

Hair Journey: A Transmedia Experience

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

Black women in the United States are embracing their natural hair, but it's not without controversy. Perception Institute's "Good Hair" Study polled black and white women to see attitudes toward afro-textured hair. White women implicitly and explicitly preferred straight hair to textured hair. Hair discrimination in the United States dates back to slavery, extends throughout industrialization, persists in the Civil Rights Movement and is still seen today. Locks, afros, cornrows and other textured styles are viewed as unacceptable in some workplaces and schools. Men and women are told, directly and indirectly, to change their hair for a job or another opportunity. The CROWN Act was introduced in 2019 and seeks to make this discrimination illegal. Six states have passed the CROWN Act, and the bill is filed or pre-filed in almost 20 states. This project seeks to explore the opinions and treatment of afro-textured hair through first-person and historical accounts in an immersive journalistic experience. Please view my main project at <http://hairjourney.journalism.com>.

Acknowledgments

Lisa Renze-Rhodes has been influential throughout the last three years but especially helped as I formed this project. She was the first to encourage me to pursue the idea of hair discrimination and led me to take on the subject with sensitivity.

I also want to thank Nykasia Williams for giving me her time and trusting me with her story.

Process Analysis Statement

This project began when I was scrolling through my Twitter feed. I noticed tweets about black women's natural hair, calling it unprofessional. I didn't get it, and I looked up what "4C" (the curliest hair texture) meant. After three or four tweets, I knew I wanted to write a magazine article about it and started brainstorming with my editors at Ball Bearings Magazine. We talked about dreads, curls, braids and products. I knew I had to narrow down the subject eventually, but first I had to find the right source.

As a longform journalist, I put a lot of importance on finding a person that humanizes the issue I'm discussing. I also ethically can't interview friends, so I always start by asking around. A friend of a friend is fair game. My editor, Sam, told me about a club called the Kinky Curly Alliance, a group on campus of mostly black women with natural hair. I emailed and messaged them on Facebook and Instagram. I never got a response (because the club wasn't meeting that semester), so I began searching again. I mean, I couldn't just ask a black woman with curly hair if she'd like to talk about discrimination. I wanted someone who already was outspoken about the issue and if possible, I'd like it to be a Ball State student. So I Googled and Googled and almost came up dry. I searched things like "curly hair" "Indiana" "discrimination." After a few hours and a couple email inquiries, I found a blog post by a student named Nykasia Williams. We had mutual friends on Facebook, so I felt a little less creepy sending her a message.

I met Nykasia at the library for an interview between classes, and we talked for about an hour. She told me all about how older generations in her family don't like her curls. It's not what I expected, and it wasn't a fluke. For decades, black women have kept their curls at bay to adhere to the preferences of white women. I knew I wanted to focus on this generational trend and discrimination for a longform piece, and I needed good statistics to show that Nykasia's experience is shared by many others. I looked for studies on hair, and I found Perception Institute's "Good

Hair” study. The numbers astonished me. The white women surveyed gave afro-textured hair low marks for professionalism and beauty, half the score they gave long, loose curls. I contacted the researchers for an expert source for my story and got an interview with Jessica MacFarlane. She told me that many women called to express their gratitude; the results of the study affirmed their experience with discrimination.

After the interview with Jessica, I wrote my final draft and started brainstorming graphics and more components. This story was special, and I wanted to turn it into a learning opportunity about more than hair. There was a lot to cover, but I knew readers wouldn’t read more than four or five pages about the topic. I was already very engrossed in the subject, so I wanted to continue writing about it as my honors thesis. But I knew I didn’t want to serve a niche audience like a research paper would. I wanted to reach wider and bring both entertainment and educational value to someone that may not necessarily want to hear about black hair, so I thought I’d put my design skills to work. I had been learning about transmedia storytelling, which is just using multiple elements and formats to get readers engaged in a story. I’ve learned how to do basic coding in my free time, so I thought if I could apply those skills, I could teach a lot of information to a wide array of readers.

I created a subdomain of my portfolio website and chose hair journey because Nykasia calls her experience a “natural hair journey.” I used WordPress as a website builder and customized a theme to fit my story. Then, I wanted to create an interactive graph for the data on afros. I tried three different types of graphs, scrapping hours of work until I found the right one. I wanted a streamlined bar graph that compared white and black women’s opinions and adapted some open-source JavaScript from D3. I liked that the graph morphed from one set of data, the black women’s ratings, to the other, the white women’s ratings.

I touched on some of the historic moments of natural hair, like the invention of hair relaxer, but I really wanted to expand upon it. I thought about making a page on Madam C. J. Walker and the new Netflix series about her, “Self Made.” The series received a lot of negative reviews, so I figured I could put her into a timeline. I started it by making a list of events I knew I wanted to highlight and dug through countless Essence articles about hair to make sure I understood styles over time. (Essence, notably, is a fully black-owned magazine that began as such in 1970 and was owned by Time Inc. from 2005-2018. The new owner, Essence Ventures is a company founded by Richelieu Dennis who started out in business making natural hair and beauty products.) I wrote a small piece for each event or period in time and sourced images for about half. I only used pictures with permissions through Creative Commons because media outlets can’t borrow photos, and I wanted to adhere to the journalism industry’s standards.

There’s a ton of resources about hair discrimination. I’m far from the first person to write about the topic, but I have approached it differently than others. As journalists, we may publish similar topics but form our own angles and stories. It’s important for multiple outlets to write about issues to expose them to as many people as possible. Those who read “Hair Journey” may not have seen other great articles on the subject, so I wanted to make a library of the other good articles and creations I’ve found. There’s “Hair Love,” an Oscar-winning short film based on the book of the same title. I couldn’t leave this out of my website, so I created pages for creative works and news articles. And since my awareness came from tweets, I made a page and embedded tweets about natural hair. Just like a traditional research paper references good works, journalistic pieces embed or link out to resources. I’ve linked to my research throughout the site, just as you’d see in a piece on The Atlantic’s website.

I styled the website similarly to those of major media outlets. I wrote in AP style, a set of guidelines by the Associated Press that is the standard for journalists around the world. I’ve

hyperlinked my sources, and I've only used photos that are licensed by Creative Commons, or those acquired from my sources or taken by me for this project. These industry standards make my formatting different than if I were to write a research paper, though these articles have the same hours of research. My project is also creative in nature because I had to create a website, art, code graphics and map out a user experience. The writing is also more creative in nature than my research papers. For a journalistic piece, I have to write in layman's terms, to do all I can to connect with the audience, but also make it interesting through creative writing techniques.

I wanted to explore videography and record a man's testimony about dreads, since hair discrimination isn't just a female thing. I'm acquainted with a hip hop artist named LJ who shared about his dreads during a concert, and I asked him if he'd be comfortable sharing his story for the project. The COVID-19 stay-at-home orders hit before I had the chance to produce my video, so I gave him some questions to answer in a quick video taken on his phone. I added subtitles for accessibility and improved the audio and video quality. To accompany his video, I researched more about dreads to give some more background on the style and wrote a small story.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced me to change my imagery too. I was going to photograph my source for the longform piece, but she quarantined with her parents. So, I asked her for childhood pictures as a fun way for readers to see a piece of her and also see how hair changes as she matured. I used those photos in a sidebar running alongside the text story, and I think it's a nice addition that relates readers back to her. So for the featured image, I made an illustration in Adobe Illustrator. I wanted to show the frustration hot combs can cause. My source told me her mom would heat it on the oven, so I wanted to show that. I added smoke to show how hot and painful the comb can be. I also illustrated the image on the homepage using public domain images. I wanted a girl and woman with natural hair on either side to show the coming-of-age part of the story. The

stay-at-home order also inspired my timeline page. I was planning on looking at products in a variety of stores, so I chose content I could research from home.

I've enjoyed exploring transmedia storytelling through creating this project. I modeled it after some of my favorite special projects in large papers like The New York Times. My inspiration usually has a team of people for the story, but I wanted to try it as a one-woman show. I like to learn how to create different media, and this project really shows my breadth. "Hair Journey" not only explores hair discrimination but also transmedia storytelling, and the amplified educational resource it can provide to a large audience.

Please view my main project at <http://hairjourney.journalism.com>.

Re: IRB Honors Thesis

ORHELP <orihelp@bsu.edu>

Tue 11/5/2019 7:10 AM

To: Hanshaw, Annelise <ajhanshaw@bsu.edu>

Hi Annelise,

I hope you've had a good week since we last talked.

This project has been deemed as not human subjects research, therefore you do not need to submit anything to the IRB.

Good luck with your thesis,
Sarah Ciosek

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