* (2013), an eleven minute video project traces the daily route the four young girls walked juxtaposed against the quiet stills of a hair salon. *The Birmingham Project* (2012) consists of diptych photographic seated portraits featuring children at the age of the four girl's death and adults at the age they would have been if they were alive (fig. 25).



(fig. 25, Dawoud Bey, *Fred Stewart II And Tyler Collins* for *The Birmingham Project*, 2012.)

What does it mean to look at these photographs knowing those girls were not afforded more time to live? Campt reflects “Slowness makes us attend to the functions these spaces serve not only as generative of Black social life but as nascent sites of rebellion.”²⁴

²⁴ Campt, “Verse Four: The Slow Lives of Still Moving Images,” 130.

Through a reading of innocence, time, loss, and regality, we are faced with a perceived velocity of Black life. In a slowness of viewing, we sustain a link between living and dead highlighting the passing of time in the often sustained slowness of Black life.



(fig. 26, Carrie Mae Weems, *Kitchen Table Series*, 1990 : fig. 27, Carrie Mae Weems, *Untitled*, 2017.)

Briefly I want to dwell on Camp's purpose and usefulness of the Black Gaze and re-iterate its methods. The term “gaze” is often mentioned in cinema studies and feminist film theory to refer to the “visual spectatorship and pleasurable looking” performed commonly by white men. While white women are often the subject of this gaze, the traditional term can also stand as a placeholder for visual structures of dominance. In continuing to oppose these structures of dominance, Camp enlists the help of bell hooks’ essay *The Oppositional Gaze* to emphasize a practice of critical looking. In opening (or challenging) one’s gaze, we are able to create pathways for agency. In encountering the visual material shown in this essay, I ask readers to challenge their positionalities in the interest of disrupting structures of dominance. This entails looking at photographs from different perspectives may they be physically, disciplinarily, or sonically. I ask that you take the time to read photos not through their contextual background but

through a web of intimacies and pauses that distinguish themselves from the passive witness.



(fig. 28, Dawoud Bey, *Mary Parker and Caela Cowan* for *The Birmingham Project*, 2012.)

Mapping an Aesthetics of Hair

The first chapter introduces the reader to the idea of “listening” to images rather than looking. The task of this chapter is to discuss an alternate form of haptic witnessing I’d like to call ‘hair aesthetics’. Defined through a set of aesthetics in the visual and technical languages of image reading, *hair aesthetics* is another proposal of interpreting images in a deeper manner. How can we use *hair aesthetics* to develop the subjecthood of an image and how can we connect this manner of witnessing to larger diasporas practiced across time and space? I’ll be focusing on Krista Thompson as her studies will help to contextualize *hair aesthetics* as a tool for image reading in relationship to a larger canon diasporic lens-based, aesthetic practices. I’ll then briefly pause on Nigerian photographer J.D. Ojeikere’s hair photography to put the theory of *hair aesthetics* to the test.



(fig. 29, Diana Ferrell McCready, *Untitled* from *Hair Project*, 2018.)

“Have you ever heard of anything so absurd? Africa, sun-stunned and light-inundated Africa, described as the ‘Dark Continent’? Something more than a metaphor must be at play here. It must be some other darkness being displaced or reassigned.”²⁵ -Teju Cole in *Shadow Cabinet: on Kerry James Marshall* from *Black Paper: Writing in a Dark Time*

I’ve always enjoyed the look of the black and white photograph. Similarly to the black and white tattoo, the photograph can be thought of as a range of heavy and light tones of gray. These grays can be attributed to the light sensitive silver halide crystals in photographic printing paper that become increasingly darker when exposed to light. The silver halides produce smooth continuous tones called contone²⁶ that eventually depict a finished image on paper. Through a process of test exposures²⁷ which regulate printing paper’s exposure to light, a sea of contones render an image on the printing paper that floats in the stop bath. Many photographers can approximate the seconds of exposure printing paper needs without test exposures after years of experience. Similarly to processes of hair braiding, developing and printing photographs morph into highly haptic practices. Both artforms became somewhat spiritual for me as the repetition in each process developed my muscle memory. So much so that I had decided I wanted to turn both of them into careers. Without an ample understanding of how black and white function as a backbone to photographic structure, it’s difficult to move into using color film. Early on in my photographic career, black and white became solidified as tenets of traditional photographic seeing. Color came later, and functioned as a personality to the photograph. Without structure and clear visual language, photographs are susceptible to

²⁵ Teju Cole, “Shadow Cabinet: On Kerry James Marshall,” 117.

²⁶ *Contone (adjective)* - Having continuous range of tones from white to black; rather than an approximation such as stippling. <https://www.definitions.net/definition/contone>

²⁷ Burning and dodging are terms used in photography to describe a technique that manipulates the amount of light exposed to select areas on a photographic print that deviate from the rest of the paper’s exposure.

becoming a vast sea of color with minimal visual technicality. Similar to an abstract expressionist Frank Bowling painting (fig. 30).



(fig. 30, Frank Bowling, *As Above So Below*, 2020.)

The more I worked with hair physically while engaging with elements of photographic processes, a shift occurred in how I interacted with each entity. This shift becomes even more palpable when I think about the dualities between working in the dark room and braiding hair. Mapping and defining the aesthetics of hair is highly influenced by my own personal experiences working with hair and photography. It is a proposal for reading images inspired by how hair trained me to read photographs differently. Notably, both practices require an eye and *feeling* for what you're doing rather than words. The word haptic is defined in Merriam-Webster Dictionary as relating to or based on a sense of touch or characterized by a predilection for the sense of touch. In relation to both photographic processes and hair braiding, there comes a point in each discipline where touch and feel guide your movements rather than sight. For example, transporting film from the canister to the tank is a process that occurs in a film bag to avoid the

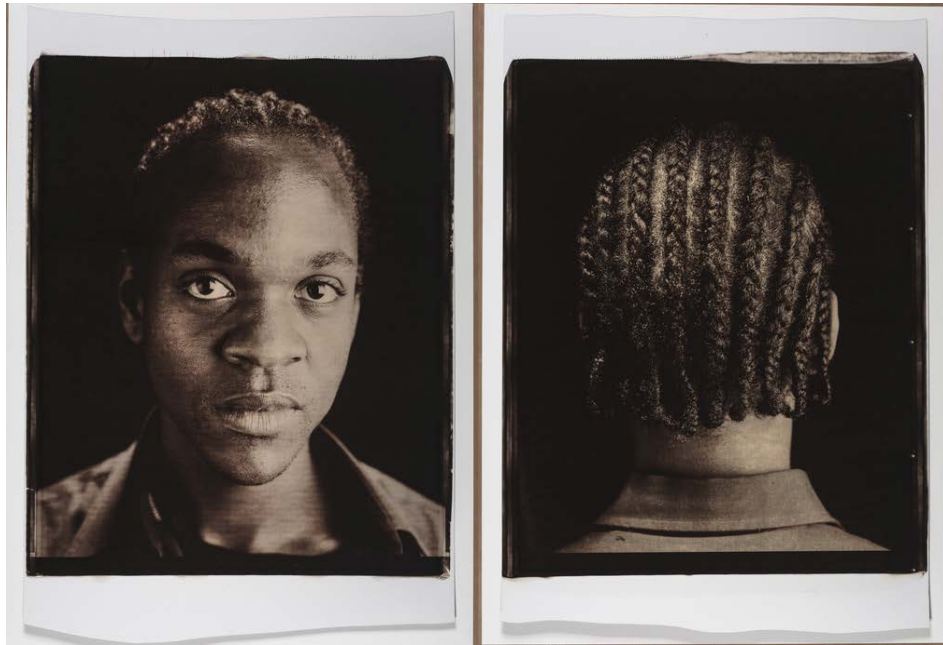
untreated film being exposed to light and requires muscle memory rather than sight. Plaiting hair on an unbraided head so each braid is of equal size and space requires muscle memory because you're unable to see how the final product will look. In both disciplines, there are moments where your instincts override the rationality of sight. The habit of 'hair aesthetics' came when the idea of the haptic bled over into my habitual and traditional ways of reading images.



(fig. 31, Barbara Chase-Riboud, *Confessions for Myself*, 1972 : fig. 32, Barbara Chase-Riboud, *All that Rises Must Converge/Red*, 2008.)

I started seeing hair photographically, and photographs through the aesthetics of hair. In reading photographs, I automatically looked for notable characteristics of hair. For moments of shine, texture, and depth of color that were supplemented as the backbone of its photographic structure rather than looking for image structure, clear subject matter, and quality of focus. The aesthetics of hair became my version of photographic seeing, and continues to develop my skill set for image reading. In relation to looking at hair in real life, these tenets acted reflexively, as I searched for those same aesthetic aspects as a signifier of hair. In this way, hair develops a language of its own, transferable throughout disciplines. The description of 'hair aesthetics' and

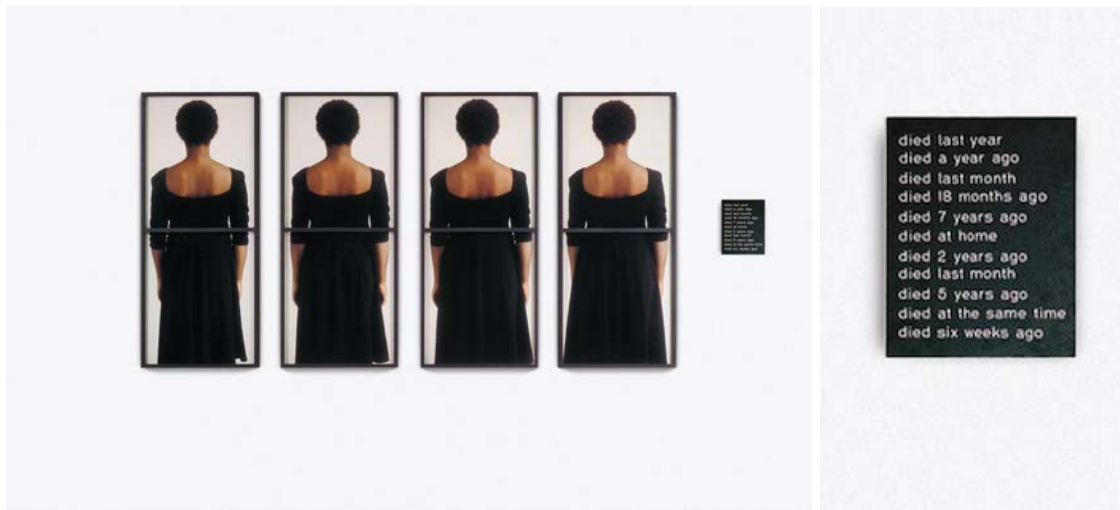
its uses and roots as a tool for image reading beg new forms of language and thinking in order to visualize and describe a working theory that bridges feeling and habit into theory.



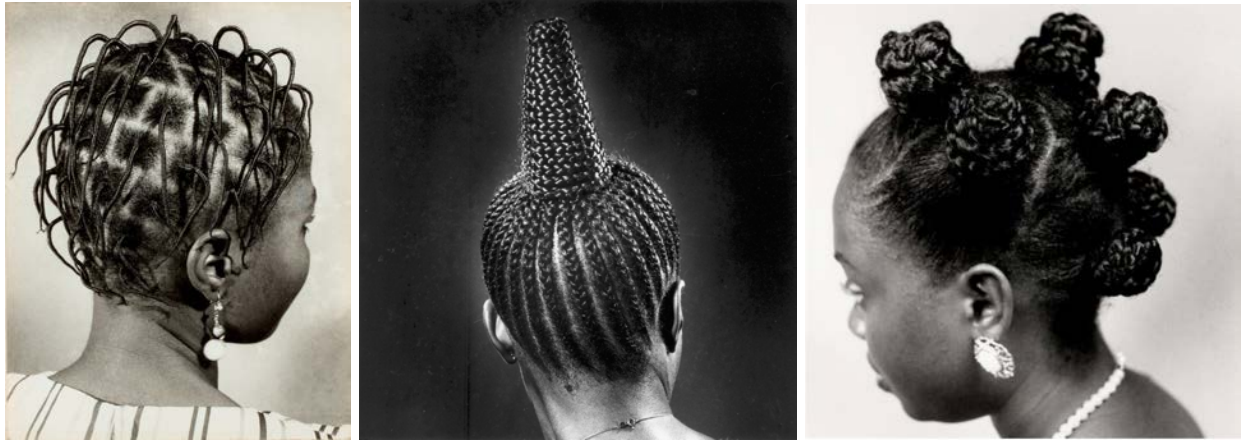
(fig. 33, Lyle Ashton Harris, *Untitled (Face #155 Lyle)* and *Untitled (Back #155 Lyle)*, 2000.)

What I find increasingly interesting about photographic practices is the crucial inclusion of light. Kinky hair is often dark, reflective, and texturized, three components that become extremely finicky when photographing them on film. Large sources of light are needed for a similar range of tone and texture to be displayed on the negative and finished print that you would see with your blind eye. In my late highschool and early college days I was determined to make what I called a ‘hair encyclopedia’. Documenting an exhaustive collection of afro-textured hair types, hairstyles, and braid forms etc., the encyclopedia would serve as a rudimentary contemporary archive. A handful of impromptu hair appointments and photo sessions ensued that ended up being less than successful (fig. 29). Without an ample amount of light— artificial or natural, the photographs of afro-textured hair were dark and useless subject-wise. Forms couldn’t distinguish themselves from one another in the negatives which in turn affected the clarity and

depth of field in the print. The resulting photographs are amalgamous featuring a significant lack of detail, but I return to them often. Even with a lack of light, a niche visual language of aesthetics persists. In this way, *hair aesthetics* can be thought of as a reactionary effect to the presence of light on hair rather than an intrinsic quality. I'm not arguing here that the presence of hair itself signifies anything, but rather emphasizing how the presence of light can trigger effects of visibility and representation. The presence of light is what mimics the effect of being visible.



(fig. 34, Lorna Simpson, *Timepiece*, 1990.)



(fig. 35, J.D. Ojeikere, *untitled* from *Hairstyles*, n.d. : fig. 36, J.D. Ojeikere, *untitled* from *Hairstyles*, n.d. : fig. 37, J.D. Ojeikere, *A Million Braid* from *Hairstyles*, 1999.)

The Tenets of Hair Aesthetics

Consisting of three specific aesthetic qualities that hair produces in the presence of light, *hair aesthetics* becomes a method for determining the readability of an image and exploring its connection to larger diasporic aesthetic practices. Thompson's *Shine* highlights social and historical examples of light being used as a method for navigating representation and visibility. Here, light is appropriated to create networks of representation and functions as a tool to infiltrate larger social cultural networks in the West. To put it simply: We will explore that where there is light, there are strong connections to diasporic practice and culture. The definition and mapping of these tenets will help us to read photographs non-normatively and connect them to diasporic networks of visibility across time and space.

Shine (noun) - 1. Brightness caused by the emission of light. 2. Brightness caused by the reflection of light. 3. Brilliance, Splendor.²⁸

Shine (verb) - 1. To emit rays of light. 2. To be bright by reflection of light. 3. To be eminent, conspicuous or distinguished.²⁹

²⁸ Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. "shine," accessed May 1, 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/shine>.

²⁹ Ibid.

Religious Definition: 1. Shine is used of the heavenly bodies, or of candles, and fire. 2. Shine is to be bright, brilliant, to be unclouded.³⁰

Photographic Definition: A quality of brightness that results when light is reflected on the surface.

Shine is the first tenet of *hair aesthetics* that highlight afro-textured hair's ability to hold and reflect light. The use of the word 'bright' in its first definition highlights that shine is somewhat reflexive. Light's relation to hair and the diaspora is important because Africa has historically been referred to (geographically and visually) as an area that is dark. Popularized from the colonial enterprise to submerge and keep hidden Europe's years of interactions with Africa, "Dark Continent" became a derogatory term.³¹ Shine is point or area central to my visual understanding of the rest of a photograph. I included a definition of shine in a religious context to emphasize that I view it as an unequivocally untouched and definitive starting point. Thinking toward the practice of reading images using *hair aesthetics* for the rest of Chapter Two, I ask: How does an area of brightness or shine contribute to your overall visual perception of a photograph? The use of the word 'bright' in its first definition highlights that shine is somewhat reflexive. As it absorbs light to produce an effect of shine, the brightness reflected also becomes a source of light as well.

Tonality (noun) - 1. Tonal qualities. 2a. Key sense. 2b. The organization of all tones and harmonies of a piece of music in relation to a tonic³². 3. The arrangement or interruption of the tones in a visual work of art.³³

Photographic Definition - Tonality is the overall appearance of an image regarding the range and distribution of tones and smoothness of gradation between them.³⁴

³⁰ Orr, James, General Editor. "Entry for 'SHINE'". "International Standard Bible Encyclopedia". 1915.

³¹ Cole, "Shadow Cabinet: On Kerry James Marshall," 173.

³² In reference to or denoting the first degree of a musical scale.

³³ Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. "tonality," accessed May 1, 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tonality>.

³⁴ Tijana Dindic, "Tonality", Tiyana.net,

Tonality enhances the technical language of photographs by being a tangible element of its synchronicity. Tonality provides an image with 3-D-like quality that makes it seem real. Without a range of tone, images appear flat and lack dynamism. The presence of tonality in afro-textured hair provides modalities of depth that produce sorts of haptic qualities. In thinking back to Camp's note of images making sound, tonality functions in *hair aesthetics* as a sort of frequency.

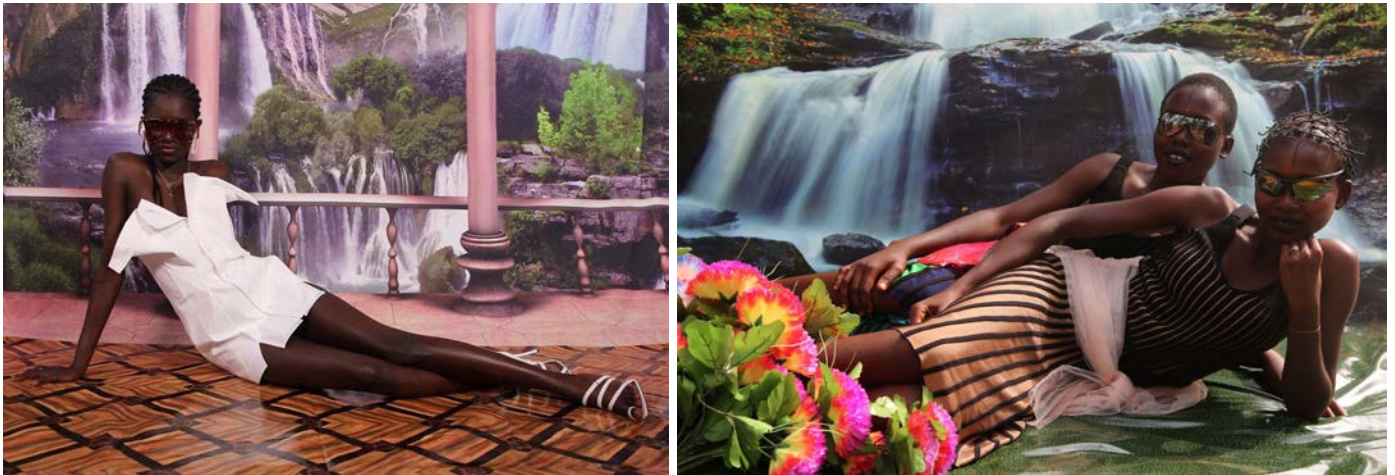
Texture (noun) - 1a. The visual tactile surface characteristics and appearance of something. 2a. A composite of the elements of prose or poetry. 3a. Essential part: Substance 3b. Identifying quality: character. 5a. Basic scheme or structure. 5b. Overall structure.³⁵

In *hair aesthetics* texture can refer to afro-textured hair's surface characteristic. Texture enhances the body and depth of surfaces that would otherwise be dull to the vision or touch. When looking at areas of texture in photographs, there may be a wide range of tonality and shadows. The presence of texture in visual imagery results in a denser look to its visual surface because of its assumed depth.

In terms of discussing how aesthetics create networks for being seen, *Shine* illuminates expression and performance practices in the Circum-Caribbean. To Thompson, dancehall its event of it being photographed create subjecthoods where partygoers visibilities are forefronted as they demand to be seen. Drawing on years of research and firsthand experience she examines the evolution of the dynamic artform from its beginnings in the 1970s to its present day global impact. Similarly to the work of *A Black Gaze*, Thompson traces visual artists and lens-based cultures that offer appropriative and non-normative ways for members of the African Diaspora to shape and affirm personal identities and culture. Dancehall functions as a site of study to think

³⁵ Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. "texture," accessed May 1, 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/texture>.

about how aesthetics amplify lived experiences while continuing to map ways of seeing that draw contemporary and historical methods of visibility. Namely, I'm interested in how aesthetic products of these practices create networks of language. In this way, light becomes a means of representation for people in front of the camera that allow for further cultural identity formations. Thompson's studies continue to contextualize the potential uses of *hair aesthetics* as a tool for navigating the subjecthood of images as well as dissecting why it belongs to larger histories of the Diaspora influencing Western visual culture.



(fig. 38, Ruth Ossai, *Untitled for Fenty*, 2019 : fig. 39, Ruth Ossai, *Untitled for KENZO Folio #1*, 2017.)

Challenging a history of photography that exclusively created networks for white people to be seen, Thompson questions how Black people through the appropriative photographic practices create their own forms of legibility. For the partygoers and attendees of dancehalls, many of these acts start with the videographer. Securing a beaming light to their cameras, videographers become carriers of visibility. “With a large camera perched on his shoulder...the videographer produced the party’s visual charge...[He] scoped the room, coming to rest on the MOB dancers, who seemed energized by the camera’s spotlight.”³⁶ Again, here we’re faced with

³⁶ Thompson, “Introduction,” 5.

the concept of visibility being possible or highly enhanced by a source of light.³⁷ Thompson describes the exchanges between videographer and partygoers vying for the light as a ‘payola system’ as seekers of the video-light hope to gain fame from the material later being produced into DVDs or video released on the internet. Light as an element of the photographic aesthetic is almost commodified as an item to be used and appropriated in the interest of infiltrating larger social and cultural circles. This relationship is something that the videographers are also aware of. A conversation between Thompson and veteran videographer Jack Sohwah describe the increase of light from the camera as an increase in visibility both literally and figuratively.³⁸ Although this interaction can be thought of as transactional, the relationship between the photographed and the photographer is active and communal as the photographer works to make the photographed feel *witnessed*, rather than *shot*.³⁹

³⁷ In relation to the tenet of *shine*, afro-textured hair’s ability to hold light and reflect light demonstrates its reflexive ability to make a person visible while arguing for the visibility of itself.

³⁸ Thompson, “Introduction,” 6.

³⁹ *Witnessed* rather than *shot*: In the interest of this paper’s task to trace new vocabularies to discuss non-normative ways of seeing and creating visual imagery, I want to lightly draw contrasts between the vocabularies defined here and photography’s previously define vocabularies in relationship to colonialism. How does the function of the camera change—especially in relation to the archive—when we challenge the idea of ‘shooting someone’ versus creating moments of active witness? Here again we can think to Azoulay and Camp’s theories on active and communal witness when visual technologies fall into the hands of the diasporas. Using lens-based practices, how are black and African diasporic artists creating social structures of seeing that are rooted in diasporic perspectives?



(fig. 40, Polo Silk, *Phillip Green, Mr.Big Stuff, Club Detour*, 1992 : fig. 41, Polo Silk, *Mardi Gras Orleans and Clairborne*, 1996 : fig. 42, Polo Silk, *Lo Life, Lo Down, Club Detour*, 1993.)

Another technique dancehall goers engage in to become more visible in the video-light is skin bleaching. Here again, we encounter the same example of light—or this effect of light—creating networks for visibility. In preparation for videographers carrying sources of light, partygoers will bleach their skin to be better seen.⁴⁰ Thompson notes that a range of photographic processes in the African diaspora act as a sort of intervention to this phenomenon.⁴¹ Following, the act of whitening or bleaching one’s skin can be seen not as a response, but a deviation in exploring how Black people experiment with alternate forms of legibility. “The bodies of men and women, manipulated to reflect light, become a new form of photographic surface, absorbing reflecting light, permanently marked by the light of representation.”⁴² It’s here that I want to draw a connection between aesthetic performance practices in the Circum-Caribbean to the usefulness of *hair aesthetics* as a method for creating structures of diasporic visibility as well as using hair as a conduit to inform photographic seeing.

⁴⁰ This practice is also inherently informed by the history of black skin being illegible in photographic technologies.

⁴¹ Thompson, “Introduction,” 22.

⁴² Ibid.



(fig. 43, Polo Silk, *untitled*, n.d..)

While Thompson draws a connection between the reflection of light transforming black people's skin into a photographic surface, I urge readers to draw a similar connection between hair as a photographic surface. Similarly, I also want to draw our attention back to the hair tenet of *tonality* as it highlights qualities of an image that marries subject matter to its overall readability. In the same way tonality allows the picture to 'come alive', the idea of brightening one's skin to be better *seen* allows party-goers within the video-light to be doubly 'seen'.⁴³ In this way, reading for *tonality* in photographs can be drawn in relation to larger diasporic practices across time and geographies.

From these studied behaviors alone, the dominance of images and visual media become to the African diasporic community's infiltration and expansion upon surrounding cultures. Thompson highlights this in her coverage of street and club photography in Black urban communities. She credits individuals such as Ivery McKnight and Greg Sanders in popularizing the vernacular form of photography in Washington, DC in the late 80s while in Jamaica she dates the genre's rise to popularity in the 1990s. I pause on this strand of photographic practice because it highlights important elements of permeability in the appropriation and creation of aesthetic expressions. Thompson describes street and club-goers posing in front of handmade makeshift backdrops, often referencing hip-hop and black urban culture in the United States. "...Found at hip-hop concerts and festivals celebrating black culture across urban communities...[these backdrops] often depict fantastical displays of wealth, from gleaming

⁴³ It's also worth mentioning here how skin bleaching almost negatively enforces a relationship between darkness and lack of visibility or lack of presence. Here I'm tempted to guide the reader in the direction of Kobena Mercer's response to Robert Mapplethorpe's photography and his discussion of the materiality of black skin as well as thinking back to Teju Cole's discussion of the 'Dark Continent'. Is there power in embracing the idea of darkness? Or is this re-claiming of darkness an act of re-claiming in response to colonial enterprises relating whiteness and the presence of light as a method of being seen?

luxury items to Caribbean seascapes.”⁴⁴ Many people portray personhood or prestige through having themselves photographed with consumer goods. Here now, it is a question of location and imagination as she proposes how visual technologies ‘expand, constrain, and change’ the geographies and terrains through which African diasporas are imagined. For street and club photography, Thompson notes the function of light changing from spotlight to flash, highlighting the two important vocabulary terms *afterimage* and *bling*. In reference to discussions about consumer culture, she highlights a number of items that contain a flashiness or bling to them that emit light especially well in the presence of flash. New Orleans rapper B.G., who characterized ‘bling’ as “...the sound light makes when it hits a diamond.”⁴⁵ popularized the use of flashy things as an element of perceived wealth. While light concerns the state of being seen, ‘bling’ renders itself as a product of that interaction enhancing moments of visibility by co-signing representations of wealth and materialism.⁴⁶ Paired with posing behind an imagined background, photographed club-goers and street walkers appropriate wealth and excess by making the unattainable lifestyle attainable. Furthermore, the photographing also then becomes secondary to the performative action of creating a persona of yourself, imagined by the manipulation of aesthetics. ‘Afterimage’ as defined by Thompson sears the occurrence of the photograph into retinal memory, now acting to metaphor-ize the presence of ‘bling’. In turn, it is the action of taking the photograph that’s rendered secondary to the performance of imagined identity. I’m also tempted here to draw yet another parallel between the pervasiveness of street and club photography and the tenet of *texture* as it pertains to characteristics of the surface. What I’m

⁴⁴ Thompson, “Introduction,” 8.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁴⁶ Although I’m discussing the term ‘bling’ to highlight the function of light as a transportative or futuristic quality of photographic culture in these locations, bling also has strong connection and influence in hip-hop and rap culture in the West.

trying to point to here is the interaction between light and photographic surfaces that create a depth in ‘sonic’ frequency. In this way, although ‘bling’ is defined as a sound, it can also be thought of as a texture that highlights a photograph's hapticity.⁴⁷



(fig. 44, Dawoud Bey, *Untitled #25 (Lake Erie and Sky)* from *Night Coming Tenderly, Black*, 2017.)

Shine mainly focuses on the study of performance within lens-based practices in the Circum-Caribbean, but it's the emphasis on the appropriation of aesthetics to mimic and create networks of visibility is key. It's also important to note that these methods of aesthetic practice derive from inherently diasporic practices. Following, we can concretely determine these methods deviations from traditional Western practices concerning the use of the camera.

⁴⁷ Again, I'm thinking about the alternative ways in which we witness photographs that do not involve vision.

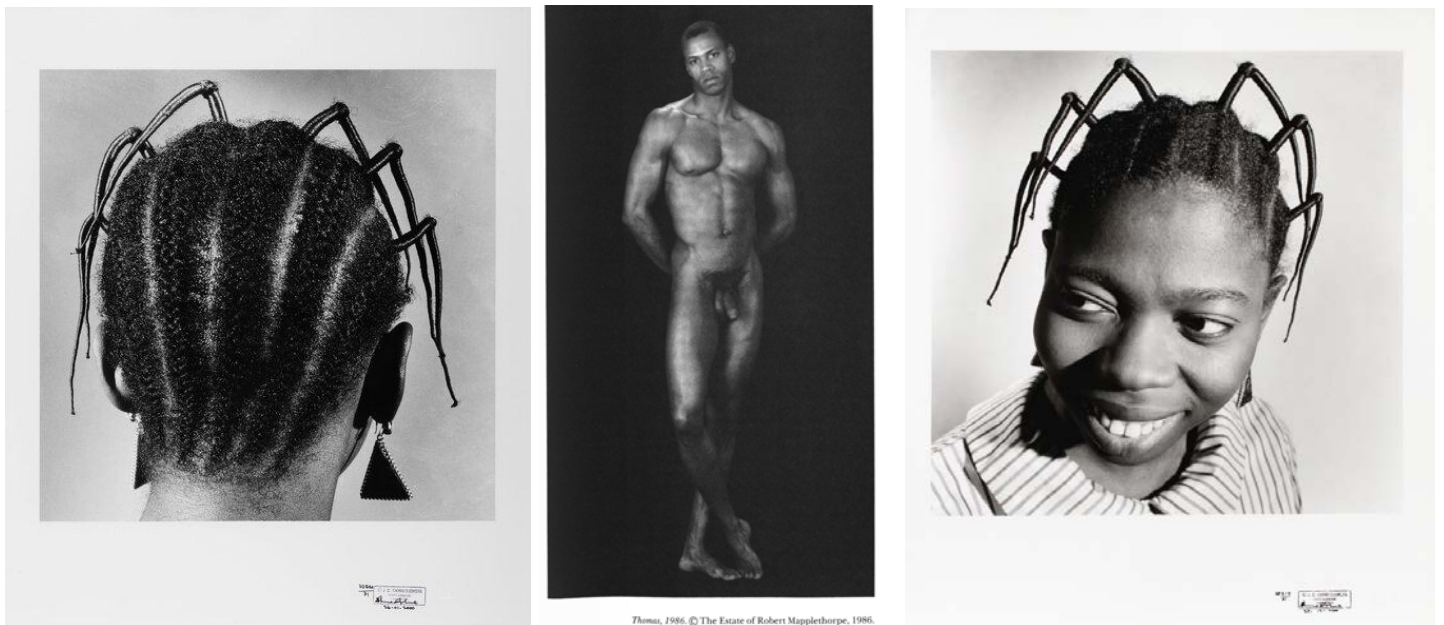


(fig. 45, J.D. Ojeikere, Lot 20 from *Hairstyles*, 1975.)

Located behind the special collections shelves at Bard’s CCS Library, I flipped through *J.D. 'Okhai Ojeikere: Photographs*, the complete published version of Ojeikere’s hair series. A collection spanning over almost thirty years, Ojeikere’s delicate hair photographs lie at the crux of fashion, studio photography, scientific study. Photographed during a rise in the Nigerian art scene, this archive of hairstyles signify cultural freedom and highlight the role of Nigerian women in the country’s movements towards national independence.

Ojeikere was introduced to photography by local photographer “Mr. Albert Anieke,” although they were not common in Ovbiomu-Emai, a rural village located in Nigeria’s south-west region. By the age of 21, Ojeikere began to seek work at the Ministry of Information in Ibadan. By 1960, he joined the Nigerian Arts Council, an agency responsible for the funding and promotion of the arts. The following year, still under the employment of the Arts Council,

Ojeikere organized a festival of visual and living arts where he continued to document Nigerian culture. In 1968 he began *Hairstyles* to memorialize and document Nigerian culture, a project he would continue over the next twenty years. Following Chapter One's discussion of how 'seeing' photographs shift their subjecthoods, Ojeikere's keen eye for aesthetics and photographic structure morph the spotlighted hairstyles into abstract records of femininity and cultural visibility.



(fig. 46 and 48, J.D. Ojeikere, "Ito Lozi", n.d. : fig. 47, Robert Mapplethorpe, *Thomas*, 1986, Photograph taken from *Skin Head Sex Thing*.)

In structuring a visual analysis around aesthetics and visibility, Kobena Mercer outlines a reading neatly in his essay *Skin Head Sex Thing*. The piece functions as a revision to previous arguments made by the art historian in response to Mapplethorpe's work. The author lays impressive groundwork for thinking about how a reading of aesthetics affects the subjecthoods of photographs. Re-stating a brief formal analysis of Mapplethorpe's photographs he discusses how their photographic language structures the viewer's gaze and relationship to its subject. "Three

formal conventions interweave across the photographic text to organize and direct the viewer's gaze into its pictorial space. A sculptural code...a code of portraiture...and a code of lighting and framing."⁴⁸ In Ojeikere's work these formal conventions are similar. Sculptural code is corresponded in the disegno of the hairstyles and positioning of the sitter. Code of portraiture is established through consistency of photographic framing and position of each sitter while a code of light and framing allow the photographed hairstyles to oscillate between abstract sculpture and anthropomorphic insectile structure. Each photograph also maintains a designated point of focus either in a detail of the hairstyle or on an earring worn by the sitter while the source of light emphasizes plaits and weaving patterns. I'm reminded of the stability in structure of black and white photographs as ranges of tonality illuminate the spine-like composition of each style. Different light white or black backdrops allow tonal elements of the afro-textured hair to demystify or diminish themselves. A profile photograph depicting a woman looking downward sculpturally accentuates the cornrow hairstyle she dons (fig. 51). The rows on the back section of her head braid upward while the front quarter section juxtapositionally braid downward, pinned away from her face in a delicate loop. The dark and light shades operate in a deliberate panoptic system, each spectrum inherently allowing the other to be seen while respectively outlining details of their own.

⁴⁸ Kobena Mercer, "Skin Head Sex Thing: Racial Difference and the Homoerotic Imagery," *New Formations* no. 16, (Spring 1992): 2.



(fig. 49, Samuel Fosso, *Le Golfleur*, 1997.)

Because the camera positions the viewer in close proximity to each style, the viewer's relationship to each subject becomes inherently interpersonal. Moreover, references to the project's social and historical contexts are also illuminated by this closeness. A network of representation becomes present in the absence of traditional facial portraiture, exemplified by the artist's technical precision. Subsequently *shine*, *texture*, and *tonality* allude to a celebration of

individual and cultural networks of visibility. The photographs declare proof of life through the hair's complex and definitive interactions with light. Through a reading of *hair aesthetics*, *Hairstyles* highlight frequencies of Nigerian life through the lens of exquisite artistic practice.⁴⁹ Thinking back to Thompson's exploration of dancehall culture and the appropriation of light to make oneself visible, the occurrence of aesthetic networks of afro-textured hair produces another instance in which light mimics visibility.



(fig. 50, Olympia Shannon, installation image of *Black Melancholia*, 2022.)

⁴⁹ I'm reminded of Malick Sidibé's *Vues de Dos* and the African diaspora's ability to express personhood in the absence of presence. Sidibé's *Vues de Dos* was taken almost forty years after Ojeikere's *Hairstyles* in Mali.



(fig. 51, J.D. Ojeikere, "*Suki Moremi*", n.d..)



(fig. 52, J.D. Ojeikere, "Koroba", 1999 : fig. 53, Malick Sidibé, *Vues de Dos*, 2001.)



(fig. 54, Reddy Ru, *Untitled* from Instagram, 2023 : fig. 55, J.D. Ojeikere, “*Mai Bu*”, 1999.)



(fig. 56, Malick Sidibé, *Untitled*, 1973)

Treatise

Rather than introduce any more material or draw preemptive conclusions on a theory still early in its development, I'd like to spend the third chapter comprehensively revisiting overarching themes, ideas and questions posed throughout the paper.

Hair aesthetics is a theory derived from my individual experiences which aren't shared by other people. While it is a unique method for interpreting visual material because it derives from real life experiences, the argument could be made that that is exactly what makes it circumstantial, making it useful only in specific cases or disciplines. Technically, I don't disagree. With that in mind, a useful element of this treatise will be to trace some parameters and limitations for *hair aesthetics* as a method for photographic seeing. The title of this thesis categorizes *hair aesthetics* as a form of 'non-normative' seeing although I'm still not sure if that is the correct term for it. On the one hand as a method for image reading, *hair aesthetics* relies on some traditional elements of photographic techniques. On the other, conceptual elements of *hair aesthetics* concerning frequency and *texture* could be considered a bit more unfamiliar. In the interest of building on scholarship instead of creating my own—as nothing is new but only continues to grow—supplementing the work of a few different critical thinkers helps to demystify what art historical and visual histories this method relies on and what its contemporary uses might be. Ultimately, the goal of this paper and treatise is not to arrive at answers, but to continue to pose necessary critical questions in sifting through histories and practices that would otherwise be considered un-connected.



(fig. 57, Ruth Dusseault, *Guard Rails on Parking Deck*, 2004 : fig. 58, Willie “Ma Willie” Abrams, “*Roman Stripes variation*, 1975.)

Chapter One introduces the reader to alternate modes of witnessing visual media and photographs. In the interest of claims made within this thesis, it was necessary for the reader to understand first and foremost that *hair aesthetics* builds on the use and appropriation of aesthetics. The idea that there could be different ways of interacting with photographs was foreign to me until I took a course exploring photographic practices in the African diaspora. It also derived from feelings of frustration within the classroom in viewing photographs with violent or racist subject matter. For this reason a guiding question throughout Chapter One became, “How can we look at photographs of violence?” The issue is past whether we see them or not and focuses on what we do when we look at them and how we can avoid the emotional and physical response of turning away.

Culture surrounding photographs and photography have a convoluted way of glorifying the idea that images belong to everyone. There is no work to be done in viewing a photograph,

because the work of capturing it has already been done. The relationship between the viewer and the image often turns salacious or passive as Sontag's *On Photography* famously argues. Cole's text grapples with this issue of the traditional witness and how as viewers, we conflate viewership with passivity. Essay *What Does It Mean To Look At This* supplements Azoulay's theory to map forms of image literacy in an age where the challenges of viewership continue to intensify. Azoulay turns the idea of passive witnessing on its head, proposing that witnessing itself is part of a larger set of interwoven actors participating in 'participatory citizenship'. To witness in her case is an inherently communal activity we all engage in.⁵⁰ To witness is to look, and in some ways undeniably see that something has or continues to happen. This acknowledgement of undeniably presence is at the crux of *hair aesthetics*.

⁵⁰ Cole paraphrasing Azoulay in her essay *The Civil Contract of Photography*, *Black Paper*, 157 in iBooks.



(fig. 59, Jamel Shabazz, *Eden and Nazarus*, 2013.)

Reading an image using *hair aesthetics* is an exercise of reifying visibility and presence through viewership. I felt it necessary to include the work of Cole and Azoulay because *hair aesthetics* as a tool for image reading is inherently non-passive. It requires a viewer to ‘see’ differently and question if previous subjecthood’s assigned or associated with photographs are resolute. Furthermore, I’m asking them to arrive at their own interpretations that are communal, thoughtful, and imaginative. Here again, I return to Campt’s proposal to listen to photographs rather than look, in order to see beyond what they connote or denote. This onus falls on the witness.

A Black Gaze builds on Azoulay’s idea of participatory citizenship to explore witnessing from a point of blackness that can be defined as a form of viewership. Campt’s text becomes structural in defining *hair aesthetics* because the method derives from an object and practice that is inherently diasporic. Not only does Campt’s text define and map out a mode of ‘witnessing’ inherently connected to black artistic vision, it traces methods of encountering visual material that inherently shift one’s role as a witness from passive to active. In this way, while Cole’s use of Azoulay’s theory proposes the idea of communal rather than passive witnessing, and *A Black Gaze* implements it by outlining and contextualizing its methods to a specific group of artists. What Campt does well in her text is acknowledge that alternate forms of viewership have been historically necessary in visualizing vicissitudes of life. Her work also helps to place *hair aesthetics* in conversation with social histories and practices of black viewership.



(fig. 60, Eric Etheridge, photo composite from *Beach of Peace*, n.d..)

Something that becomes increasingly important in discussing Campt's 'Black gaze' is her use of "a" in "a Black Gaze" signifying its multiplicity.⁵¹ The use of "a" rather than 'the' acknowledges that a Black gaze—like *hair aesthetics*—is a vessel in which to explore alternate methods of viewing that employ the act of participatory witnessing. In *Verse One* Campt outlines an alternate relationship between viewers of photographs and their subjects. She explains, "Lawson's photographs draw us into a world of strangers to whom we feel intimately connected...In doing so she transforms the Black subjects captured in their frames into life-sized simulacra that force us to meet them as equals."⁵² This breaking of the fourth wall between photographed and viewer exercises 'a black gaze' as the viewer actively interacts with photographed subjects through their world. In turn, the viewer becomes the subject of the sitter's gaze rather than the other way around. Here again, we can understand a Black gaze not as a categorical method but as a poetics of interactions meant to facilitate inter-relational methods of viewerships. These designations become structurally important to understanding how *hair aesthetics* should be used. Rather than a working method independently meant to be used on

⁵¹ Multiplicity in this case can be interpreted in a similar manner to the term subjecthood.

⁵² Campt, "Verse One: The Intimacy of Strangers," 32.

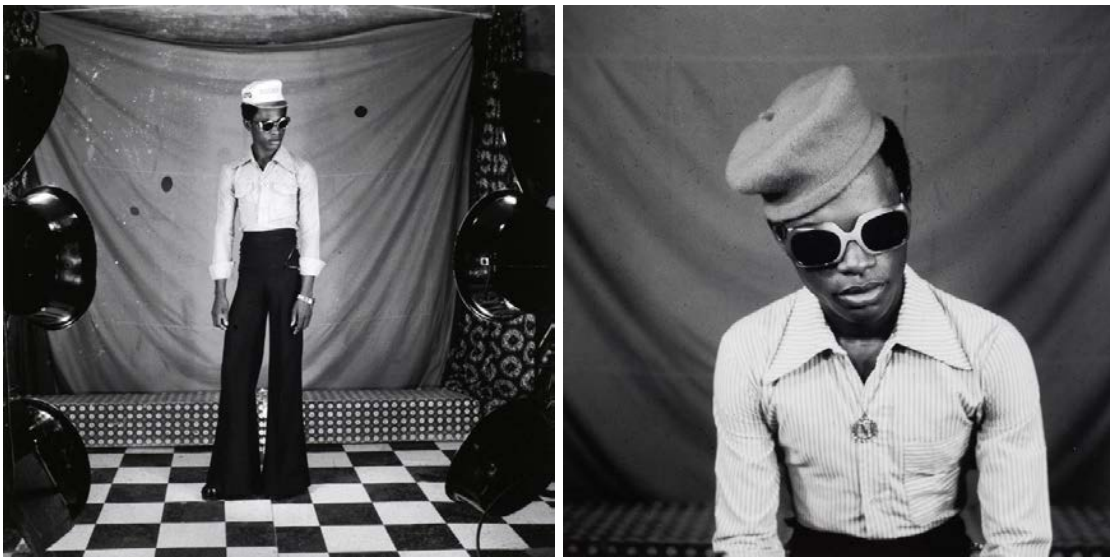
works of art or visual material that are defined or are about hair, *hair aesthetics* can be used to further interpret a given piece of photographic or visual artwork.



(fig. 61, Deana Lawson, *Sons of Crush*, 2016 : fig. 62, Deana Lawson, *untitled*, n.d..)

In terms of methods used to interact and interpret visual material, *hair aesthetics* and Camp's 'black gaze' diverge. In *Verse One* Camp discusses shifting her positionality to artwork by writing prose-like verses to describe a photograph rather than brief captions to describe its subject matter. Techniques like these help Camp to familiarize herself with the sociality exhibited in the work she views, acknowledging that many of the photographs she discusses in the verse depict scenes of Black life. *Verse Three* defines the term 'frequency' as the impression images leave a viewer after their initial encounter. Drawing on conceptual work from choreographer Matthew Morrison, Camp discusses frequency in terms of *how* we see images rather than what we see. It's here that *hair aesthetics* also supplements a Black gaze using its structural conceptual framework to think about its tenets as a collection of frequencies. Camp interrogates the ways in which the physical and emotional labor provides insight into the everyday experience of racialized subjects through the lens of sensory registers. For *hair aesthetics*, focal points of shine, tonality, and texture are used to aesthetically and haptically

appropriate truncated moments of diasporic visibility within photographs. Supplementing the conceptual frameworks detailed in a Black gaze, *hair aesthetics* looks for those moments of black visibility a bit more technically using its tenets to facilitate moments of visibility. It is a level of hearing or engagement with visual material that can be treated sort of like a close-reading. The introduction of the Beitler photograph works to explore diasporic visibility through aesthetics even within racialized photographs (fig. 16). Camp's interrogation of the labor required to look at racialized images through a reading of hapticity potentially argues for visibility rather than erasure in this case.



(fig. 63, Samuel Fosso, *Self-portrait*, 1976 : fig. 64, Samuel Fosso, *Self-portrait*, 1977.)

Its denotations depict a lynching and its connotations reference a history of white power, voyeurism, and oppression, but is an alternate reading accessible through a reading of aesthetics? My brief inclusion of Lajer-Burcharth's visual analysis of *The Intervention of the Sabine Women* narrows the focus of interrogation by considering how a lack of visibility from the overexposure of the white onlookers draws my attention upwards to the hanging bodies of the two boys. By

articulating my pause, my aim was not to arrive at a set of conclusions but to familiarize readers with the possibility that the appropriation of technical aesthetics in reading photographs aids multiplicities of visibility otherwise hidden through passive viewership.

Mapping the Aesthetics of Hair shifts from conceptual and theoretical ideas to discuss concrete applications of appropriative aesthetics that shape representations of identity. In congruence with these applications, Chapter Two also defines the focal points of *hair aesthetics* to aid the interpretation of visual imagery throughout the rest of the chapter. Framing the chapter by pausing on the similarities between photographic processes and hair praction places previously mentioned concepts of frequency as an extension of participatory witnessing in conversation with *hair aesthetics* as a haptic habit. Both are practices in my life that rely heavily on exacting visibility without denoting them. Discussing my experience photographing afro-textured hair became a focal point for interrogating how diasporic visibility prevails through practices historically used to silence and erase black bodies.⁵³

⁵³ I'm referencing the utilization of the camera during colonial efforts to render black communities and individuals as objects rather than humans. This act of silencing and racialization can be seen in photographs similar to the Beitler lynching photograph. A project that comes to mind that grapples with the camera's participation in colonial efforts is Carrie Mae Weems' *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* (1995).



(fig. 65, Carrie Mae Weems, *A Negroid Type/ You Became a Scientific Profile/ An Anthropological Debate*, 1995-1996.)

In returning to those early photographs and examining their technical failures I was able to parse through what aesthetically remains visible. Retrospectively the hair photographs became a great source for thinking about how aesthetics prevail in the absence of traditional networks of legibility. As a result, their defined aesthetics adumbrate visibility rather than concretely signify presence. Returning to Camp’s consideration of black life as a visual frequency, Chapter Two also grapples with the idea of aesthetics as a frequency rather than a concrete visual concept. Camp’s definition of frequency proposes an avenue of exploration in considering what concepts communal viewerships can use to look beyond what is concretely exhibited. In that vein, a guiding question of this chapter became “How can shine (and more generally *hair aesthetics*) be used to identify visibility or presence?” As with my own experience using a camera to photograph afro-textured hair, light becomes an uncontainable element of that process. For that reason *shine* became the first tenet of hair aesthetics, as it is the primary aesthetic responsible for holding and reflecting light.



(fig. 66 and 67, Matt Yoscary, BTS for Quil Lemons' 6,7, 2021.)



(fig. 68 and 69, Matt Yos Cary, BTS for Quil Lemons' 6,7, 2021.)

Thompson's text *Shine* became an amazing primary source for exploring cultural uses of lens-based technologies in the Circum-Caribbean. More specifically, I focus on her coverage of the appropriation of light in Jamaican dancehalls, and the visual economy of light in relation to diasporic communities infiltrating larger spheres of culture. In its essence *Shine*'s methods of exploration are more art historical than Campt and Cole's texts as it focuses on the use of light as an object and appropriated aesthetic. This method is favorable though, as the Second Chapter focuses on practice rather than concept. In thinking about how interpreting photographs and visual material using *hair aesthetics* can render visibility, *Shine* also provides specific socio-historical examples of how diasporic communities of the past and present use light to facilitate viewerships and visualities. This is crucial as one of the comprehensive goals of this thesis is to place *hair aesthetics* (as a proposed method for interpreting and defining diasporic visibility) in conversation with socio-historical methods that utilize light as a vessel for representation. Art-historically speaking, afro-textured hair as an object capable of holding and reflecting light is reified as a viable object of inspiration.

What I'm particularly interested in exploring in Thompson's text is how in the use of light and aesthetics visualize the imagined identities of the diaspora. My choice to focus on sections from her text concerning skin-bleaching and videographers' use of light in dancehall events are meant to offer concrete applications that contribute to the discussion of how aesthetics manipulate and often shape networks of visibility. In the case of videographers, the combination of light and lens literally and figuratively symbolize visibility for party-goers, as being filmed representationally outlines a network for communal witness and the presence of light amplifies that occurrence. Skin-bleaching to be better seen also speaks to how an advanced understanding

of aesthetics contributes to visibility practices. These behaviors offer the opportunity for *hair aesthetics* to also be considered as a method that contributes to the shaping of transnational diasporic communities as it concerns the appropriation of aesthetics.

The introduction of Ojeikere's *Hairstyles* offered yet another opportunity to explore how individual and cultural visibility can be interpreted through aesthetics. I was also interested in how these photograph's textual language corresponded well with tenets of *hair aesthetics*. My focus was to experiment how an aesthetic —instead of objective— reading could outline further networks of visibility through the presence of hair. I use the word 'objective' to return to the traditional concept of photographs denoting what they connote. Without the statement of the artist or context of these photographs being significant to Nigeria's independence, Ojeikere's *Hairstyles* objectively represents an archive of hairstyles. The goal of the visual analysis was to determine representation in the absence of presentation. In the absence of traditional portraits framing the face, the composition and photographic language of these hair photographs become increasingly important. Their sculptural code, and decisiveness in portraiture and lighting help to extrapolate the presence of aesthetics by directing the viewer's attention to their elemental makeup.



(fig. 70 and 71, Renell Medrano, 1984, *Harlem, New York* for *10 Men* magazine, 2018.)

Mercer's *Skin Head Sex Thing* works to further abstract this concept of connotation and denotation by considering the role of aesthetics in abstracting the male black body. Providing only a summary of his visual analysis to structure my own regarding the Ojeikere photographs, I briefly want to re-visit Mercer's arguments for two different reasons: Firstly, I'd like to offer an observation and question in relation to Mercer's discussion of photography and the black body. Secondly, I would like to juxtapose the goal of our efforts to explore the subjecthood of photographs through a reading of aesthetics for reasons that will become clear later. In his first essay discussing Mapplethorpe's photographic work titled *Imagining the Black Man's Sex*, Mercer maintains that Mapplethorpe's interest in the Black male nude is inherently fetishistic. This feeling of fetish is both consistent within the photographs' formal qualities and in the

relationship the works creates between viewer and subject. By exclusively considering what is exhibited in each photograph's 'pictorial space', Mercer states that Mapplethorpe's photographs say more about the white male subject behind the camera rather than they do about the black men depicted. Mercer re-visits this analysis to revise his arguments in *Skin Head Sex Thing*:

"Considering the way in which the glossy allure of the photographic print becomes consubstantial with the shiny texture of black skin, I argued that a significant element in the pleasures the photographs make available consist in the fetishism that they bring into play."⁵⁴

Here, I'm not so much interested in Mercer's argument that the materiality of the printing paper reify elements of fetishization within the Mapplethorpe photographs as I am interested in his observation that material elements of the photographic process, intrinsically aesthetically interact with visual elements of the black body. In thinking about how *hair aesthetics* could potentially be utilized to illuminate the multiplicity of blackness, I wonder what interpretations or conclusions Mercer would draw in considering the Mapplethorpe photographs using *hair aesthetics*. Is it simply the presence of aesthetics that adumbrate black visibility or is it the diasporic practice of appropriating aesthetics that help to outline a visual language of presence without presenting? Oddly enough, I actually think Mercer's revised observations outline the incipient stages of *hair aesthetics* as an extension of my *personal* experiences rather than a method for reading photographs in turn answering the question of whether aesthetics obscure or irradiate networks of visibility. While Mercer says it is useless to question whether Mapplethorpe's photographs reinscribe fixed beliefs of racial ideologies or problematize them, he also reveals that it is precisely the experience of the viewer and how they attribute

⁵⁴ Mercer, "Skin Head Sex Thing: Racial Difference and the Homoerotic Imagery," 4.

intentionality to the author of the artwork that influence how an artwork is read. Similarly to Azoulay's interpretation of Sontag's debate on the voyeuristic role of the witness, it is the onus of the witness to determine what witnessing looks like:

More specifically, [my earlier reading] refracted the ambivalent 'structure of feeling' that I inhabit as a black gay male reader in relation to the text... In retrospect I feel this logical flaw arose as a result of my own ambivalent positioning as a black gay spectator...I emphasized objectification because I felt identified with the black male subjects in the field of vision, an identification of the Other that might be best described in Fanon's terms as a feeling that 'I am laid bare. I am overdetermined from without. I am the slave not of the "idea" that others have of me but of my own appearance. I am being dissected under white eyes. I am *fixed*. Look, it's a Negro.'⁵⁵

What I find so interesting about Mercer's revision in relation to *hair aesthetics* is that at the root of each exploration, the desire (or habit) to see oneself in or through the visual imagery prevails. While Mercer interrogates the relationship between aesthetics and the male black nude body to discuss its ambivalent visual representations, this thesis focuses on aesthetics (of hair) to interrogate how we think about and read images. Our interrogations of visibility and aesthetics echo similar goals while our subjects of interrogation widely vary. I happily attribute this to paradigm shifts in the uses of lens and aesthetic practices within the diaspora. In this way, I find the burgeoning role aesthetics play in imagining external identities highly significant in the interest of contemporary culture production.

⁵⁵ Mercer, "Skin Head Sex Thing: Racial Difference and the Homoerotic Imagery," 7.



(fig. 71 : fig. 72, Stephen Tayo, *Okada, Lagos, Nigeria*, 2018.)

More broadly speaking, the importance of images has not gone unrecognized by critical thinkers and artists of our time. In *The Trayvon Generation*, Alexander harps on the influence of images in shaping memory within the twenty-first century. Campt also focuses on paradigmatic shifts of memorializing Black life. She distinguishes the still image—namely pictures we see in scrapbooks and handmade albums—from the moving image, namely the types of media we see on platforms like Instagram and TikTok. This shift from still to moving for Campt, denotes a focus on the precarity and vicissitude of Black life in the wake of premature Black death.⁵⁶ Antuwan Sargent’s *The New Black Vanguard* underscores the new generation of Black artists who challenge traditional representations of Black people and life through art and fashion. In it,

⁵⁶ Campt, “Prelude to a Black Gaze,” 4.

South African photographer Jamal Nxedlana mentions being “...Part of a generation that reads the world almost exclusively through images...”⁵⁷ emphasizing the power of agency in being behind the camera.



(fig. 73, Edson Chagas, *OIKONOMOS*, 2011.)

In the African diaspora, it is not only the utilization of imagery but also the appropriation and manipulation of their materialities (digitally and physically) that aid the shaping of cultural identity across nations. What Campt, Cole, and Azoulay do so well in this respect is centering the act of the witness within these networks. This isn't to say that performance of identity and presentation is reliant on or meant for the witness, but rather emphasizes that there are ways in which the witness can act to reify the identities of the presented. *Hair aesthetics* functions as an extension on this concept. In shifting the role of witness from passive to active by engaging in alternative methods of seeing, representative qualities of what we see, won't always have to denote what we assume. As with any interrelational relationship this phenomenon relies on two willing parties. The project of this thesis is to continually make the effort to parse through my own individual methods of looking at things, and ask readers to do the same. What is the first

⁵⁷ Antuwan Sargent, “Jamal Nxedlana” in *The New Black Vanguard*, (New York: Aperture, 2019), 187.

thing you look at when you see an image? Why does an image speak to you when an image of similar subject matter doesn't? How do these images communicate with you? How do they communicate with each other? In posing these kinds of questions the reader can prioritize the examination of their positionalities to the (visual) world, in the hopes that what they observe will meet them halfway.

Conclusion

“I think of Black women braiding hair. We make quilts every day. I knew I wanted the braids to speak to this quilt. Because it’s braids, it’s immediately a Black woman because it’s a signifier of Black female. Braiding hair is survival.”⁵⁸ - Radha Blank in *The Cut* discussing her installation at the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Costume Institute.



(fig. 72, Radha Blank, *We Good THX!* In *In America: An Anthology of Fashion*, 2022.)

I care about hair so much. I have a fierce love for these strong strands that weather the storm of life with us every day. More than that, hair reminds me of how much our souls scream at our bodies to grow and change. This internal and spiritual dialogue is embodied in the presence of our hair. It is a fierce love our souls have for our bodies. It is a fierce love I have for myself. The relationship with haircare and art comes from the unspoken responsibility I have to nurture and take care of my body, although my hair proved to be quite the challenge. As an older kid my mom would separate my hair into four sections and braid the top two braids respectively to their sections on the bottom. Before that, I would sit in between her legs as she sectioned small

⁵⁸ Michaela Angela Davis, “How Four Black Women Artists Disrupted the Homogenous History of the Met” *The Cut*, July 22, 2022, 7.

strands of hair, dividing them into two, and twisting them together to make two-strand twists. My relationship to hair has always followed this suit.



(fig. 73, Gordon Parks, contact sheet of “*A Man Becomes Visible*”, 1952.)

Hair has been an object of personal exploration and growth for me, as it was something that always literally and figuratively grew with me. During covid, I cut off almost all my hair after being too tired to deal with it everyday. I was so sick of being stuck inside that I felt stuck in my hair, subconsciously feeling like having less hair would give me some senses of freedom. Of course I was wrong, but it felt nice to start over again as I began to navigate life during Covid. Going from middle school to high school, wearing new hairstyles became a way to express my individuality from family—and adults specifically—in my life who were usually in charge of doing my hair. Vocationally, hair-practition has been a way for me to sustain myself and explore the inherited artistic tendencies I thought were only passed down to my brother. For this reason,

when the time came to write my senior project— a thesis guided by personal interest— I knew hair would be an unwavering component.

In my junior year of Bard I began working on a TV series called *The Hair Tales*. As a research assistant tasked with exploring the historical relationship between hair, presentability politics, and pop-culture, hair took on a more daunting role. Having had such an intimate and artistic relationship to it, I actively chose to ignore the fact that hair—to many people beyond myself— determines who you are, especially in relationship to Black women and politics of presentation. Black women and cultural historians would categorize this occurrence as a symptom of the politicization of hair. I found solace by immersing myself in images containing hair which led me to think about the aspirational aspects of Black hair in pop culture. After spending a week pouring over old Jet Magazines recommended to me by a professor, the very first book I bought that semester was Sargent's *The New Black Vanguard*. Rather than being aspirational, images inside *The New Black Vanguard* are imaginative, ripe with color, personality, poise, and talent.



(fig. 74, Ruth Ossai, *London 2017*, 2017 : fig. 75, Micaiah Carter, *Duckie in Wonderland*, 2018 : fig. 76, Nadine Ijewere, *Jawara, Tia Sinclair for Tallawah*, 2020.)

Sargent harps on the power of representation in shaping the imagined identities of a young Black generation, featuring stunning works from a collective of photographers. Even now, *The New Black Vanguard* is a sort of bible for me as it continues to reframe how the African diaspora fashions their cultural identities. What I enjoy so much about *The New Black Vanguard* are the ways in which hair renders itself as central rather than accessory to fashion and personal expression. Undoubtedly this book has been *influential* in the conceptual shaping of this paper, as I believe hair is central to cultural expression, rather than a product of it.

While this thesis focuses on the uses of aesthetics as a conduit to parse through the imagined identities and visibility politics of the African diaspora, I am resolute in the fact that hair continues to play more of a central role in advancing cultural expression than even defined within the confines of this thesis. I am proud of the fact that Black women continue to be the driving force behind haircare and hair art, as a method and expression of survival. Guyanese artist Aubrey Williams articulates the point I'm slowly arriving at in a journal article he wrote in the 1970s. *Caribbean Visual Art: A Framework for Inquiry*, emphasizes the imperative role

visual art plays in the survival of culture. This realization is paramount in thinking about the Caribbean's historical experiences with colonial structures of power. Williams writes,

“With the dying out beneficial piracy and the start of true colonialism via the Slave Trade, the British found art not only a nuisance and a hindrance, but a dangerous weapon to contend with in the hands of the new captive peoples they controlled. Character destruction was synonymous with art-eradication... Our people must be made to realize that visual art is an integral part of life, and without it they would be very hard put to truly know who and what they are. Our means towards visual identity have been with us for a very long time.⁵⁹

What Williams’ spotlights so well in quote is twofold: Firstly, culture cannot survive without the presence of visual art. Secondly, visibility is central to imagined and collective identity. In emphasizing the efforts of the British to eliminate visual art, we can begin to think about the loss of identity that festers in its absence. I use the artist's observations to spotlight the role of Black women in (diasporic) cultural expressions and the immediacy of their relationships to a broader understandings of cultural production.

Now returning back to Cole’s point on colonial efforts to separate the West and Africa, I want to reflect on my own role within the diaspora and the emergence of *hair aesthetics* from personal experience. As a participating member of cultural production— as I like to think we all are— I feel it’s highly important that we see ourselves reflected in the cultures we represent. As a black/African American woman, I feel that that doesn’t always happen. But maybe, in changing the ways I interact and interpret photographs by centering and interrogating my positionality, this lack of representation might begin to dwindle. Past its pure and practical form, Afro-textured hair continues to structure networks of visibility and representation for myself and/within the African

⁵⁹ Aubrey Williams. “Caribbean Visual Art: A Framework for Further Visual Inquiry,” in Anne Walmsley, *Guyana Dreaming: The Art of Aubrey Williams* (Sydney: Dangeroo, 1970), 23-28.

diaspora. Maybe in this way *hair aesthetics* itself can be thought of as an appropriation of traditional viewership.



(fig. 77, Carrie Mae Weems, *Slow Fade to Black #1 (Eartha)*, 2009-10 : fig. 78, Sonya Clarke, *black hair flag*, 2010.)

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