

Working on my hair: The politics of Afrocentricity in the fictional workplace

Hayley Blackburn
Ph.D. Student, Public Communication and Tech

Purpose

With a negotiated reading, I examine the symbolic interaction with natural hair in network, primetime dramas to uncover problematic messaging against Afrocentricity.
Research Question: **How does the visibility and representation of natural hair in entertainment television invite the audience to discipline Blackness in those mediated professional spaces?**

Procedure

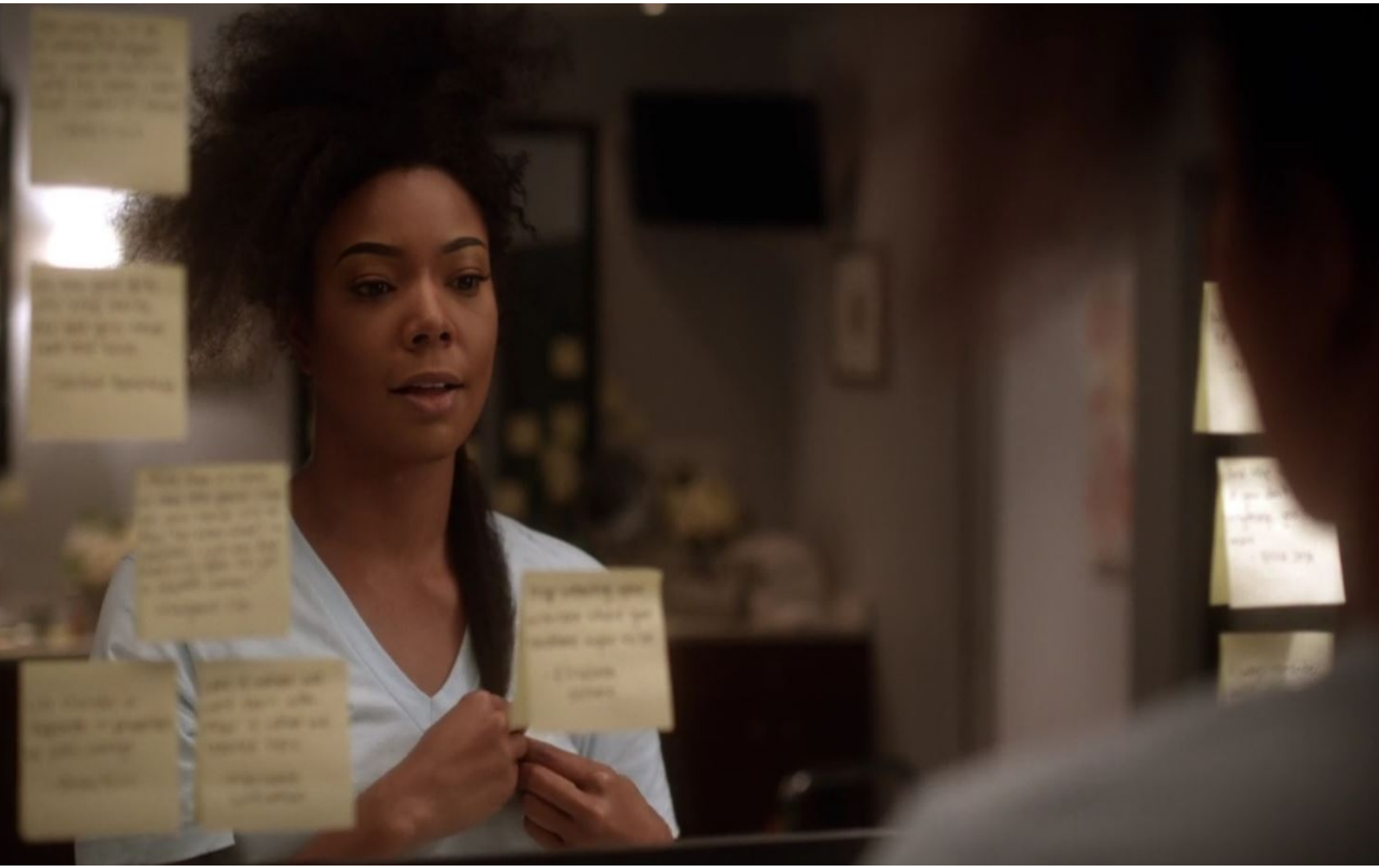
With a qualitative, grounded theory approach in the critical cultural paradigm, I conducted a visual and narrative analysis on 309 units through Feb. 1, 2017. 1) Binged all episodes in order. 2) Returned to most significant units for closer reading.

Key Theories

- Racial Neoliberalism^{1,2}
 - Deemphasizes the history and discourages drawing attention to race
 - Sees hair as an ethnic signifier because it *can* be changed
- Black Hair History^{3,4,5}
 - Hair framed as animalistic and a sign of being uncivilized
 - The Good Hair Study: Black women 2x as likely to experience social pressure at work to straighten hair
- Professional Success⁶
 - (Perceived) Below average looking women earn 3% less annually than average or above average peers
 - Similarity and manufactured preference place Black women at a disadvantage at work
- Meaning Making Theory of Media⁷
 - Especially in absence of counter-experiences, mediated representations influence attitudes and perceptions about Othered groups.

Sample

Program	Primary Writer	Writer Dem.	Network	Minor Black Women Characters	Extra Black Women Characters	Types of Jobs
Bones	Hart Hanson	White Man	Fox	Infrequent	Moderate	Blue Collar
Mistresses	K.J. Steinberg	White Woman	ABC	Infrequent	Infrequent	Blue Collar
Sleepy Hollow	Phillip Iscove	White Man	Fox	Infrequent	Moderate	Blue Collar
HTGAWM	Shonda Rhimes	Black Woman	ABC	Moderate	Frequent	White Collar
Empire	Lee Daniels	Black Man	Fox	Frequent	Moderate	Both
The Flash	Greg Berlanti	White Man	CW	Infrequent	Infrequent	Blue Collar
Being Mary Jane	Mara Brock Akil	Black Woman	BET	Frequent	Moderate	Blue Collar



Being Mary Jane
Creating and shifting power



How to Get Away with Murder
Masking insecurity



Being Mary Jane
Marking mental health

Findings
1) Eurocentric hair was displayed most often in the most positive contexts 2) Three categories emerged in consistent association for natural hair: **service work and less “professional” careers**, **privacy and emotional crisis or failure**, and with **suicide/ questions of sanity**.

The Mammy was the embodiment of Black servitude in the White home, and now nurses and waitresses, whose occupation is in service and personal care, are represented in ways that call attention to their race and refocus the notion of Blacks being best suited in personal service.

The characters wore natural hair in their most private and vulnerable moments rather than when perceived as in charge or in control.

Implications and Future Research

The most problematic finding was the consistent association between Afrocentricity and mental and/or physical instability. In nearly every program, from suicide to demonic possession, the audience was invited to see natural hair as a cue to the mental and physical health of the characters. Even though these instances were not directly within the workplace of the program, framing natural hair as unstable does influence what professionalism for Black women looks like to the audience. Moving forward I would like to investigate these links more thoroughly.

Sleepy Hollow
Jack Walters: “I have heard that Agent Mills is not as stable as she once was. That she has changed.”
Daniel Reynolds: “Mills is a good agent. She will find her feet again.”

Additional Theory and Historical Grounding

Critical race theory places the work sphere as a Eurocentric construction because the imperialistic colonizers brought notions of capitalism and business to the cultures that they dominated. These dominated peoples were mostly hunter and gatherer cultures not oriented towards the Eurocentric business model of society, which was understood as a currency and commerce system. The Eurocentric view of non-business cultures being defined as the savage served to validate the definition of Whiteness standing for civilization because colonizers could understand themselves through what they were not ⁸. If he was not wild or savage, then the White man could more clearly define himself as civilized. The understanding that civilization meant participation in business and commerce, in the Eurocentric sense, plays out in the sample as natural hair is visually bound to a different type of professional woman than altered hair.

Due to the public, yet highly personal, nature of hair, the styling an individual chooses creates strong **symbolism for identity** ⁹. Within the workplace, professional hairstyles are those that reflect valued characteristics of regularity, uniformity, and ambition; both men and women are expected in most workplaces to construct a professional image through behavior, dress, and grooming that support those corporate values ¹⁰. Elle, a popular style and fashion magazine, published an article in 2010 to help women understand how hair is “holding you back.” The article, with interviews from psychologists and professional hairstylists, describes straight hair as being more serious while advising curly hair can be seen as “too carefree” or even “upstage your talents” (Herbert, 2010). Other fashion magazines, like Cosmopolitan or Redbook, often teach readers how to achieve the professional styles with gloss and shine This research emphasizes the ways that hair can minimize or emphasize racial identity and is, therefore, crucial in the symbolic understanding of professional ability. In many corporate structures, Black women are in the vast minority of employees; the more different a Black woman appears to be the more difficult it can be to attain acceptance in the environment because humans are more likely to feel a kinship and empathy with the similar other ¹¹. Altered hair that is more reminiscent of White aesthetics also increases how physically appealing a woman is perceived to be because Black women with Eurocentric features are more often described as gorgeous or beautiful than their counterparts ¹². The research on advertisements consistently finds that Eurocentered Black models are more commonly used as the standard for beauty, reinforcing that to be more physically appealing Black women should alter their hair ¹³. Hair styling can make an individual look more similar and attractive to co-workers when the style conforms to the norms of a workplace. Appearing as similar as possible to White peers can be advantageous for minority women in the workplace, and, as discussed by White ¹⁴, hair has an ability to be changed to allow an individual to align with culturally enforced norms as a means of fitting in.

The **method of observation** is straight forward for the visual analysis of the sample. Each episode in the sample was watched from start to finish in order of appearance within the season. The programs were watched one at a time, starting with the first episode of each season. This style of watching replicates the bingeing style of consumption that has grown with the introduction of steaming. Binge watching, or viewing more than three episodes per sitting, has been reported by 68% of consumers ¹⁵. Streaming sites, such as Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon, host the programs in the sample. Internet-video streaming overtook traditional television viewing in 2015 with 42% of American households reporting that they prefer streaming to live television. Additionally, streaming services provide a rich landscape and convenience for observation as I can jump within and between programs easily. I can also rewatch, rewind, pause, and search within programs without taping. As I watched the episodes, I marked units that contained significant interactions with natural hair to then review with an in-depth visual analysis. I also took many notes in a notebook for assist with the final analysis.

Sources

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