

Project Naptural

Using the Roots of Our HAIRitage to Create Happiness with Nappiness

Abstract

Project Naptural is a socio-cultural initiative designed to initiate and sustain positive change in how and why many black women form and frame perceptions about their psychological and sociological identities by choosing to wear their hair napturally (i.e., without utilizing any type of chemically based “hair relaxing” treatments or other means to alter the naturally occurring texture of most Black women’s hair). This project is intended to help educate Black women about the various options they have available to them re: wearing their hair naturally, how to care for it over time, and how to psychologically and sociologically empower themselves by using naturally appearing hair to signify pride-of-belonging in a variety of African American communities.

Additionally, Project Naptural is intended to enlighten these women about how wearing particular naptural hair styles can visually communicate specific meanings about their personal identities (historical, current and aspirational), as well as about which particular social and cultural groups their hairstyles signify allegiance with and against. This research endeavor allows the exploration of three major sets of issues that contextualize and affect how and why Black women choose to wear their hair in specific ways. These are: 1) “Hair Mentality,” 2) “Hair Barriers” and 3) “Hair Affordances.” Each of these issues is directly linked to the African American past and research has shown passes down the lost traditions of hair care and the pride associated with wearing the naturally afro-textured hair.

Keywords

Black natural hair; African-American women; Black empowerment; African-American slavery

An Introduction to Our HAIRitage

Just like any hair strand, it has a root, and Black hair has roots that run deep. So deep that they can be traced back through the bloodlines of a wide variety of African tribes for hundreds, and, in some cases, for close to two thousand years. A large percentage of Black Americans can find social and cultural links to their past by studying the history of one or more of these tribes (and, in some cases, civilizations). Before the slave trade, and still today, hair signified anything from marital status and age to social rank and religion (Byrd, 2001). Africans from all over the continent spent literally hours on their hair, and in some cases even days creating just one hairstyle.

Hairstyles could signify differences in religion and even marital eligibility. It was also a communal practice that brought a trust and bond unlike no other. If one was allowed to do someone's hair, that meant they were a trusted friend, which is a theme that plays out even today in Black hair salons and homes throughout America. Through ethnographic data, it was found that many Black women are very skeptical to allow women whom they do not know touch their hair for fear of hair or scalp damage such as, the hair being braided too tightly or the hair being cut too short. This same attitude was and is still very present in African culture because the hair is very treasured. The amount of time spent on the hair correlated with the intricacy of the braids or locing which showed the amount of time one had to do hair rather than work. This, in turn, showed one's status in the community. Below are some examples of hairstyles from African tribes that soon became American slaves in the 1600's:



From left to right: Wolof Tribe Woman, Mende Tribe Woman, Mandingo Tribe Woman, Yoruba Tribe Woman, Two(2) Igbo Tribe Women

Walker, William D. et.al. "A Selection of Visual Sources." *NYPL Digital Schomburg Images of African Americans from the 19th Century*. The New York Public Library, 01 Jan. 1999. Web. 15 Sept. 2014.

An interesting find from looking at the era of Black American slavery through the lenses of Black hair, was the fact the African culture had such an emphasis on hairstyling and that act just happened to be one of the first things from African culture to be stripped away from the African slave. This was because Blacks were no longer to be associated with a tribe, an economic status or even a family name for that matter. Hair styles differentiated the Africans and made them look more like individuals which did not fit in the culture or objectification of the African slave. Black American slaves were thought of as property and thus any type of distinctiveness or originality was discouraged and was perhaps even prohibited. This act of stripping away a once deep rooted cultural identifier was detrimental to the identity of Africans, now African American slaves. This suggests a correlation between the stripping of this identifier to the knowledge (or lack of) passed down to future generations about the ways in which one can care for one's own naptural hair. This confusion still exists today around the topic of hair care in the Black community. So much so that many women that long to go natural express one of their biggest fears is that they will not know how to care for their own natural hair. It is because of the lack of accessible information stemming all the way back to the era of Black American slavery, that this is easily understood. Often times, Black slaves had their heads shaved so that they not only would not associate with a tribe or family but what could be considered even more importantly so that the time that was spent on their hair in Africa would be eliminated due to their new rigorous work schedules. Slave owners were businessmen after all and ordered for slaves to spend at least six days out of the week in the fields. In Africa, the culture encouraged hours to be spent on the hair, and now there was no time to spend on such a trivial thing when the priority was work and survival. One might notice in older films where Black slaves were shown they would most likely have a scarf on their head, hair pulled back, shaved heads or a wig like their master's hair. This is no mistaken representation of the real lifestyles of Black slaves. There was a new tradition for the Black hairstyles and rather than adoration and time spent on the care of Black hair, Blacks were to shave it off or cover it up. A stripping away of identity and empowerment.

Throughout slavery most Blacks were on the same socio-cultural level except for the separation of "house" and "field" Negroes. After the civil war and the Emancipation of Blacks, the divide grew even bigger adding to the separation of the Black community because of skin color, hair texture and education levels. As more and more Blacks were freed, a refugee-type experience took place. This is because freed Blacks were now living a style of life that, be it

better, was unfamiliar, new and perhaps even scary. The emotional refugee experience¹ is defined in four phases which Blacks have and continue to experience today.

The Black American Refugee Experience

Four phases have been defined in the refugee experience which Blacks have undergone while trying to “find themselves” in relation to hair and the otherness that they have experienced in the States. The first is *confusion*. This is at or around 1865 to 1900. The feelings of confusion were met with the guilt of abandoning those at home, those perhaps still enslaved, mixed with a sense of relief at having escaped the danger of slavery. Imagine a Black person enslaved their whole life now at the age of 60 years old being told they are free – now what? From the domestication of slavery to the freedom and independence of freedom is something even the best of us might need help handling. Notice the propaganda of Blacks “thanking” America for their freedom will have the identifying scarf on their head or pressed hairstyles to blend in with



the Eurocentric culture around them to help find some sense of belonging. It is at this time that a permanent solution was to be found to straighten hair for good. Up until now, Blacks would just shave their heads and/or wear wigs to get by and find some sense of “normal” in their new found life of choice and ability to live free.

The second phase is *disillusion*. This period would be around 1900-1959. This phase is defined as expectations and hopes not being met. This is seen as those who are free perhaps not experiencing the freedom that they were deserved. It would still take years for America as a whole to give equal opportunity to Blacks and thus affects why Blacks would do everything in the power to become more like Whites, more free. This included skin bleaching and chemical hair straightening. Neither of these were safe for

anyone to use, but the longing to be included for many Blacks was much more prioritized than safety of the individual.

The third phase in the refugee experience is *isolation*. This phase would be in the 1960s to

¹ Phrase coined by O'Neil & Tobolewska in Global Refugees, Ethno-mimesis and the Transformative Role of Art." Renewing Methodologies for Socio-Cultural Research

1990s. This segment in the freed Black experience is defined by problems that may have been exacerbated by the emotional anxieties stemming from loss of social status and lack of political participation compared with the levels before flight. Although Blacks did everything in their power to “belong” in some sense of the word, they still lacked one crucial factor, white skin. The civil war was over, but civil rights was another thing all together. No matter how hard Blacks tried, they were not going to be equal which enabled the rebellion (whether civil or violent). Black women and men showed their support in the revolution to gain their civil liberties by styling their hair in its naptural afro state. This hairstyle is iconic to the Black liberation and although may mean something different today, it will always be synonymous to the rebelling against mainstream definition of beauty and liberty of that time.

The last phase in the refugee experience is *adaptation*. This time period began in the 1990s and continues today. This phase is described as adaptation and acculturation that may take years depending on age, language, culture, gender, and whether one is alone or part of a family. Indeed, Kushner and Knox feel it may not be achieved until the 2nd or 3rd generation which is why this is still in the present today in Black culture. Black women who are taking part in the “natural hair movement” are not doing this out of rebellion or to “get back” at anyone, but more so out of a new found acceptance in who they are living within the American culture. Whether the representation in the mainstream media is there or not, Black women throughout the United States are battling the beauty standards and are declaring their naptural selves as beautiful, loving their hair, skin color, big lips, big hips and everything in between.

This misidentity and confusion of Black naptural hair persists even today throughout the Black community. There are women who may still be on the second and third phases of the emotional refugee experience and still do not find comfort in their own culture. I happened to be one of them. It was hard to imagine a day that I thought my nappy hair would be considered beautiful. Project Naptural was created to change these negative perceptions that are deeply rooted in the Black and mainstream cultures.

Creating Happiness with Nappiness

Black women have consistently been conflicted with the ways in which they should and should not wear their hair. As discussed earlier, this trend begins in the beginning of the era of slavery when the African culture and traditions were stripped away from Blacks forcing them to find new ways to belong to their own heritage. Although there is a strong history of hair in the African culture, many Black women identify with negatively questioning their beauty as they relate their naturally afro textured hair to that of mainstream media standards. Several women

can account for numerous occasions in which they had to conform to White standards to feel empowered as professional, attractive or even an orderly citizen. With that stated, one can imagine the assertions and suggestions that Black girls might have been fed as a child to help fester these negative perceptions, equating their natural hair to a flaw in their cultural race or as something that would keep them from being successful in life. The pressure from society and within the Black community to conform to mainstream beauty standards has caused an overwhelming amount of women to view their natural hair as a curse in need of taming by that of a chemical relaxer.

In recent trends, “going natural” is a term used by Black women who have found means in which they can explore their naturally curly/kinky texture and begin the process for healthy hair free from chemicals. Naptural (a term combining nappy and natural) is also used to describe the unaltered curl pattern of many Black women who have “gone natural.” Many might see “going naptural” as just something new and trendy for the moment, but opinions from those who have made the decision to stop relaxing their hair prove otherwise. (Author, 2013) The liberation and freedom to make the choice to wear one’s hair naturally proves to be healthier not only physically but psychologically. How then can this knowledge be given to the Black community of women to help them make more informed hair choices? With the help of communication design, my thesis question asks just that:

What type(s) of an educational, community-empowering and interconnective display and/or tool(s) about hairstyles, hair care, hair experiences and overall physical health might most effectively enlighten Black women as they inform their decision-making processes regarding whether or not to wear their hair napturally?

My thesis question examines how the display of naptural hair affects the transmission and interpretation of socio-cultural identity among Black women and hopes to allow new opportunities for women to live naptural lives. It is from this question that Project Naptural was born as a socio-cultural initiative designed to initiate and sustain positive change in how and why many Black women form and frame perceptions about their psychological and sociological identities by choosing to wear their hair napturally. Project Naptural is intended to help educate Black women about the various options and affordances that they have available to them while wearing their hair napturally, how to care for it over time, and how to psychologically and sociologically empower themselves by using naptural hair to signify a pride-of-belonging in a variety of communities.

Design research has played a pivotal role in helping to unwrap facts and opinions about naptural hair and why it is important that Black women feel they can express this aspect of their beings without feeling alienated from society. Theoretical approaches such as grounded theory helped to create the question while the ecological theory helped to piece together the networking factors to assist in solving it. Using these theories while studying this phenomenon of Black naptural hair helped to understand the nappy issue in such a way that a solution might be uncovered and made available to the Black community to end confusion and/or inner turmoil that Black women may feel about her hair. The issue of nappy hair is clear:

Women need a way to safely express their naptural hair concerns, experiences, hair care tips and regimens without judgment to overcome their feelings of alienation and/or lack of confidence by being made to feel like they are not good enough to belong in the category of beauty and professionalism in mainstream society.

The goal for Project Naptural is to be a resource of information and empowerment to help Black women connect on such a level that they understand they are not alone and that it is okay that they are unaware of the proper way to care for their naptural hair. The simplest of tasks such as combing through naptural hair needs to be taught as the Black community has gone generations without knowing how to care for their own naptural hair. Black women also need a way to take any new found information and empower themselves to accept who they are and that they can be that girl, that woman, or that beautiful person, napturally.

While conducting primary research (interviews, focus groups, surveys, graffiti walls, and discussion panels), the act of meeting, talking and sharing hair experiences has been found to be one of the most important acts in overcoming the lack of women who felt that they could wear their hair napturally. Connectivity (connection of the community) is the foundation where enlightenment (education or information dissemination) and empowerment (feeling confident to be naptural) find their home. In this environment, women feel culturally familiar and can find a sense of comfort to be able to express hair experiences and secrets that could possibly make them feel vulnerable. This connection of shared experiences can happen even when no one in the room knows each other's first name. Project Naptural's goal is to help bring Black women together, both in a physical and cyber space, to create gatherings that will bring forth enlightenment and empowerment. To tackle this, conducting user centered design opportunities has allowed for this two-part network.

Nap Network 1.0 (The Physical Space)

Part One of this interconnective network is a moving gallery exhibition (Figure 1). The goal is to find environments that allow women to dress up (feel good about themselves), get out (see what else is going on in the world past what they see in the everyday) and fellowship (connect and share experiences) with other Black women whom they can relate and learn from about their naptural hair. This is intended to be an outlet and way to increase the education about naptural hair without intimidation or the judgment of being the only one that does not know how to care for what naturally grows from their scalp.



The Gallery Exhibition Explained by the Author

I have created a series of prints and infographics that will live wherever they can be taken or shipped to connect women together in one place to empower and inform one another about their naptural hair. This solution will serve as a way to get the conversation started, influencing the way Black women think (and in turn teach the generations after them) about their hair.

I created each illustration by sketching out the models in an exaggerated or fashion-illustrated form before tracing over the sketches in Adobe Illustrator. I was inspired by the beauty and versatility of natural hair and I wanted to make that known by having the models or mannequins look confident in their anonymous forms. I also chose not to give the models any distinguishing facial features because 1) I did not want the models to look like any particular kind of woman

predefined by her facial features, and 2) I wanted any Black woman looking at the images to be able to see themselves wearing that particular hairstyle. Because I wanted the images to keep anonymity, I chose not to illustrate hair texture as it looks in the natural. I wanted to find a texture found in nature to emphasize this point as well as imply a freedom found by wearing your hair napturally. I considered leaves at first (and have not completely ruled those out as an option) but found the textures of different feathers to be so beautiful that I wanted to lead with this for the first round of exhibition posters. I used feathers to express the freedom of napturality and the various textures that are found within the natural hair community. I also chose one skin tone to avoid the conversation about lighter and darker skin tones.

The posters will include the data I have found thus far. It is my hope that women can see how much time was spent to find a solution to help other women embrace their naptural hair. Along with the quantifiable qualitative data located on the posters, I will also include a relatable (sometime amusing) quote about naptural hair spoken by one of my interviewees to let the Black women viewing the posters know that they are not alone in their natural hair journey. I would like the posters to spark up conversation of similar thoughts and hair experiences so that Black women know that their hair (naps and all) is a beautiful thing worthy of admiration.

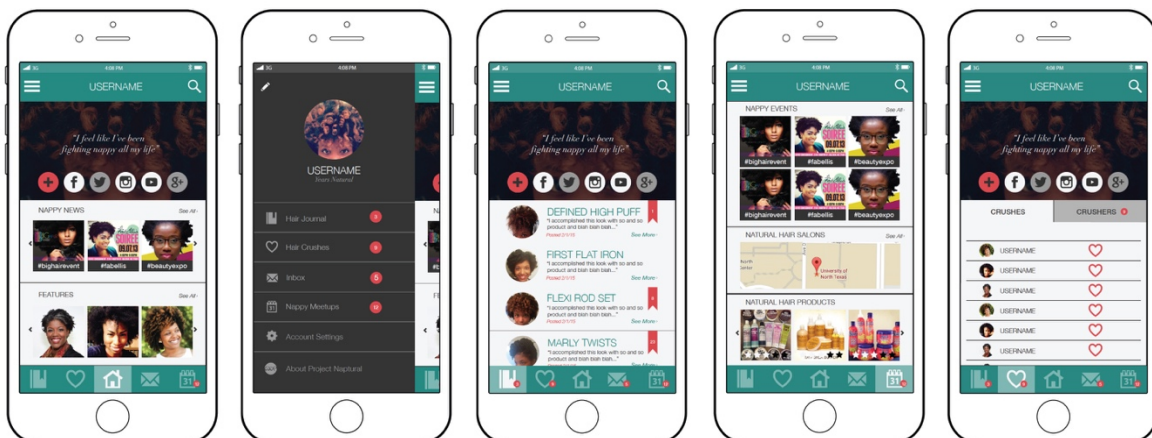
Nap Network 2.0 (The Cyber Space)

Part Two of the network is a mobile application (Figure 2) meant to create a sense of oneness and belonging within the natural hair community. This is to provide a tool for Black women to set up their profile which will provide recommendations for them to better fit the needs of their own hair. Their profile will consist of questions like their nationality, geographical location, age, profession, hair texture, etc. all in hopes of giving them a customized list of naptural hair styles and hair care tips that would benefit them most effectively. The reason for these questions is that the answers effect how a Black woman can most successfully care and wear her hair. For example, if a Black woman lives in a place that is humid most of the time, she may want to consider protective styles that keep her hair stretched to reduce the amount of knots she might receive from shrinkage (or the hair reverting back to a tight curl). Another example might be if she works in a very conservative profession she might receive recommendations for stylish and contemporary updos that she would feel comfortable wearing to work on a daily basis.

The mobile application will be designed with the intent that the user will not only receive knowledge and information for their particular natural hair journey, but with that become empowered. If there were a successful style that the user was able to create they would be encouraged to show off a successful hair style they achieved by posting a picture or video to a

section in their profile called a journal entry. If the user wanted to help the community achieve the same look, they could fill out the required information like products used, hair length, hair texture, and that would, in a sense, catalog hair suggestions for the use of recommending to other women who share some of the same hair attributes. This would essentially create a catalog of hairstyles and hair care regimens that could be used in a search option or recommended to women of same qualifications. Not only would a user be able to gain bookmarks (meaning the other women added the user's journal entry to their journal) but the user could gain hair crushes which means they not only like one or two journal entries, but they would like to follow all of their hair activities because their hair journey closely relates with their own or they they just really like the other user's hair journal entries. Hopefully, this will be a great opportunity to activate connectivity within the Black community that could essentially offer solutions and inspiring stories for the user to relate with.

The application will pull posts that users have made to other forms of social media to make the application more integrated for the user's everyday life. For example, if the user is an avid Instagram user, when they log into the Project Naptural mobile application, they will be prompted with a question such as "You have posted a few photos to Instagram, would you like to add any of them to your journal?" If the user selects yes, the application will ask the user to select which photographs it would like to add and begin to create journal drafts for the user which the user would the complete. Information about the photos will be asked like: What is the title of the hairstyle? What is a short description of the hair style? What was the approximate length of the hair at the time the style was created? That occasion(s) could the style be worn? What was the preparation time for the hair style? How long did the style last? And how was the style achieved (directions on how to create it)? The user could also link the style to a video or blog post they have already created with that hair style to help their "crushes" achieve the style for themselves.



The Mobile Application Explained by the Author

I created the application not only to connect the Black community as a means to share information, but a large part of the mobile application will be to gather data to see what else can be done to improve the naptural hair experience of each users. Each profile will be cataloged anonymously for a better understanding of the needs and wants of the users. I will essentially be able to know how many women have created a profile on the application and what their indicators are such as; age, nationality, their time natural, length of hair, texture of hair, profession, and geographic location. I can then take this information and compile it to see how each group uses (or wants to use) the application to help the natural hair journey. If the application empowers women based on meetups, it would be important that that area of the application be improved and highlighted for use. I will only know this after more user testing has been completed. I will also be able to understand the hair experiences of the user groups. I believe that I will get similar quotes and responses of women with the same hair texture and length. If that is true, I will be able to catalog the negative hair experiences and use their posts to highlight those experiences and ask the community for help on whatever issue(s) they are facing. For example, every naptural woman who has grown their hair out knows about the in-between stage of hair growth. The in-between stage is when the hair has grown past the TWA (teeny weeny afro) stage, but is not quite long enough to pull back into a puff or pony tail. This stage in the hair growth process can frustrate women to the point of reverting back to chemical relaxers as their hair regimen. My application would be able to point out women in this stage and refer them to women who have passed the stage for empowerment and ideas on styling!

The application (Nap Network 2.0) will also run parallel to the poster gallery exhibits (Nap Network 1.0) to connect women of different backgrounds together with the same goals of enlightenment, empowerment and connectivity. There will be a section in the application for events, meetups and product reviews and this will house where the exhibit is traveling to and with the application's help and exhibit will gain more momentum.

Conclusion

The community based experiences in the physical space (Nap Network 1.0) and in the cyber space (Nap Network 2.0) will continue to evolve to bring about more positive change in the perceptions and affordances Black women have as a result of wearing their hair natural when more users begin to use the networks. More over, both Nap Networks will continue gathering quantifiable data to inform the decision making process as changes to the information displayed on the posters are made by using the mobile application data. A foreseen end to either network has not been established as the need for community interaction on a physical and cyber space is

growing and needed to help achieve a “new beginning” and positive outlook on naptural hair in both mainstream media and the Black community over an unforeseen period of time. Each event or circumstance surrounding naptural hair in the world affects how not only Black women but the world sees Black hair.

With the data still being incurred, Project Naptural is dedicated to finding out how to better educate Black women about the ways in which they can care for their hair... their true naptural hair. The nappy issue is much bigger than the freedom of choice to arrange one's hair in a way that makes one happy. Project Naptural hopes to successfully attack the idea that Black women must conform to society's beauty standards and mentality because that is the only choice Black women have. Project Naptural is against the ignorance of naptural hair care regimens and what naptural hair can afford Black women to do. Project Naptural is against the uneducated opinions of mainstream society and the ideas of Black women that shape the thoughts of the younger generation into thinking that their naptural hair is just not good enough and in turn that they are not good enough. If “nappy” indeed has a negative connotation in someone's home, do not use it, or change its meaning. This can change the perception of what a little girl has dreams of becoming and how they see themselves when they see no one that looks like them, with their nappy hair, in mainstream media. It is time to do something positive to combat the negative perceptions of naptural hair in our society.

From interviews, focus groups and my own experiences, I have learned that due to the lack of Black women who are perceived as successful or beautiful with nappy hair, it is much harder for women of the same aesthetic to consider themselves that way. Comedian Paul Mooney comments in Chris Rock's *Good Hair* (2009) that: “If your hair is relaxed—white people are relaxed, if your hair is nappy, they're not happy.” In order for positive change to occur, can the Black community admit that some people do not care whether we have nappy hair? If the whole Black community “went natural,” are all Black people to be fired from their jobs? If the Black community can come together and inform their children and children's children that they are beautiful in their natural state, what is stopping the Black community from loving their nappy-headed selves? The weight of our beauty must be seen through our eyes first before society can accept it and change its negative perception. I believe with the right tools; the Black community can find the beauty in their naptural hair again.

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