Long Hair Don’t Care

At the Intersection of Race, Beauty and Power in Feminine Self-Representation
Hair is much more than meets the eye. It has recently been a topic of interest in the realm of sociology and anthropology. In depth literature has questioned the relationships between hair and race, hair and beauty, and hair and gender. Hair has been recognized as an important cultural marker denoting meanings specific in time and place to societies. In my thesis I will focus on an unchartered territory in understanding hair: length. Hair length denotes so much about American culture and our society. Length can be understood in a multitude of ways especially when beauty, power and race are added in. Interviews with college females will only support the myths of long hair that are inherent in our society. Their own lived experiences will add a spark of reality to abstract and metaphorical myths surrounding long hair. The experience of long hair will also be contrasted with short hair; how the two differ supporting each other in the normalization of societies standards. This thesis will serve to identify these traditional and normalized understandings of hair length and support them through the lived experience of the interviewee's.
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Introduction

Hair: The Invisibly Visible Social Marker

Sometimes it is the simplest of things that escape our understanding, but what also stands to inform our most basic decisions. We as humans make snap judgments of others when we enter a room. We base these perceptions off what our minds can process into categories that are programmed in cultural dictionaries. This is a phenomenon central to understanding those around us, or at least believing to do so. Our cultural dictionaries are the natural repository of biases, perspectives, actions and understandings that are socialized into the human body, creating the human being from birth due to the surrounding environment. These cultural dictionaries are filled with the clearest markers that are visible to our human eyes: our phenotypes. Race and sex are obvious distinctions that divide into categories within differing specific cultural dictionaries. However, outside those two demarcations, something that captures human minds more than anything else is hair, specifically the hair on one's head. This is evident by the amounts of scholarly work to be found on head hair (Leach 1958, Cooper 1971, Bordo and Jagger 1989, hooks 1992, Gayles 1993, Mercer 1994, Eilberg-Schwartz 1995 Rooks 1996, Banks 2000, Bennett and Dickerson 2001, Byrd 2001, Weitz 2004, Rock 2009, Davis 2010, Roger 2013, Freeman 2013, Jones 2014).

Hair has long been historically and almost universally traced to be able to socially locate individuals within their culture (Weitz 2004, Banks 2000; Cooper 1971; Eilberg-Schwartz and Howard 1995). In this sense hair is inextricably linked to the formation of self-representation, on the individual, group and wider societal level. Hair can change everything, hide everything, show nothing and yet show everything, all at the same time. Going bald could force a female to
redefine her markers of beauty (i.e. without hair how does a female define her beauty), while possibly identifying her as a patient of chemotherapy; however if she wore a human hair wig to cover it all of those identifiers disappear unless one knows how to see and interpret it (no one would be able to see her bald head and guess it to be the effects of chemotherapy; even if they could tell that her hair was fake.) The opposing relationships formulated defining hair (being able to telegraph much while also being able to hide much) also metaphorically represent the opposing natures of head hair itself (the tangible qualities of hair versus the emblematic qualities). Its corporeality is static, while its metaphysicality is fluid and transient. Hair itself has always been the same. Hair as a physical item grows, lives and dies. While one can cut it, dye it, and perm it and more it remains the same “a protein filament that grows from follicles found in the dermis...” (Wikipedia). However, what hair means changes and will continue to change person to person, culture to culture, and epoch to epoch. I look to understand these myths of hair within the modern American culture by focusing on length while recognizing the importance of beauty, power and race. In the coming chapters I will attempt to identify these myths, their origins and attributions of importance. Lastly, my research data in coming chapters will help to highlight or defy these myths I seek to expose.
Hair = Self-Representation

The self-representation of an individual is fraught and tenuous, and the lack of control relating to the evolution of being is almost astonishing. It is impossible to exist without the collective, even as a singular favoring an individualistic approach. The individual may choose to remove themselves from the group but they cannot remove themselves from culture, from time and their own social location (Rooks: 1996; Banks: 2000; Leach: 1958). The agency of the individual is then severely limited, by these things and contingent on self-awareness. The individual rarely receives choice on social markers that create the projection of the self, [i.e. race, sex, class, and sexuality] these things are normally unbreakable in their steadfastness.

Hair unlike other social markers is close to infinitely malleable. However its malleability is inherently constrained by said social markers. The choices one makes concerning their hair can be infinite, but they will always take into consideration the social markers that define the individual, sometimes to conform and other times to rebel. The possibility of the pliability of hair is dependent on the individual's own agency and their power to exact that agency. The self-autonomy that can come from choosing a hairstyle, coloring it, shortening it, and so on, can impart a degree of self-confidence as well. Therefore hair represents a visible social marker that is indeed, a viable option for self-autonomy.

When we enter a room we look to situate our own self-representation within the realm of others. We utilize these social markers to abstractly define those around us, categorize them to understand our place within them. There are those that we will gravitate towards, the
attraction is intrinsic in their presupposed similarities. In essence, we like to surround ourselves with those who are like ourselves:

“When an individual enters the presence others, they commonly seek to acquire information about him or to bring into play information about him already possessed. They will be interested in his general socio-economic status, his conception of self, his attitude towards them, his competence, his trustworthiness, etc... Information about the individual helps to define the situation, enabling others to know in advance what he will expect of them and what they may expect of him. Informed in these ways, the others will know how best to act in order to call forth a desired response from him” (Goffman 1959).

Self-representation as defined above by Goffman is the self-knowledge that the representation one has can be manipulated to be received by society in different ways, while also acknowledging the importance of this representation. The individual knows, or ideally a self-aware and autonomous individual would know, that the choices they make in presenting their hair telegraphs specific and important cultural messages that are specific to their time, culture, and social location. These messages that are telegraphed are vital in the formation of self-representation an individual craves. It is the formation of this self-representation where the self-perception and societal perception may align; what the individual wishes the public to see of themselves and what the public sees regardless of the individual’s intent (Goffman 1959). An important part of hair then is that it is not disassociate of anything, it is connected to every part of society. Hair is deeply entrenched within the world even if the choices surrounding it may sometimes be an attempt to strategically place oneself from it. Hair lies at the junction of self-representation because it is so attached to other societal markers, it is a part of everything.

Hair is not a passive item, it is active, it transitive. Its meaning and form can change from day to day, within the span of a few seconds of strong winds or long hours under the
demanding hands of a hairdresser. The first time in the hair salon/barbershop, is a transitive experience for some. To come to an age when hair can be utilized to demarcate status (ascension to maturity, marital status, sexual status), it can denote periods that place an individual in an “in between stage” and a finalized stage of being as well. Hair in its tangible state can be visually flowing [i.e. flowing in the autumn wind], but in its metaphorical stance what hair means to society, to the individual, to the group is endlessly changing.

The concepts of hair as a part of a cultural identity\(^1\) change over time, culture, environment and societal expectations (Weitz 2004; Banks 2000; Wade 1993; hooks 1992). When looking at hair there are few conscious decisions that explain the characteristic mapping that happens after observation of an individual’s head of hair. Therein lies the liminality of hair, the uncertainty of the “other’s” (being the observer and not the individual) perception. When we look at hair, we see a story, which is being played out with society’s preconceptions shaping that visual. This story tells an observer that societal equations such as “blondes are dumb” can reliably match an individual’s actual personhood (McCacken 1995). Whether these associations are consciousness or subconscious could be endlessly argued, but the fact remains that these myths of hair are inevitably linked to a person’s self-representation (Banks 2000; Jacobs-Huey 2006).

_Hair is Not Just Hair_

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\(^1\) Identity being defined in this text as a consummate expression of the self; encompassing self-representation.
When society views an individual, depending on the medically designated sex, hair is divided into the feminine and the masculine. Facial, body and head hair are all the most visible characteristics of the human body. Hairiness has become one of the symbols of masculinity (for example beards) where lack of hair on a women’s body becomes sexual [in Western culture]. Therefore the only place a woman’s hair can become sexualized is on her head. “The Rape” by Rene Magritte depicts a women’s face as the site of her outward sexuality, her sexual characteristics (the breasts and vagina) while the head hair remains to highlight and define that sensual space. So, though there is no difference genetically between what head hair looks like on a male or female, it is the sign of femininity (Cooper 1971). This binary dictates the perception of the individual’s hair within society.

In American popular culture hair is an imagined cultural realm which is possessed not by the individual but by the society. The female body, as argued above stands as a site of societal control where hair as compared to the body is a more subtle area of control. The formation of the female identity relates very clearly, to hair versus the male identity. Hair is essential to the
female identity, whether or not the female wishes or sees it as so. In this way hair remains within the societal domain, removing agency from the female. However, females can take this agency back by being aware of the power their hair may hold. (Byrd 2001; Rook 1996; Jacobs-Huey 2006; Banks 2000; Weitz 2004; Rook 2001). Hair therefore can be a site of oppression, of resistance, and of power. There is no way to ignore the importance of such a site which holds such a confluence in the structure of identity, social, and cultural politics.

It is impossible to speak of hair without speaking about the different types of hair, which is code for race. Different textures of hair telegraph certain racial identities, especially when skin tone is not easily categorized, i.e. skin tones that are not obviously dark or light. Someone with lighter skin (would be seen as white) with type 4B hair would be recognized (even if only by the black community) as black. Simply because of the knowledge that curly, kinky hair can only be found on the hair of black people. The entire categorical structure that denotes hair texture (see photo) essentially showcase the way to race individuals on their hair “type”. Therefore, hair stands as one of the most important racial markers other than skin (Rook 2001; Banks 2000; Jacobs-Huey 2006; Rook 1996; Byrd 2001). Hair types are ascribed to ethnicity as well. Hair as an extension of the body is just as socially and culturally created but within the discourse it cannot be simply bent into two (straight vs. curly hair) as Kobena Mercer would argue (1994). The discourse on the importance of hair is much wider than that. In Nella Larsen’s Passing and Quicksand the trio of main characters are all defined as lovely mixed race women (read: black
Each of the three characters had the ability to “pass”, move through society solely claiming their white heritage. The crux of this “passing” lay in their hair, without hair that could be racially identified as white they would not be able to move through the white society. Hair is an important aspect of the body narrative, essential to the formation of the identity where race must be added to the dialogue.

*The Politics of Hair*

Hair is important, but is it important in the eyes of women? Most would say yes and the array of literature about the female body and hair gives credence to that idea. The billions of dollars that flow from the hair care industry gives credence to this. There is no doubt that conversations with women about hair would prove that hypothesis. However, how women think about hair is where the real question lies. How do women decide how to do their hair, where do they decide to do it, and why do they do it or why do they do nothing to it? These are questions that various pieces of literature reference and explore. Some of the arguments posed in the literature range from following the evolution of hair within the white American female culture, to the popularization of Afro hair and the reflection of that growth in the public sector, to how hair can be a place of resistance and power for women (McCracken 1995; Rooks 1996; Weitz 2004).

Women have their own thoughts about their own hair but what influences those thoughts, either in conformity or rebellion is society. How does society introduce young girls to their hair, how do we speak about hair in front of young women? (Weitz: 2004). What conversations circulate in salons as women flock to find community or answers?
“When do we compliment others on their hair? When do we withhold compliments? In our remarks, are we honoring our friend’s individuality? Recognizing the constraints under which she lives? Or reinforcing the pressures on her to use her appearance to bolster her identity, self-esteem, and life chances... Do we assume that coworkers, employees, and underlings who have long hair aren’t professional, or that those with short hair aren’t feminine? And do our thoughts and actions limit the potential of other women” (Weitz: 2004)

Weitz cuts down to the bone with this stream of questions which pose to highlight and query the things that we take for granted in the roles of the individual both female and not in reinforcing societal expectations inherent in hair. This is all part of how to understand hair.

Most of the literature concerning hair though recognizing the importance of the discourse fail to nuance the intersectionality of the lived experience of the female, even within a limited American context. Most of the texts supporting this thesis focus on hair as a whole, and why it is important in culture. Only one focuses specifically on female hair and only a few texts speak about hair and race. Discourse has only recently gained credence (early 2000’s) in highlighting the differences of hair textures, i.e. race. The politics of hair has been understood through race as a crossroads of intersectionality and inevitably the discourse adds beauty and power into the equation. It has been argued and proved over and over again that white women are the standards of beauty in our society and therefore women of color lose beauty and power when it comes to hair standards (Byrd 2001; Rooks 1996; Jacob- Huey 2006; Banks 2000; Weitz 2004). Beauty and power are linked because they stand as definitive factors of femininity. To be beautiful, to be a woman is to have power. Power over females who lack said beauty and power over the male gaze which requires and covets that beauty. Beauty is defined within this text as a reinforcement of the patriarchy and cognizance of male dominance and the male gaze [The male gaze being the assumption that the female body is continually under the male gaze
for approval and attention] (Wolf 2002; Craig 2002). Beauty though an avenue of power for the female can be constrained and overtaken by male dominance. Even though beauty can indeed be constrained by the male gaze and its desire, it still leaves room for female empowerment because cognizance of societal standards surrounding female beauty do not then mean all women are forced to adhere to them. At times in our history laws have indeed forced women to do such things, but in the modern era women do have a degree of choice in self-representation.

The discourse around hair, that involves a focus on the female body, race, beauty and power inevitably focuses on the differences between straight hair and kinky hair and how that affects an individual (Byrd 2001; Rooks 1996; Jacob- Huey 2006; Banks 2000; Bennett and Dickerson 2001; et. al). Arguments and debates that circulate within this specific literature focus on these topic: the beauty standard excluding women of color, the unfair expectations and influence on women of color, the value of Afro natural hair and the social exploration and popularization (Byrd 2001; Rooks 1996; Jacob- Huey 2006; Banks 2000; Bennett and Dickerson 2001; et. al). These conversations inevitably cross into length but it is not a topic that has received in-depth attention. Perhaps because it is spoken of in conjunction with other topics such as race. However it stands that there is no detailed discussion of length as a crucial factor in the importance of hair, its presentation and cultural impact. In the following pages the lenses will be turned to understand a specific yet important phenomena: long hair. Discourse

\[\text{\footnotesize\ref{note:intersection}}\]

\[\text{\footnotesize\ref{note:intersection}}\] At the intersection of the female body, race, beauty and power there are no discussions about “blonde vs. brunette” because that inherently racializes the topic into one of whiteness (most colored woman are not born blonde). Furthermore, to focus on long versus short has also not been a serious topic of discussion because that also seems inherently racialized because of myths of black hair and because of the industry of weave as well (which also lacks a lot of literature).
concerning hair at the intersection of gender, race, beauty and power has yet to fully engage in discussions of the importance of hair length. This work will stand to add to the discussion and provide a different insight.
I Whip My Hair

*Rapunzel, Rapunzel Let Down Your Hair*

The story of Rapunzel has been a mainstay myth in Western culture. Hair is not the main meaning of the story, yet hair, specifically long hair plays a crucial part in the telling of the tale, along with the assumptions that have become the norm in our culture today. The Maiden in a Tower, was a literary motif that first appeared in the story of Saint Barbara, who was depicted with long, blonde hair in the third century. A beautiful woman trapped in a tower to be rescued by a gallant knight, charged in chivalry. Next, Ferdowsi created a Persian tale involving a “hair ladder” for a young prince to climb a tower to see his trapped lady love, a ladder of the trapped lady’s hair. Petrosinella, the beginning of the modern Rapunzel first appeared in history from the mind of Florentine Giambattista Basile’s *Pentamerone* in 1637. She was a woman of humble origins, found in a parsley patch for which she was named, “little parsley”. Petrosinella evolved into Persinette by the French author: Charlotte Rose de Caumont de la Force in 1697 (Davis 2005). Finally, Rapunzel first appears in the German translation by Friedrich Schulz. Today the popularized version of Rapunzel by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm is the tale which most people in America are acquainted with. It is a story about a woman whose beauty lies in her hair, of course!
The modern depiction of Rapunzel is the basis of the 2010 Disney film *Tangled.* Once again, the motif of the maiden in the tower was depicted, with a main character having flowing blond locks. The film continues the Grimm adaption of the folk lore but created a more independent character who actually sneaks out of her tower, to embark on daring adventures with the ever present male “prince”. In the movie, she is trapped by an evil old woman who stole her away at birth to give her eternal life. In the beginning of the movie the old woman, named Mother Gothel attempts to take just the child’s hair but when cutting it finds that its power is gone, turning it brown and dull. The power rests in its natural state, meaning it must continue to grow and never be cut. The long hair (an estimated 70 feet long) though realistically unwieldy and unmanageable is portrayed as an aid to Rapunzel (Disney). She jumps rope with it, she fights with it, cleans her tower with and so on. Her portrayal in advertisements is with long, blonde hair even though at the end of the film it is cut off to a short bob. At the end of the film, Rapunzel loses her long hair (in an act of defiance and love, yet done by the hands of the main male character). Two important notes about his transformation is that she loses her magical healing powers that were imbued into her hair when it goes from long to short (she literally loses her magical hair), and the color turns from blonde to brown. It also marks an end

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3 The film was actually originally titled *Rapunzel Unbraided*, then changed to simply *Rapunzel*. However, Disney decided to change the title to *Tangled* to appeal to boys and girls, because princess themed films and titles did not appear to do so very well.

4 It is interesting to note that the male character (Flynn Rider) is the one who has the authority and power to cut off her hair, which is imbued with such incredible power itself. This reifies the patriarchal hierarchy of domination and power.
for her from an untethered life to marriage. When she has long hair she is single and when her hair is cut short, she is quickly married to the main male character.

Young females watching this film are exposed to the imagery that not only is blonde a color of power, and brown is the color of the average but that long hair is magical and important and short hair is boring and ordinary. The folk tale revolves around the notion that hair is a tool to be used (i.e. as a ladder to climb an impenetrable tower) and as a visual sign of nobility and beauty (i.e. long hair can only be afforded by those who have the time and money to tend to it and need not work). The modern adaption of Rapunzel has added the idea that long hair is magical. That, the idea of magical hair is where the importance of hair length is revealed in our society. The movie would not have worked the same way if she was short haired magical heroine. It would not make sense to the public as viewers to have magical short hair. The power inherent in Rapunzel’s long hair was articulated by an actual power it represented: the ability to heal. The actual power is the power to heal and the metaphorical power is one of innocence, sexuality and beauty. With long hair Rapunzel is young (unwed), attractive and living an adventure which ends when her hair is cut short. These subtle messages are repeated throughout the film to retrench the importance, power and beauty of long hair.

Creating Hair Culture in the Feminine Identity

When young girls are playing with toys, they are stereotypically given dolls to play with. A young girl has tea with her dolls, embarks on exciting adventures throughout their home and most importantly forms a bond of friendship and care for their doll. One of the most ubiquitous images of a young girl playing with her doll, is one where she is combing out her doll’s hair, long
and manageable (read: fine texture). Mattel, America’s most popular and successful doll company, recognize this action: “… little girls of all races love hair play… long, combable hair is still a key seller” (Byrd and Harris, 155). Mattel sells its dolls with numerous accessories centered on hair care, long hair care not unlike the toy pictured above. This is an overt act of love, the combing of one’s hair. This is replicated from cases where mothers sit their own daughters down and do the same for them. Young girls are taught to see the caring of hair as a site of love and attention. This education comes from the world around them. Hair is taught to children, not unlike many other parts of our culture, it is a social phenomenon that is a learned culture.

If hair is a significant part of culture then it can be ascertained that there are specific normalized ideals that frequent the minds of those participating within it. Similar to other cultures, there is a cultural hegemony, the ruling class, who dominate the culture, recreating it in an image of themselves. Hegemony is described by Gramsci as the specific realm of culture, where the dominant class is dominant because they can and do prescribe their own definitions and norms for society as a whole (1992). They do this not through force as much but by creating the norm to be indeed the norm, indisputable and irreconcilable. Therefore the minority has a marginalized view of the norm as it differs from the dominant power group. In the American culture, fine textured hair has been normalized. This is a reflection of the hegemony of the Eurocentric culture. The overlaying hegemony of the Eurocentric culture is the gender binary. The gender binary denotes two culturally distinct genders of man and woman. The gender binary delineates the separation by the genitalia of an individual. However, since society cannot see underneath one’s clothing, hair is used as a substitute. Meaning, hair is also
used to recreate the gender binary on a more visible level. Hair in culture normalizes the idea that long hair denotes femininity and short hair denotes masculinity.

*Length is Beauty*

Long hair has long stood as the bastion of femininity in mass media. From childhood to adulthood women are constantly bombarded with images of women with long hair. *Tangled*, attempting to foster a gender-neutral audience⁵, continued to reinforce standards of beauty being synonymous with long, blonde hair. Dolls, targeted towards girls teach them to find beauty in long hair. Salon culture, and in family care⁶ instructs them that care for the hair is important, normal and expected for a woman. To have long hair means, that one essentially has the time, money and effort to care for it. However, the reason why length is beautiful in modern America is because it signifies all the markers of “true” femininity as defined within the patriarchal system. It defines a women who is young, full of life, and perhaps may be innocent but has sexual promise. However, most importantly within the patriarchy it defines a women who is attractive to most men. This should not discount that women themselves too find truth in the attractiveness of long hair.

To understand why length is considered beautiful, beauty itself must be understood. Society understands beauty as something that can be universally defined, and agreed upon. It’s the reason we have beauty pageants, and class adjectives “Most Beautiful”, it’s the reason

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⁵ *Tangled* changed the title from *Rapunzel Unbraided*, to stray away from the typical fairy-tale categorization which they felt would attract more girls, as well as adding a main male character who would appeal to young boys.

⁶ Family care meaning how children are taught to care for their hair in the home. I.e. young children being taken to salons by their parents where choices are made for them and therefore the children learn from those choices. Or, when parents care for their children’s hair at home with their own hands, and children learn norms about hair from that too.
models can make money. Beauty becomes quantitative and not qualitative, depicting a monolithic mold, a one size fits all standard. We measure someone’s beauty through their smile, their eyes, their body and their hair, versus observing someone’s beauty from their personality (Usually when someone says that a person has a great personality it usually means they are not pretty). However, as Naomi Wolf adequately puts it, that is the beauty myth (2002:12). This myth she argues is created for one purpose only, to reify the patriarchy, intimating beliefs of male dominance and power. Beauty, in reality is what Wolf denotes as an “economy... determined by politics...” (2002:12) The politics, are ones of culture (specific to the time and location), economy (access of resources), and hierarchy (domination of groups). In essence, real beauty is not simply quantified because it changes over space and time. The human body is capable of too many combinations to ever truly appreciate the beauty in them all. However, despite the lack of a universal beauty, beauty is a gendered word with a skewed perspective. Beauty is a word for females, where “handsome, chiseled and strong” are masculinized perceptions of attractiveness. When one uses the word beauty in American there is an obvious standard: leggy, slim yet generously supplied, long haired women. This standard however is continually challenged, broken down and rebuilt in the images of popular culture. The only ubiquitously remaining attribute is long hair. From the models in the runway, to the pop stars on stage, and the actresses on TV, long hair is key in the iconography of the beautiful.
Long Hair and Sexual Power

A woman is seated at a bar. Her legs are crossed demurely, contradicting the slit in her dress that shows just enough skin to tantalize but not enough to scandalize. Her face is glowing as she smiles and laughs at the bar, her youth tangible in the belting laughter that is heard throughout the room. Her hair falls past her shoulders and swings and moves with a life of its own as she turns back and forth between her two friends. She turns around in time to catch an attractive partner walking through the entrance of the bar, pointed out by a friend. She catches the eye of the arresting partner and flips her hair. The movement is subtle as she has not yet had enough time to assess the potential of her suitor. Using her head she merely swings her hair forward enough that with a practiced twist and two fingers she arranges it back behind her ear. She does this while looking in their direction, though not at their face. After talking more with her friends and deciding this striking partner is indeed a possibility she proceeds to the next step: a bigger hair flip – slower, and showier, running her hand over and through her tresses-- with a coy half smile, an invitation to merely approach and so the night begins.

This depiction is not uncommon in half of the movies and TV shows that air in American media. Legally Blonde, a movie about a young woman who goes to law school to get a guy and then falls in love with another man, has an entire musical sequence revolving around the idea of “flipping” one’s hair effectively. The “Bend and Snap” focuses on the individual slowly folding

Figure 5: Princess Ariel flipping her hair
downwards where they snap upwards flipping the hair backwards over the head. In another Disney film, the mermaid princess Ariel, flips her hair in a slow motion act depicting her rise to the surface, a culmination of her biggest song in the movie. This act of the “flip” is a sign for attention. It involves a female, tossing her hair back, “flipping” it. It cannot be done without being noticed, the hair flies up and backwards from the face. It can signify sexual interest but also any other range of emotions: anger, nervousness, happiness and fear. It is a powerful movement, and to do it one must have long hair.

The physical connotations of long hair extend past the movements of the individual but their relation in movement to other, with the length of hair. When a woman with long hair lets others brush her hair, she is engaging in an action that reifies the notion of extra care that is associated with length. In acts of intimacy, running hands through a lover’s hair is a sign of unrestrained sexuality. When dancing, women sometimes whip their hair to signify their sexiness. Beyoncé created her entire image of sex appeal off of her body, but also her long hair and her ability to dance with it effectively. Beyoncé represents for many the embodiment of the sexually powerful female. Her iconic style is long blonde hair. It is as much a part of her body, as her highly sexualized body. When she sported a short hair style seemingly randomly the internet erupted into chaos. Some people argued for the importance of seeing a woman without seeing her hair, yet most could not deny the inherent sexuality long hair exudes, especially for Beyoncé (Rogers 2013).

The ability to move long hair to fit into situations of love and sex makes it idealistically perfect in the realm of the feminine, i.e. fertility within modern American culture. The sexual power of long hair, mirrors back onto its female gendering. The female is considered to be
wildly sexual, to be more emotional and therefore more romantic and it is the female who is more natural. The romantic hero portrayed in books and movies most always wear a full and long head of hair. There is just something about long hair that shouts health, beauty and sex all wrapped up in one. There is the contrast of a young virgin as often depicted with long, untouched hair. This is the complete opposite portrayal from tales of siren mermaids with flowing locks that cover their naked chests. Long hair in the sphere of youth retains innocence. In this sense, long hair is seen as a sign of immaturity and shorter hair, or up do’s as a sign of growth and womanhood. When long hair is worn by older women it can be seen as a sign of wantonness and overt sexuality (not unlike the sirens).
Real Talk Pt. I: The Lived Experience of Long Hair

**Methodology**

Throughout my research I had found clear mythologies of hair length: long hair equaled beautiful. My further research attempted to prove and disprove different parts of that myth, seemingly normalized in American culture. Data was only collected from the beginning of November to the end of December. All of the data collected was drawn from Swarthmore, Pennsylvania as a home base, but the participants have come from different parts of the United States though not outside the country, as I am trying to understand the lived experience of the American female. Interviews took place in Swarthmore classrooms, common areas, and interviewee’s rooms depending on availability and ease of access. I have drawn data from seven interviews with college aged women who identify as white, black or biracial (black and white). These interviews focused on extracting individual stories about hair and how length may affect an individual in life decisions. I have asked questions that will help me highlight their own “hair story”, the history behind the choices of their hairstyles, and how hair lengths may have differed in those hairstyles. The interviews took an average of 30 minutes and did not extend past 60 minutes.

In one of the foundational books upon hair and it’s relation to the female identity Rapunzel’s Daughters by Rose Weitz, interviews are also utilized in understanding the role of women’s hair. Weitz interviewed 74 girls and women, and continued on informally with data collection with multiple conversations. In Hair Matters by Ingrid Banks (an ethnographic exploration of hair and its relation to the black identity), she uses a slightly smaller sample size for her interviews: 43 black girls and women. Interviews are central in understanding the hair
story, both formal and informal. Interviews are essential in the research about hair because it is a study of a form of self-expression essentially. Speaking to individuals who are partaking in that act is central to cognizing, vital, in fact. It is the only way that the researcher and the audience will ever understand what the meaning could be, and what the meaning actually is in relation to the world around them.

I utilized a sample size of seven participants, for the interview phase and five participants for the focus group phase. The interview sample size, will give credence to multiple identities, but will not drown out the significance of the individual narrative and turn into a triviality. My research is focused on extracting the lived experience of women and how length has affected their lives, in issues of self-confidence (power and beauty) and societal rewards and consequences based upon the levels and factors of the former markers. In my attempts to understand these things, I truly wished to delve deep into the psyche of the participant, understanding the distinctiveness in their lived experience without diminishing with too many voices within my concluding results. I recognize that the sample size could be larger, but I would argue against an increase for the sake of the prior point.

Weitz’s interview questions helped guide my own structure, she attempted to understand the individual understanding of hair as self-expression. She asked about the women’s own hair history, how participants saw the effect of their hair in their lives and how they managed it. Banks bases her first theory around the idea of self-hatred and its possible correspondence with hair alteration. Her main two questions were: “Is hair associated with power in any way?” And “Do African American women have a choice or voice (i.e. one that is independent of societal norms or beliefs) about the way they wear their hair?” (Banks, 19).
Both questions relate to the creation of the self-identity and the tangibility of that creation in the social strata. Both Banks and Weitz set a stage for their interviewees, like I have. First, understanding the personal history of the participant, and then seeing how they themselves understand their own history and then attempting to understand their own thoughts on the equitation of long hair with feminine beauty and power.

Considering my own identity as a black, African-American woman on campus, I am aware if not friendly with almost all of the black women on campus. Approaching that subsection of the sample was not difficult. For the white women who were involved in the study it was not be very difficult to capture participation for a study about something central to identity. I wanted to have a purposeful selection within the interview sample size of women with long hair length (mid- back or waist), medium hair length (shoulders and just below shoulders) and short hair length (above chin). These categorizations, though agreed upon in certain social locations, are ones that I define as a researcher and adhere to in my results; though I recognize that these length designations are not by any means, conclusive or veritable in every social location (people define hair length depending on their own understandings of hair). I ended up having a higher distribution of short versus long hair, with only one participant with medium length hair.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Hair Length/Style</th>
<th>Hair Color</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Felicity</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Above ears length <em>Short</em></td>
<td>Purple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kay</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Shoulder blades length <em>Long</em></td>
<td>Blonde</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ella</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Collarbones length, natural style <em>Medium</em></td>
<td>Black with ombre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autumn</td>
<td>Bi-racial (black and white)/multi-ethnic (black, white, Latina)</td>
<td>Waist length <em>Long</em></td>
<td>black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burkina</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Close to scalp (crew cut), natural style <em>Short</em></td>
<td>black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hannah</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Close to scalp (Pixie cut) <em>Short</em></td>
<td>Auburn/brunette</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janey</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Just below mid back <em>Long</em></td>
<td>Brunette</td>
</tr>
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Weitz essentially recruited her sample through “snowballing”. She asked those she had a relationship with to recommend other individuals as related to her current criteria for an interview subject, i.e. “asking lesbians for referrals to lesbians, housewives for referrals to housewives, and so on” (Weitz, xvii). She focused on finding individuals who actually proactively cared for their hair. Weitz also approached individuals on the street when she felt that they had a specific understanding that may have added to her research. Banks also utilized a snowball sampling, accessing her sample size from original participants and asking for recommendations. The original participants were friends of Banks. Grant McCracken in *Big Hair*, an ethnographic investigation of hair and hairstyles, also utilizes the “snowball” method in recruiting interviewee’s and also utilizes the occasional purposeful random approaches in the street.

I also utilized the snowball method, once again because as a female student on campus I am already a part of the community that I will recruiting from. Weitz worked to ensure that her sample size, though not random still reflected multiple narratives that were varied and distinctive in their analysis of the lived experience. Banks also attempted to specifically ask for
participants who would add different perspectives to her research, by specifically asking for women who wore their hair in particular hairstyles. I attempted to do the same, to ensure that my sample size though small will be able to portray a number of hair stories. I purposefully sought out different hair identities for my participants.

The population being studied reflects an important subset, the young adult generation: aged 18-21. This subset as the youngest “free agents”, have the ability to make their own choices and create their own identity, even within the confines of possible parental interactions and influence. This population is more likely to be successfully experimenting with changes to their own identity, body and spirit. They are also more likely to be more open to embracing differences within those categories, which they may not understand, nor agree with. I chose this population for all these reasons, combined with the fact that this sample size resides within a prestigious and expensive liberal arts institution, many – though not all—individuals have the means to actually create these new identities.

The population of college women on my own campus, are also most accessible. It was much easier to create a safe space within the context of the interview, simply because I was recognized by the participants as “one of them”. I am an acquaintance of all of my interviewees and most of them are my friends. I fit into the space, and as a current student around their age I can understand their mode of speech, slang, and general culture. All of the individuals that took part in the research occupy different hair experiences: long hair and whiteness, long hair and blackness as contrasted or combined with short hair and whiteness, and short hair and blackness.
The age of the college women usually ranges from 17-22, a quite young age in the timeline of life. However, each of these women are in a social setting which places them on the cusp of a transformation. Transformation is key and central to the understanding of the self and identity. Sometimes this transformation is invisible and more focused on a change in spirit but more oft than not it also translates into the visual and tangible realm. Hair, is a most common medium for this self-expression. As such, the choice of college aged women seems quite logical in hoping to understand the importance of length. College aged women are not old enough to have imbibed enough of societal standards and expectations of propriety and correctness (though of course, there is a degree of inbred cultural knowledge as well; we grow up in environments which we learn our culture from before college). College aged women are also not young enough that they do not have the agency, will and ability to process these changes themselves. They are mature enough to analyze their choices and understand them, placing them in the context of the broader social structures without restricting themselves within them. Lastly they do not face too much pressure from society as they are not full members of the working society, however this is the time when the expectations of “business professional” start to permeate and stick.

My methodology takes into account not only past literature understanding of how hair can be understood and why it should be understood. Interviews, as stated prior, are key in respecting the individuality of the lived experience, yet allowing a linkage between the distinct hair stories. Furthermore, in my research I will be following a similar yet distinct path in framework. Both Rooks and Banks set up the understanding of hair relative to race. McCracken relates hair and hair color, and hair styles, yet does not really speak to any depth of the black
identity within hair. None of the three authors speak deeply or at all on the possible importance of hair length and how that can be indelibly connected to race. The interviews will help to understand this new framework of hair, length and race.

What Does Hair Mean to Women?

Undoubtedly as explained throughout this thesis hair can be understood academically as important, its importance linked to the social import that human culture gives to it. However, where does that social import come from and how does it manifest within the female? That is what the interviews allowed me to explore. Hair as defined by one interviewee is a mode of “self-expression”. It is a way women can create and recreate, define and redefine the boundaries of the self. All of the interviewee’s brought up something crucial in the understanding of hair: its relation to the “other”. Whatever that “other” may be hair does answer to something or someone other than the self (most commonly family among the interviewees). Regardless of this fact how the interviewees all chose to respond to that “other” is where individuality becomes key in hair.

What Does Long Hair Mean?

I am a black woman. I have had my hair relaxed, straightened, (never cut), braided, whipped into a weave, twisted and crocheted. I’ve done a whole lot to my Afro hair and have decided to take a break (especially for my finances) from relaxers and now have natural hair. Some of the discussion that I had with my black interviewees were much more candid and in depth because I expected them to give me a complexity of their hair choices, I expected a

7 Kay, Interview 12/8/14
conversation about relaxers, and naturals. I expected conversations about the contrast of beauty standards for women of color and white women. However, I entered my interviews with the white participants apprehensive but nonetheless determined in my belief that hair was as important to white people as it was to black people.

There is just something inherently feminine about long hair. There is an intangibility of the actual femininity of long hair. There is nothing you can physically say makes long hair feminine. There is nothing intrinsic in long hair that makes it feminine. Men can and do have long hair. There are women who identify as female and have short hair. Therefore we can rule out the act of growing hair as a difference. I believe that our norm that makes long hair feminine is specifically created in our culture. However, throughout all my interviews the idea of the quintessential female with long hair was common and never argued against. All of the interviewees felt that society deemed long hair quintessentially female (though some of them believed the idea to be antiquated and close minded) Beauty as defined previously is in the eyes of the beholder, but specifically the male beholder. Beauty is defined in terms of the male gaze, which means it is appraised and doled out as reward to females that fit the needs and expectations of men.

“I think that long hair is associated with femininity and I think that when you decide to wear your hair short, you’re making a conscious choice—maybe unconscious choice—that’s going against the grain and what beauty means. I think that, when your hair is shorter, your neck is more visible and your back is more visible. And your ears are more visible. It’s a way to show off your neck and your back and your ears. So, I think that earrings are a nice touch. But I guess to say that they add femininity, cause I think that earrings are associated with the feminine as well. I guess, the word add is not really appropriate, maybe accentuate. I don’t think you’re unfeminine without having earrings, I just think that it’s a nice opportunity to add something else, because your ears are now more visible.” – Ella (Interview 11/3/14)
As Ella says above to have short hair is indeed rebelling against the norm because what is the norm then is long hair. So for long hair to be the norm means that it is a staple in a beautiful woman, which would then mean that males find long hair beautiful. Arguably the real study needs to be done on why men seem so allured by long hair, but women still have agency and independence (most times). Women do not need to have long hair, not all women are heterosexual or awaiting the approval of the male gaze. Yet women themselves continue and perpetuate the long hair beauty myth. Ella had mentioned to me that while discussing her satisfaction with her shoulder length hair that she would love to sport a shorter hair style. She called it sexy and she mentioned the opportunity to wear bigger earrings with shorter hair:

“So I think part of having short hair is that you have to have big earrings. Cause I feel like I have to have something that is still like you know touching my shoulders or something that is still feminine. Cause I think, first of all you just have more space for earrings, your earing are just shown off better cause you don’t have hair in the way. But I always picture having big earrings, now that, I would have short hair.”

– Ella

The crux of this definition of femininity with short hair revolves around these big earrings which arguably serve as an acquiescence to the norm of femininity already flouted; earrings standing in as the marker of femininity that the short hair denounces. Another stand in for earrings is makeup or head scarves all ideas meant to utilize a normalized expectation of femininity and therefore possibly soften the “masculinity” of short hair. Indeed Ella’s enamor of a shorter hairstyle lies not in its actuality but it metaphysically, a marker of rebellion against the male dominion of beauty.

Long hair though treasured by many of the interviewees was sometimes looked upon as extra work. Though long hair itself may be prized, it is prized in certain formats not unlike many
other parts of the body. Dirty, unkempt, matted or lank long hair is not considered beautiful, just like slim slender limbs bathed in unwashed funk are considered enticing. Kay (white female with shoulder length blonde hair) saw long hair as a visual and recognizable achievement of hard work and care (not unlike how Ella saw her dreads:

“But I do think when you’re growing dreadlocks you’re conscious of how long it’s getting because that the whole point, that’s the whole process of locking your hair, is for length as well. But also not just because you want the length but I think that longer dreadlocks, give off the vibe you … that you have longevity or that you … that you’ve been able to tackle something, you know. So it’s kind of showing progress, in a way. And that’s why I love my dreadlock also is that the longer they are, it shows the longer that you’ve had them. Which I don’t think is kinda true for every hairstyle you know? So I think that, cause, yeah, cause the longer they are the longer you’ve had them and I think it kinda shows the longer you’ve been committed to a certain hairstyle.” – Ella

This idea of growth and care seem to resonate within the words of Kay as well, she saw her own long hair as the effort of “time, commitment and care”. Kay saw long hair as the product of commitment, just like Ella saw her dreadlocks. Obviously, these hairstyles or hair types are similar (not even possibly in the hair growth rate). However, the link that binds them is the effort that was made to gain length, length is what both women are working hard to gain. Neither of them would easily shorn off any amount of their hair and only begrudgingly trim ungainly ends. Long hair takes not only time to grow, but commitment and care to grow it to an acceptable status. This is a fact for most types of hair and is the most basic factor of why women find long hair beautiful: it is a living testament to the care of the self.

Who Owns Hair?

Autumn is a young biracial and multi ethnic woman, she identifies as black and white and Latina. Her hair is her crowning (literally) glory, waist length black tresses grace her head. She has been my friend throughout my time here at Swarthmore. What first drew me to her
was in fact her hair. Her hair texture is more Eurasian but her skin color make it clear she is not purely white. When I first saw her it astonished me to see a women of color with such long hair, even being mixed (which usually explains long tresses). Her hair is not just long, but gleaming and healthy, signs of intense maintenance. Her interview brought up most clearly a reoccurring theme: the ownership of female hair. The hair on a women’s head is hers physically however the cultural manifestation of her hair (through haircuts and styling) can sometimes belong to more than just the (her)self. It can belong to a longtime stylist, her overbearing and caring mother, the trendy whims of society etc. Hair exists for the self while battling, or entwining with other controllers.

The strongest examples of hair ownership was expressed in my interview with Autumn. As a biracial woman with a black mother, Autumn’s own hair is contrasted with her mothers. Her mother has a short head of tightly coiled kinks and regularly uses a hot comb to straighten it. Autumn saw this difference in her mother’s vehemence in keeping her hair as long as possible: “...there was always a lot of pressure in my family that I received from my mother to keep my hair long uhm because she always thought it was so beautiful and that she could not necessarily grow out her hair to this length as well because my hair had a straighter texture than hers...” (Interview 12/8/14) Her mother saw her long hair as beautiful, a beauty enhanced by the defiance of the stereotype that black girls have short hair and white girls have long hair (which relates directly back to structure of power and beauty).

This idea of hair ownership extends beyond just the way that people think about the hair on a women’s head but extends to how she cares for is as well. How a women cuts her hair, how she decides to color or style it, all these decisions are made with the idea of hair
ownership in mind. Autumn rarely cut her hair, and when she did so with the knowledge of her mother’s family and how much they loved her long hair:

"I don't always feel like the decision is my own to make such a drastic change... uhm I feel like one of the reason I hesitate is I do ultimately think of my grandmother and my aunts and my mother who are always constantly kind of showering me with praise when my hair looks long and nice and I take care of it and I feel like they would be so disappointed in me if I uhm for cutting it, that I ultimately find that that’s more important than my own conveniences with having the long hair."

It is a circle of reciprocal affection and control, not with malign intent yet regardless a powerful hold. Autumn’s hair is not just her own, it has become the manifestation of her black family’s wants. She effectively won’t cut her hair short because her family values it more than she does. Her hair though her own, is socially owned by the family around her who influence her to make and not make decisions about her hair. Though Autumn was not the only one who expressed feelings of ownership by family. For Burkina, a young black woman with a short afro there is a similar discussion about her hair:

“I think I was very sensitive, insecure child and I got made fun of a lot in school. And one thing that I thought would help me be more like the other boys and girls that I went to school with, who were almost all white was to have hair like them and for it to be longer. And to be able to do the same styles other girls did with their hair and I thought that that would be a way for me to fit in. And it was also because the length of my hair and the style of my hair was something that my parents were very much in control of. My dad liked longer, straighter hair and he's recently like changed that because he's seen how much the other woman in my life really like having natural hair because almost all of us do. But my parents opinions and like control over my hair was also a big part of it."

Here Burkina was explaining her decision to cut her hair short, one that was dissuaded by not only her parents but the society around her. Ownership of hair is essentially ownership of
choice. As humans we need and respect the opinions of others and in doing so we also look for approval in those opinions.

*Prizing Length*

Length is rewarded by our society, either through the male gaze or female recognition. Either women comment upon her hair complimenting it and verbalize finding it more attractive, or males compliment upon her hair and verbalize finding it more attractive. The American society thrives on compliments. Women with short hair are seen as “daring”, “edgy” and “unconventionally attractive”. When Beyoncé sported a pixie cut for a couple days, the internet was ablaze with the audacity, and called her haircut “fierce” (Freeman, 2013) When the word “fierce” is used it usually denotes something that is once again unconventional. The Guardian article went on to imagine how Beyoncé would fair in a fight against similarly pixie haired ladies: “It's cooler and tougher than Anne Hathaway and Carey Mulligan's cuts, which is as it should be, as Beyoncé looks as if she could easily have Hathaway and Mulligan in a fight in about two seconds flat.” (Freeman 2013). This haircut makes Beyoncé fierce, fearsome to take on in a fight. The short hair created this more normatively masculine persona, aggressive, dominant and strong. In reverse, long hair is not usually considered “fierce” (unless perhaps you shave off the side of your head which returns back to the previous argument). Long hair isn’t “edgy”, “cool” or “tough” it is simply thought of as beautiful. If short hair is unconventional than the convention is indeed long hair. Short hair is prized on its brazenness, its willingness to flout the norms of society, however long hair is prized for it societal rewards. Those societal rewards being easy acceptance into standards of beauty and power. The best example of this
are the people around individuals. The emphasis people make on the importance of long hair continues to impress the gravity of long hair onto women.

Janey is a young, austere and polished young woman at first sight. She sits comfortably in an upright position, hands clasped over one another, and ankles primly crossed. Her mid back length chestnut hair is beautiful but does not overwhelm her tall and slender frame. As we begin the interview the basic questions of background are almost redundant as she is one of my best friends. I did not know what to expect from this interview, but as with my others I found that there was much to be uncovered. In our interview Janey’s own experience of long hair was also molded by familial expectations: her grandmother: “I’m grandmother’s favorite child, favorite grandchild. There’s in my family no doubt about that. Uhm and her one comment is always about my hair. So that’s like, I do love my grandma but we’re all pretty sure that’s why she like me the best is because of my long hair. So like long hair is her standard of beauty and she loves my hair.” (Interview 12/8/14)To claim favoritism on the basis of hair, seems ridiculous however in acknowledging the importance and power of long hair it is easy to understand why her Grandmother places such value upon it.

The “prizing” of hair is very close and an integral part to “ownership” of hair. Janey’s grandmother in placing such value on her hair believes subconsciously or consciously in her own stake in it. Her grandmother believes that her granddaughter’s hair should be a certain way, i.e. long. Janey fulfilling this expectation is expected to keep in line with this ideal and any deviations are felt almost like a knife to the chest. The strong feelings may seem inconsequential and frivolous yet long hair is clearly prized and rewarded so its threatened existence is serious.
“Uhm, and like whenever... when I came back from Italy this summer I had gotten a haircut before I left, and then I got another haircut when I came back and she was like just very upset when she saw how short my hair was. And my dad never notices when I get my hair cut and like my sisters think it’s like long enough that a couple inches here and there don’t matter. But my grandma noticed immediately that my hair was shorter and she was like what did you do to your hair, and I was trying to explain to her that my ends were pretty fried, they had to come off. But she didn’t really understand that.”

It is Autumn’s black family (led by her mother) that alone places such importance on her length, as her father she explained cares nothing for her length. This difference of prizing her length is recorded even in her friendships as well: “Almost all my friends of color whenever I tell them I'm getting a haircut they're always like "Don't cut it too short!" I mean I definitely don't feel as though uhm that influences or pressures me as much as my familial uhm relation do but as the same time it does kind of reinforce those opinions and kind of suggest to me it’s not just my family that’s being crazy but that its part of a larger set of aesthetics." What aesthetics? The aesthetics of long hair, of a black woman with long hair. Over time the beauty standard for long hair has quietly but efficiently erased black women. Not because black women can’t have long hair but because it is harder to grow for them. Not genetically, but because of consistent and normalized abuse of the hair through hot combs, flattening irons and chemical relaxers.

However, even besides that the definition of long hair is essentially Eurasian in its reality. Black hair does not grown naturally down, it grows out and away from the head. Ella put these thoughts so clearly during her interview in her understanding of black hair:

“I use the term black hair to symbolize hair that gets what we call kinky or hair that doesn’t grown down, or hair that grew up and out, hair that can be made into an Afro. I think that to use the word length to describe that I don’t think black hair I measure I don’t think that, I don’t think length means something. Length itself is a Eurocentric construction of what hair should be. I don’t think length works or is even important to hair that grows up and out, why don’t we call it height? [giggles] I don’t know. The ways in which even having the word length itself is constructing the way hair should be.”
Black culture prizes long hair on women for precisely this idea of Eurocentric beauty. Autumn’s long hair is the pride of her family and friends. Her hair long and healthy is a pinnacle for what many other women aspire to have. Ella’s own hair though not as long as Autumn’s is still long enough to touch her shoulders. Despite their varied hairstyles the attraction of their hair stems from their length, it is beautiful because it flows downward.
Real Talk Pt.II: The Short Hair Crew

Masculinity and Short Hair

Short hair for women is a declaration of resistance, a refusal of feminized and sexualized standards of beauty and practices. Long hair can remove some of the agency in the sexualization of the female body and short hair reverses that, short hair removes that sexual power. No longer is a women able to swish her hair and issue sexual invitations nonverbally with her hair, instead she must in sense be more direct in her subtleties, and therefore more assertive. In the place of sexualized power (inherently female) masculinized power is left. For women to take upon characteristics gendered towards men is to not say that women therefore equalize the gender disparity but rather create a new definition of womanhood that does not answer to the male attraction. In a way, presupposing the power seen through short hair, is understanding that it is thought of as masculine, which is where the power is drawn from. These concepts will be explored in a later chapter.

Perusing through Forbes’s 25 Most Powerful Women in the World\(^8\) 40 percent of the women listed sported a haircut that did not touch the shoulders, which I categorized as short (Forbes 2014). 40 percent of the women had hair that just grazed their shoulder, which I categorized as medium length and last remaining 20 percent had hair that was below the shoulder. However, for the five who did have long hair, only one (Beyoncé) had hair that was past the clavicle region. Obviously, this does not represent an entirety of a possible

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\(^8\) It is interesting to point out, Forbes does not have a “Most Powerful Men” list but rather a most powerful people list. That is a list of 72 people, and only 8 of them were women—Forbes creates its list by allotting one slot for every 100 million people and allocated positions by financial and human resources controlled and possible influence on world events.
understanding of short hair and power. However, it is slightly indicative of the importance of short hair in the workplace and its relation to the appearance of power. None of these women want to rely on sexual power, nor expect others to see them as using it. On the Maxim Hot 100 2014 List (the 100 hottest women in the world) the top 10 females all had long hair, every single one. 9 Maxim, a men’s magazine taglines the list “A definitive list of the world’s most beautiful women” and explains it like this: “You voted, we counted, and the rest is supersexy history. From mind-bogglingly seductive supermodels to Hollywood’s most awe-inspiring actresses (with a bevy of beauties in between), the women of 2014 make up a roster so undeniably breathtaking you may get light-headed just reading it”(2014). These women who are being judged on their sex appeal all had long hair. Short hair, banishes those thoughts and makes society focus on other aspects, and not their hair. And though their feminine identity is seldom in question (they all present as females; wearing feminine clothing makeup and jewelry, wearing heels), it does rein back the negative aspects associated with femininity and produce more positive ones associated with masculinity, which is important in the workplace (i.e. from flighty and emotional to dependable and strong). Short hair in essence neutralizes the female identity in a way, especially in the workplace and in positions of power.

Society genders hair length making short masculine and long feminine. For either sex to subvert these norms is an act of rebellion however it cannot be ignored that subversion itself can be popularized and commoditized to be acceptable and palatable to the public. Short hair on women can be in the form of bob, a pixie cut or a fringe cut but once the hair becomes too masculine in its shortness it becomes stylized as “butch” or “manly”. The interviewee’s that I

9 The order from 1-10 was: Candice Swanepoel, Scarlett Johansson, Katy Perry, Irina Shayk, Jennifer Lawrence, Zooey Deschanel, Alessandra Ambrosio, Jessica Alba, Mila Kunis and Cara Delevingne.
had with short hair (Burkina, Hannah and Felicity) all sported haircuts that were above the ears in hair length. All three interviews expressed similar themes of gender misrepresentation through hair, the reconstruction of a feminine identity outside of long hair, which both strengthened the myth of long hair while also exposing how short hair can be used to subvert that myth and rewrite it.

Felicity as she sits down to our interview is excited. She is constantly touching her hair, running her hands through it and rubbing it, already suggesting a certain type of obsession with her hair. She is ready to talk to me about her hair and she comes into the interview with a positive and open mind because of it. During our interview she was sporting an asymmetrical Mohawk all dyed purple. Simply put Felicity loves experimenting with her hair. Her hair history traces a path of choice, and she describes her own feeling of freedom when it came to making decisions on her own hair. When she decided to first start cutting it short, she was worried about how her mother would take it: "My mom is very intent on all my sisters and I not being masculine. Initially when I was going to cut my hair short she was like I don't want you to have a masculine haircut, I want you to get..." Felicity (Interview 12/8/14) She was cognizant of that fear of masculinity being assumed because of her having short hair, yet that has not stopped her over the years as she has cut her hair shorter and shorter. By recognizing that short hair can be considered masculine she gives credence to the myth equating long hair to the feminine identity but not necessarily beauty.

Hair is culturally gendered. Society teaches that woman have long hair, and men have short hair. This is meant to differentiate between genders even if outward difference appear to be ambiguous or too similar. The need of categorization demands this differentiation so that
society can distinguish between a male and a female. Women who have short hair are immediately registered as males and most either choose to accept that gender assignation or distinguish their femininity through or without their hair. I.e. by wearing recognized short feminine haircuts (a pixie cut) or by wearing makeup and jewelry. Women can wear short haircuts and create a gender queer identity, bucking the norms of gender expression, or she can simply wear her hair short, bucking conventions of female gender expression.

Approval and Recognition

Hannah had always intrigued me, when I saw her walking around campus. She sported an Audrey Hepburn type pixie, with ginger hair. I rarely saw her without makeup, either natural looking or bold (she favored a red lip which highlighted her hair even more). When she decided to cut her hair she did not turn to her mother but her friends and boyfriend: "... and all my friends said that it would be really good, my boyfriend said he would really like it and so I kinda wanted to do it but at that point I had been growing out my hair for like three years, so there was sort of a sentimental attachment to it, a little bit irrationally..." (Interview 12/19/2014). Here is a woman cutting her hair short needing to recognize approval from outside sources, though Hannah acknowledged that the choice was hers. Hannah was afraid of cutting off all of her hard work but then expressed this sentiment later in the interview: "It's just hair, it'll grow back like shouldn't be that big of a deal but I guess it takes such a long time to grow back that you sorta get attached to it and become a little afraid of like oh my god its really gone, I can't just get this back immediately, so...there's a little bit of that I guess". So her hair meant a lot to her, but knowing that her decision could easily be reversed helped her make it.
Doubtless, there are a number of black women on campus with below shoulder length hair (actual hair) including me. However, including me, many of the black women with below shoulder length hair are working to grow out their hair so the number of women who wear their hair out when it’s above ear length is few. Most wear their hair in any number of protective styles such as braids. Burkina has the distinction of being one of the few black females on campus who wears her hair naturally and with little manipulation in a short fro. She purposefully keeps her hair short and cuts it to maintain the shorter length. She did this much earlier on then Hannah and Felicity who cut their hair in college. Burkina cut her hair short in 8th grade to about 1 cm and has kept it around that length since then. She said her longest point was about 2 in, which she said she was at now if she would comb out the kinks of her hair. Whereas Felicity and Hannah cut their hair in a sort of experimentation Burkina cut her hair short because of the continued hair breakage due to relaxers and her lack of good moisturizing and care “dryness along with all those other chemical kinda really messed my hair” (Interview 12/19/2014). For her, the decision to cut her hair was one made of necessity and not cosmetic.

Case of Mistaken Identity

Once all three women decided to go short they then experienced a self-acceptance of their new hair, but then had to also recognize the ways that society could treat them differently because of their hair. Both Felicity and Hannah have been mistaken for boys before, mostly from the back. This is the clearest example of how society views hair length. Felicity’s example of being mistaken as a boy was when she was attending a sports event and due to the cold weather was bundled up enough that her sex wasn’t very clear.
"Like for example whenever I like go to a like, every time I go to a Giants game right and I have a hat on and its cold or I have a coat on they always push me into the men's line and I'm like "Not a man!" like got to go back to the women's security line. It doesn't really bother me because I'm comfortable enough in my own identity so it's not like that big of a deal for me... Just cause I have short hair does not mean I'm a boy"

The most striking part of this story is the simplicity with which assumptions are made due to hair length. Without any other discernible and obvious markers of sex, the security people had to resort to using hair as a marker. For Hannah she originally feared being seen as male simply because of her shorter hair.

"I was worried about that before I cut it off I think and I worried that people might mistake me for a boy and for a tomboy or whatever uhm it doesn't really concern me now anymore its I think I hope pretty clearly not a men's haircut or at least a typical mens haircut"

Hannah was worried about her femininity being threatened by her short hair (once again adding credence to the idea that long hair is inherently feminine). The way she combatted that to assure her feminine identity to herself was by wearing makeup, lipstick or big earrings; normalized markers of femininity. She told me a story of when she was accidentally called “sir” by a customer in her restaurant where she wore all black. So in response to that she attempted to compensate for her lack of femininity with the practice listed above:

"... for that I would wear makeup, lipstick, big earrings because that was pretty much the only thing you could do with an all black uniform... in part I guess it was also because, to ensure that I did present as feminine because again button down black shirt kind of looks a lil bit ambiguous, it’s not really feminine or masculine one way or the other, it’s kind of the point..."

This all proves that females, even with short hair view long hair as being essentially feminine and when wearing short hair have to add other feminine aspects to their self-representation to overcome the masculinity inherent in short hair. I say that masculinity is inherent in short hair on females because of the stories above which evidence that is so, but also because if long hair
is feminine it makes sense that short hair is then masculine. That is not to say that short hair cannot be feminine but rather, overall shorter hair is not considered feminine in society.

**Short Hair as Reinvention**

Since having short hair as depicted by these three women is indeed a difficult process which requires them to be their own cheerleaders it is no surprise that each of them have found their experience with short hair to be one of the best ways of understanding how they wish to represent themselves. Burkina saw changing hair as way to reinvent the self. The only way that that can happen is if, hair is closely linked with how we see ourselves and how we see each other.

“I think changing your hair at all is an opportunity to reinvent yourself you know. Uhm and cutting your hair short being that reinvention comes from your own personal perspective on what normal beauty standards are like if you’re someone who feels like uhm long is something had to strive for and you were feeling like bound by that ideal of beauty and you cut your hair then like yeah that, cutting your hair is the best way to reinvent yourself. But that’s not always the case for everyone you know...”

Though Burkina does not say this implicitly, I feel that she hints that in cutting your hair short as a female you can reinvent yourself because you are indeed defying beauty conventions. By acknowledging the hold that long hair has in the minds of society and choosing to ignore it as Burkina, Hannah and Felicity have done they have reinvented their own ideas of beauty, power and the feminine identity.

As a female, whenever I see woman with short haircuts (above their chin) I’m always impressed, the shorter it is the more impressed I am. There is something impressive the resoluteness of a woman with short hair, willing to ignore societal conventions while being stylish, edgy and cool doing it. As I went through the interviews I recognized that my strong
impression comes from the idea that long hair is so intrinsic to being female but also because I feel like to make such a decision would require a sacrifice of my hair. Both Felicity and Hannah commented in their interviews of women just like me. Women who complimented both of them on their braveness and expressed sentiments not unlike me but yet would probably never cut their hair.

"I dunno I wish that more women who want to would be comfortable with cutting their hair off. I get a lot of comments from people who tell me like "that’s’ so brave of you, I wish I could do that but I’m like way too scared", or" I don't think it would look good on me" even if it would totally look good on them and they have nothing to be afraid of, uhm but so many people are so reserved about it for whatever reasons. Maybe reasons they probably don't tell me uhm I really just wish that more people would feel empowered enough and not be like worried about the repercussions or about it not you know, I dunno what they worry about [giggles] I know what I worried about but uhm I won't project that." – Hannah

"Or people are like " I could never cut my hair short like that", "that's so brave" and I'm like cutting your hair is not a, like for some people it's a really big deal but for me it's just like if you want cut your hair and you wanna try having short hair, like hair grows back. I love playing with my hair and I loved being able to change a ton of different things about it and what's really cool about having short hair is that people notice when you do stuff to it... I like that people can see drastic changes in it" —Felicity

For both of them in two separate interviews to have the same experience with women being impressed but yet still afraid of short hair, reveals a significant support for long hair equating to a feminine identity but also equating to beauty. Women obviously want to feel like women, but they also want to feel beautiful and wanted. The fear is then not only a loss of assuredness in the feminine identity but a loss of approval from the male gaze, i.e. society.

Femininity vs. Beauty

Over the course of the interviews with specifically the women with short hair I found that I had been associating the feminine identity with beauty. I was thinking that long hair was
feminine because people considered it beautiful. However, talking to these interviewee’s I started to explore the idea that the association of femininity and beauty can be and is indeed separate in understanding the appeal of long hair. They are linked because we essentialized the perfect feminine identity in our society on advertisements and in media. This essential feminine identity is depicted with long hair; our models, our musicians and our women in power they all adhere to this depiction of the feminine identity which is why beauty is then attributed to it. So is it that long hair is beautiful and therefore we see it as feminine? Or is it that long hair is considered feminine so the longer one’s hair is as a female the more beautiful you are? The second question is more accurate because it explains the draw of myths like Rapunzel which immortalize the myth equating long hair with beauty. All three of the interviewee’s with short hair understood the equation but found the idea that long hair is all that is beautiful and feminine for a female to be constricting. Hannah said it implicitly: "I think long hair is seen as the traditional essence of femininity or whatever..." However, Burkina felt that the association between femininity and long hair was archaic: "I think long hair is not so much a beauty standard anymore like they’re been, like I think there's been a shift in the perception of what your hair can be you know". Popular culture today accepts short hair on women today, yet it still requires them to wear their short hair in a specifically feminine way which Felicity argues against.

"The fact that I can be like it was intentional for me to have purple hair or like it was intentional for me to like have a mowhawk, you know it’s a choice I can make about my physical presentation that like is me being like I’m going to do this for myself like this is a choice I want to make about what I wanna look like. You know maybe it’s not me putting on makeup everyday but I want people to know that girls can be feminine and look really pretty with short hair and it doesn't have to be some waifish little like Anne
Hathaway haircut. Like I can have a cool edgy haircut and still be feminine and cool if I want too!"

There is a distinct difference in the eyes of the public between a pixie cut and a crew cut on a female. One is accepted as both feminine and beautiful while the other is not recognized as either. To have short hair as a female you choose between those choices, to be recognized as feminine and beautiful or to not be. Women with long hair don’t face that distinction. Long hair on a female is never considered masculine. In fact, long hair even on a male is usually considered to be feminine. So if we understand short hair to have two sides (femininity and beauty), then it merely strengthens the argument that long hair is automatically attributed to both (whereas with short hair one needs to work for it).

*Short Hair and Queerness*

Another interesting distinction between long and short hair is keyed into self-representation in the eyes of society. Since long hair is viewed as normalized and feminine and short hair is viewed as rebellious and masculine on the female body, long hair is associated with heterosexuality and short hair is associated with homosexuality. This myth centers on what is normalized in our culture: to be female and have long hair is normal. To be a woman that loves a male is also considered the norm. What is then placed outside the norm is short hair along with homosexuality. Felicity is a queer female, she identifies as a woman and exclaimed to me during the interview her fascination with the way society associates short hair and queerness.

"What about hair is what makes me feminine right? SQU [Swarthmore Queer Union] has a meeting every year on hair and how hair shapes peoples identities and stuff you know. And like it’s that weird thing like especially like when you get to Swat and like being a lesbian one of the first things that they say is they're like every girl who comes to Swat is a lesbian if she has long hair right when she gets here the first thing she’s going to do is cut it off cause now she’s a "liberated woman"... and it’s like or not that, you know!"
The “liberated woman” being the recognition that the dominance of the male gaze encourages women to have long hair, whether or not they decide to do it for themselves. In recognizing and then rebelling against that with short hair the “liberated woman” can recreate her own definition of what femininity looks like to her. The association of queerness and short hair supports the myth that long hair is the norm for a feminine identity.

All three women see their own hair as being part of their feminine identity but not all of it. To them they face no qualms in their surety of the femaleness and see their short hair not as a rebellion against standards but simply as a choice. To have short hair is indeed to be disregarding a norm that values long hair, yet for some women the choice goes beyond that into something that is purely individual and personal. Hannah related these feelings at the end of her interview:

"I was worried about looking less feminine, uhm sometimes I thought to myself if I cut off all my hair I'll have to wear makeup ever single day and that didn't happen [rueful laugh]... I was a little bit worried about being mistaken for not a women, which has only happened once and it didn't actually really matter at all I sorta laughed about it and brushed it off, it didn't really get to me at all which I thought it would but I dunno I feel confident enough in that I am a women and I am feminine uhm to be not really bothered by comments like that especially when they were not intentional, they were completely accidental."

Hannah, just like Felicity and Burkina all recognize that society wants them to present themselves in a specific manner but choose not to, not specifically in an attempt to buck against the status quo but to recreate themselves, and define their own feminine identity. In conclusion my interviews with these three ladies only supported the myths of long hair as prevalent and influential in society. Society does indeed place long hair as an identifier of gender and sex. Long hair is considered beautiful and feminine while short hair is usually
considered masculine unless effort is made to dispel that notion. Due to the norm of 
heterosexuality in our culture (America normalizes the relationship of a man and woman, 
making any other such pairings or groupings even abnormal) short hair as a queering of the hair 
norm for females is associated with queerness. However, as stated above short hair does give 
women the chance to recreate their own idea of feminine beauty, outside the dominance of 
the male gaze. 

Now to cut your hair short is an act which require much confidence in the self and some 
women do not have that. For women who do not like having short hair but do not have the 
time or the money to grow their hair out or who just wish to have flexibility with their hair 
styles the next step is artificial hair. If long hair instantly gratifies a female with 
acknowledgments of beauty it is no surprise why the business of weave is thriving and growing. 
The power that comes with being identified as that beauty is indeed the allure and attraction 
for women to want and covet long hair. The next chapter will explore the weave industry and 
common misperceptions to its usage, while also understanding the lived experience of females 
whose long hair is not their own.
An Industry of Feminization

Why Weave?

When looking at the possibilities of hair, there is no bigger domain than weave. Fake hair is an empire, a billion dollar industry driven by the ideal of beauty. Weave is not simply bereft pieces of hair but the basis, a foundation of imagination creating a unique fantasy of beauty. Weave has the ability to create new identities, change perceptions and influence individualities. A woman who wears weave can aspire to create a new self-identity, one dictated by the society they aim to please. Though most women do wear weaves in order to attain length, weave cannot be simply boiled down to the equation answer of long hair envy. Rather it signifies what one might call a white lie, to achieve presupposed beauty. Meaning, quite simply, women put fake hair on their head to achieve their own (inspired by society usually) idea of beauty and length.

When society thinks of weave, they think of black people. If you put in the word weave on Google Search Images, the subtopic searches include: ratchet, bad and braids. The resulting images are all of black women, with long hair. When the word weave is replaced with extensions, suddenly all types of people are included. If you do a Google Search in Images of hair extension the subtopic searches include: before and after, clip-in and black women. The following images are of white women with long hair. The sub topic search of black women under hair extensions clearly denote the specificity of “hair extensions” alluding to non-black women specifically. Weave is fake hair, fake hair are extensions, and weave is extensions. They are all the same but society places different value to different heads of hair.
My own experiences of weave cannot be discounted as I venture through attempting to link the industry of weave into my analysis of long hair. As a young black woman I have lived over two decades of hair exploration. I spent most of my childhood with relaxed hair, ascribing to standards of “good hair” Hair that is silky and combable as it falls straight down. When encompassed in braids, they were usually no smaller than a pinky and numbered in the hundreds. Each end of the braid was coiled hair, as I used a type of hair called yaky braid. When I was 15 over the summer I installed my first weave. At the time it was attractive to me because I felt that “real” women had hair like that: long hair that touched below their shoulders and moved with the wind.

The next time I wore a weave was when I was a senior in high school, and again in my first semester at college. I got a multitude of compliments with my hair in a weave. My environment at home and at college is white washed and my hair in a weave was more acceptable and recognizable to white peers. My black peers saw the hairstyle for its acquiescence to a beauty standard, neither a bad or good change but an accepted and almost expected one. Older black women are rarely pictured in magazines with braids, or short natural hair (though long natural hair is sometimes acceptable). As a young girl I understood the “real” woman wore their hair in weaves, unless their natural hair was long. Now in college

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10 Since I have been in college I have found myself surrounding by older black women with short natural hair. However, I wonder if that is more a sign of class within the academia, along with the fact that maintenance of natural hair can be expensive and time consuming. Especially when the individual needs to be concerned with presenting themselves to a largely white audience.
where I have had more freedom to create my own hair identity, I still found myself drawn to weaves. They create to me the image of a put together woman. However, at the base of that understanding is one of texture yes but more importantly length. That has always been the obsession at the heart of wearing weaves (though there are short weaves).

As referenced in previous chapters there are parts of hair culture that I have taken to be truth only to realize that they apply to a limited cultural scope. Such as the idea that “black women can’t grow long hair” and “only black women wear weaves”. This chapter speaks more to the black experience with weave though there are undoubtedly other races that wear extensions with regularity. I focus on the black experience with weave because of the complexity inherent in the juxtaposition exemplified in this case; Black women’s hair is usually not like the hair they attach to their heads.\(^{11}\) This complex interaction is what makes the black experience the most interesting to analyze.

A Brief History\(^{12}\)

Weave is not a newfangled invention, its traceable roots hint back to 3400 B.C. when the Egyptian privileged used fake hair to create stiff wigs. These were normally made of human hair and dyed sheep’s wool, and for the poor any substance close enough like straw (Curious History 2014; Berry 2014). They also wore extensions by attaching them to the head with knots,

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\(^{11}\) Most hair that black women put on their heads is Eurasian in texture and is sourced (if it’s human) from Asia. Though there has recently been a trend of “natural hair extensions” the hair utilized is still Asian hair that is then chemically treated to mimic the kink of Afro hair, it’s not actually Afro hair.

\(^{12}\) This is a history of added hair in the format of wigs and hair extensions however it is one that moves mostly through Europe and America. While this project only focuses on the experience of the American female. I would add that this history is wholly incomplete as it completely ignores the Asian and Afro usage of hair extensions which is undoubtedly a noteworthy history in it of itself. However, all the information found on the history of weave led to this Western dominance (which is not unlike most historical understanding of the origin of many cultural norms).
beeswax and resin. Even in 3400 B.C. long hair was already attached to wealth and power, for only the rich could afford elaborate wigs and knotted extensions. The next time extensions and weave were historically recognized was in the 1700’s in America and Europe sported powdered wigs as once again a notation of wealth and nobility. These wigs were made with horse hair and framed over the natural hair and hair extensions over the frame (Curious History 2014). Wigs were a status sign, they announced a person’s worth to society (Berry 2014). Moving forward to the 1800’s a trend called Apollo Knots required the wealthy to once again don extra hair to achieve bouffant hairstyles. The 1900’s brought hair extensions to the masses removing it from the realm of the rich. “They always used human hair in them and they started at just .95 for a bundle but costlier extensions could go up to as high as $25 (equals $2500 in 2014)” (Berry 2014). Clip in extensions were popularized under the name “the Switch” as they could be easily removed making “switching” one’s hairstyle and look quite simple (Curious Hair 2014; Berry 2014). By the 1940’s long hair was recognized as something that could be “grown” artificially and long hair extensions boomed in popularity. The 60’s continued the need for hair extensions and wigs with hairstyles such as the Beehive (Curious History 2014). The 90’s brought more affordable wigs while the 2000’s popularized them in the media creating a transparency about wigs and hair extensions. Now in 2015 hair extensions and wigs are accessible in various forms to all types of people with a range of monies. Furthermore, there is more recognition in the general
public about the possibilities for hairstyling through the usage of hair extensions, not just in the people that use them. However, the culture and history of weave tends to be shrouded in a mythological secrecy, perhaps because of shame or pride. Regardless, the understanding of weave seems to be specific to culture, gender and situation.

Where and How?

In the world of fake hair, there are endless possibilities. One can buy synthetic or human, Indian Brazilian wave or Indian Remy or Indian Malaysian. Weave, extensions, fake hair. All these varying monikers refer to head hair which can be bought and attached to the human head. This hair comes in a variety of lengths, curls, colors and types. It can be human or synthetic (fake hair fibers usually constructed of plastic). The main differences between these two types of hair (human and synthetic) is that human hair moves naturally and easily unlike stiff synthetic hair. With the ease of movement in human hair also comes the ease of styling, since once can indeed utilize it like one’s own head of hair, whereas synthetic hair is inherently flammable and combustible due to a low threshold for high temperatures [though Kanekalon (a specific brand of synthetic hair) does claim to be flame retardant]. These differences are also most evident in pricing. Where a full bundle of human hair could cost hundreds of dollars, a bundle of synthetic hair could reach a maximum of $60. All in all it may be easier to understand why selling and producing weave could be a lucrative business and why it sometimes is wittingly referred to as black gold.

Synthetic weave is easy to find, it is manufactured in factories. It is created with polymer blends not unlike the ones found in human head hair meant to mimic it, albeit insufficiently.
Human weave on the other hand comes from one source and one source only, the head of a human. In recent years there have multiple attempts to uncover what processes allow this hair to make its way to American markets and the greedy consumers who covet it. In Chris Rock’s *Good Hair* he travels to India to the Tirumala Sri Venkateswara Temple in Tirumala, India. In the movie he explores one root of the prime export of Indian hair; hair tonsuring: an offering to a deity (Stilson 2009). The hair taken in each day is a little over a ton and is sold a few times a year for hair extensions and cosmetics. The total revenue is close to $6 million dollars (Wikipedia). This temple though now famous because of continued ventures concerning the origin of human hair is not the only place where human hair is collected; not in India and not in the world. However, the singularity of the temple lies in the fact that India exports the most human hair in the world, and is only narrowly followed by China. Together the two export most of the world’s human hair. This hair will find its home one the heads of millions of women around the world including America.

All in all, wherever it comes from, weave is a business. It is the most lucrative yet most hidden part of the black hair industry. According to data the industry was worth $684 million dollars in the 2012 market. However, it is also noted that it does not take into account “general market brands, weaves, extensions, wigs, independent beauty supply stores, distributors, e-commerce, styling tools and appliances”, adding these the market could reach a half trillion dollars (Opiah 2014). Weaves are expensive, not just to buy the hair but to also maintain it (once a week) and retighten it once a month as well. Not to mention the price it costs to also “install” the piece. Synthetic hair can sell as cheap as $10 a pack but they are likely to tangle quickly leading to a short life on a client’s head. This along with the fact that the hair is usable
once and only once, and is virtually impossible to style considering its flammability makes it undesirable to most women.

*What is Weave?*

Synthetic hair is primarily used in braiding styles. This style encloses the synthetic hair in some form either in a braid, twist or cornrow which leaves its negative aspects negligible. There is no need to worry about tangling when the hair is enclosed in a braid, and there is no need to using hair appliances to curl or straighten the hair, which can be achieved once by submerging the finished hair style in hot water. This will force the hair to hold onto the style (either curly or straight) for the length of wear. However, the reality of braided hairstyle is that they do not look “natural”, i.e. they are a specifically black hairstyle and do not fit into the Eurasian standard of hair beauty since they do not look like one’s own hair coming out of their head. To achieve that “natural” look one must wear a weave.

Synthetic hair with its fallbacks is not the best for a weave. However, it is the most affordable option for sporting a weave especially when human hair (not mixed with high quality synthetic) sells for at least $100 a pack. Human hair is offered on one website for $140 a pack for the basic length of 12” (which for straight hair might be right below the collarbones,
while on curly hair might hit right above the shoulder) (Fab Hair Premium Extensions) To get a full head of weave, meaning to have one’s entire head covered with weave without any of your own hair left out one would require at least 3 pack of hair. To that end, a full head of hair could cost around $500. This sum is simply for the hair which can be reused for up to two years (Jones 2014). Most hair styles including sew-in weaves need to be redone or taken out after a maximum of three months, so the shelf life of human hair is fantastically long. The install at a salon could cost anywhere from $50 to $200 and upwards. The install refers to the action of braiding a pattern on a client’s head to sew in the wefts of hair into the head. The pattern protects the client’s own hair and allows the client to perhaps wear their hair up without exposing the tracks (the cornrows of hair) or parting it in a certain direction. A weft of hair is the hair sewed onto a long piece of cloth which is used to attach their hair by needle and thread to the customer’s head. The intricacy of the installation all lend to the most important and valued illusion of weave, the illusion of naturalness. That is the inevitable aim for weave, for it to look natural on one’s head, like the head grew it itself.

Weave in the Present

A new salon chain has popped up in the past few years soared in popularity in the hair community: The Weave Bar. The Weave Bar is a salon whose platform is based on the service of a quick, professional and cheap weave installation: a starting price of $50. This is what pushed this salon chain forwarded in popularity, the cheap price of a professional and quick service usually marketed from upwards of $100 for a reliable service. Reliability is of utmost importance in the installation of a weave. The stylist must ensure that the client’s hair is safely braided, and the hair itself is properly installed. If it is not the client can face the possibility of
embarrassment, hair damage and loss. For a woman spending from $100 upwards to get her hair done, the distinct possibility of failure and hair ruination does not sit lightly. “Ultimately, we give you the hair you’ve always desired and our business was founded to provide great service and products at an affordable price.” (Weave Bar) The Weave Bar promises quick service, affordability and reliability. Those are three traits crucial to a satisfying salon experience.

When I myself traveled to a Weave Bar location in a suburb of Philadelphia I found it nestled in a community which necessitated the need for bars on the windows and a buzzer door system. When I walked in I found the salon empty. Which only served to accentuate the décor and feeling of the environment. It was like I had just walked into an upscale salon in Midtown. The walls were unburnished bricks, with sleek and clean lines of black sweeping through the salon in forms of mirrors, chairs and sinks. Every tool gleamed in their place and overall it looked like the space to make clientele feel special and pampered for a day. The day I went there were no customers for the hour and a half I spent there. The two stylists working were both young in their early and late twenties both wearing their own weaves (both past shoulder length). Denise was 27, a black woman wearing all black with a mid-back length hair colored with bangs. Katana was 21, also a black woman who was short and curvy with chest length hair. They both did not have relaxed hair and wore their hair natural underneath. They told me that weekdays were appointment days so only people who had made appointments could enter the salon. They said during the weekends when they were open to all clients their salon was usually packed.
Denise and Katana defined their clients as about 80% black with a scattering of whites and Hispanics. In their experience they explained to me that the most popular length of hair was 18 or 16 inches of hair. This is well below shoulder length on any type of hair type. When I asked them about why they thought people liked weaves so much, including themselves Denise began with “I love it”. Such strong words which highlight the pervasive feeling most clients feel about their weaves. This was followed with statements such as “I save it, I cherish it” by referencing her cycling of human hair, “life is much more convenient” highlighting the simplicity of not having to deal with one’s own hair and “everybody wears weave” by Katana assuming a cultural norm which is ubiquitous and culturally shared. Their fevered speech about weave highlighted to me the importance of it to women, but specifically the importance of having long hair.

Weave and Length

Weave is much more than just idle piece of hair it is a force of expression for women to explore their identities with. Weave creates an illusion the women wishes the viewer to see. It allows some women to completely hide away their hair while allowing others to add length and fullness to their hair. There is no limit to what illusion weave can create, however at the end of the day it remains just that, an illusion. That illusion allows women to feel control of their hair
and of their appearance. That is why weave is important, the illusion and the control that
women can wield.

It is impossible to truly separate weave from length. Weave is about “adding” either an
entire head of hair or length/fullness. In all of its incarnations weave is rarely offered in lengths
less than the shoulder. This is not because it is impossible to install shorter styles but rather
women wearing weaves (braids, sew-ins, extensions, wigs) all aim to attain that length. Women
pay by the length of the hair, not merely by the salon process of adding it to their head. It is
here where the analysis of length and weave is most on display. Women literally pay to have
long hair. Though they pay for the hair they receive much more than just a hairstyle. They
receive status, one imbued with societal gratitude for affixing the prescribed beauty descriptors
to the body, male recognition and female respect. Woman with weaves are acknowledging
either consciously or subconsciously the positive associations with long and manageable hair.
Unlike braided extensions which do not mimic Eurasian type hair, weaves create a more
realistic illusion of long hair actually belonging to the wearer. When women receive an
exorbitant amount of compliments for their weave it’s hard to distinguish beauty from long
hair. Celebrities continue this trend of connection between beauty and long weave (Beyoncé,
Naomi Campbell, Nia Long, Kim Kardashian, Christina Aguilera, the list can go on). There is no
end the associations of weave, long hair and beauty. So it makes sense that average American
women will pay above and beyond to achieve this beauty. Weave is the exemplification of the
business of long hair.
Conclusion

_The Very Beginning_

The body is the site of the lived experience. It is a visual narrative that can add depth and breadth to the experience of the individual, from scars, to presentation, to the clothes that are used to cover it. The body is the culminating gift and curse of mankind, as we are blessed to have it yet doomed to corral and abuse it. The importance of the body lies in the formation and manifestation of culture, in essence a cipher to the intricacies of human social evolution as argued by Mary Douglas (2003). The human body telegraphs emotions with facial tics, bodily gestures and these movements are indicative within certain cultural contexts. When we see a body in a space, it does not stand alone. It is a representative of an individuality which is located within specific human understandings.

The body is the focus of a discourse that is constantly in flux between the individual and society. The body represents what society or cultural influences presents to the individual, either in the expression of acculturation (consent to hegemony) or repudiation (identification with a subculture) (Gramsci 1992; Hebdige 1991, 1979). In this same sense the body, though an outward exhibition of culture, is in effect a device of cultural laws. As both Pierre Bourdieu and Michael Foucault would argue, culture dictates the way the body, and therefore the individual, presents itself as a site of cultural reproduction (1998; 2010,1984;1979,1977). The cultural norms that frame the social location of the body, limit and cage its expression. The docile body does not know how to do anything but stand within the clearly delineated lines that society lays out.
The female body stands as the zenith of this critical analysis of the body. The female body throughout time has been caged and fenced not unlike the male body, its very existence dictated by the societal norms. However, the difference between sexes becomes apparent when one recognizes the cementation of these societal norms where norms are clarified and recognized: laws. Women’s bodies have been and continue to be legally controlled by society, in legislation about dress appearance, voting rights, sexuality, pregnancy and more. Pregnancy as the sole domain of the female [i.e. only females can cultivate and produce new life] is where female power is recognized. By females as a site of possible self-reclamation and choice, but by society as a site of control and domination.

The female body stands as the clearest site of social reproduction because of this connection to motherhood, the growth of a new life and therefore a new culturally created body (Martin 2001). This newly created body once again becomes a site of cultural interpretation, and societal control. The female body is the progenitor of that cycle. It is through the female body that human bodies are physically produced and as mothers they can culturally produce the human being as well. Even with that unique ability the female body stands as a pawn in society’ power games. Susan Bordo explains that the female body is slave to a thoroughly malleable system of social control, rewriting Foucault’s definition of power to explain the structural constraints that form this control [the new definition being power stemming from different societal structures than from a single group; power being a relationship] (1989; 1979, 1977). This rewritten definition of power, is key in the analysis of social markers and their importance. The positionality of the female body expresses a different story than the male, which requires analysis outside the patriarchal structure. The world is
made in the male gaze, for the male gaze. It does not take into account the female viewpoint. The female body in particular outside the understood concepts of the human body, also becomes the embodiment of expression in a way the male body cannot, through hair. It is true that the uniqueness of female expression can be explored through other avenues such as clothing, the genitalia or the face and cosmetics. However, hair plays a specific role in society that has been a constant part of culture for millennia, its historical importance has been unchanging, and that is why it is key.

*The Illusions of Beauty*

There can be no doubt in this age of the power of suggestion, appearance and will. With these three things any individual can create power or create an illusion of power. Because our modern society is one that thrives on beauty, on perfection. This is a type of power that cannot be denied. Beauty is more than just a simple symmetry of lines, it is the suggestion of all he social cues that society terms a successful person. Let’s take for instance the model Kate Upton, she is a woman the general public terms beautiful. With long blonde locks, blue eyes and tan skin she is the “classic All-American” beauty. Her tan skin impresses the idea she spends copious amounts of time in the sun being active which then is reflected on her slim body. As a “classic all-American" beauty she seems approachable in her “normality”. Her beauty is enough power that it can be translated to money, as she is a professional model. For those whose beauty is not “right” for modeling there is still power in their beauty. This is a power that

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13 I put “all-American” in quotes because I believe that the idea of an “all-American” ideal is fake and imagined. By using this term, people are usually sub textually referencing a Western European ancestry emerging in the WASP image.
14 “Normality” equaling the majority and ignoring the minority existence.
can be used to influence others through flirting, unknown aids in positions that encourage the hiring of attractive people and so on. The power of beauty lies in its ability to influence the actions of others measurably and reliably.

Kate Upton is a template for beauty but she does not complete the whole scope of how beauty can be imagined or found. The ideal of the long blonde haired female excludes women whose skin color would usually not produce hair that color. This is where race comes into play. You cannot dialogue about beauty without referencing and acknowledging the maze of dictations race can produce in conversation. For every normalized template of beauty another one must be created, with different definitions and norms that fit the multitude of colors and ethnicities that define beauty separately. Each part of this multitude does not have the same definition of beauty and even possibly the correlation to beauty and power (some cultures might consider being beautiful to be a weakness and term it a cause for exclusion). In this idea, certain beauty types are raised on top of others which is where power also accumulates. For there to be “beautiful” there must be “ugly”. Therefore any discussion of beauty must include race, and to ignore it is to dismiss the individuality of the human being.

At the End

Long hair is something that has reached across multiple societies (perhaps because of the success of colonialism) to reach into multiple cultures. Long hair has had a deep history all related to beauty and power in different ways, as evidenced by the long standing and powerful tale of Rapunzel. Today long hair is still just as fascinating to understand as it was centuries ago. Long hair has actual lived rewards for females today, from distinctions of beauty, to esteemed
regard from society to a secured feminine identity. It makes sense to then see a booming market for long hair. Though just as long hair prescribes societal rewards it also seems to be a way that society corrals women. Women with especially long hair feel that their hair is not their own, as compared to women who just buy their long hair. Regardless of how ownership is defined by the individual female, long hair is something to be prized. Not only because of the maintenance time but also for what illusions it creates to cloak the female. Long hair is inherently powerful. In further attempting to understand it and how females in society view it, long hair can be given meaning and is culturally defined.

Throughout this thesis I have explore how long hair is viewed by our society but also by the women who are imposed with these societal norms. The myths of long hair are influential and historically supported. In our magazines, advertisements and media we glorify women with long hair, short hair depicts women who are outside the norm, edgy, rebellious queer. Long hair is considered beautiful because it is considered essential to the feminine identity. This myth is based on reality and fact and therefore has been proven to be an actual norm in our society. One actually affecting women, whether or not they even recognize it.
Appendix A. Interview Questions

1. What is your name?
2. Where are you from?
3. What’s your major here at Swat?
4. Do you care about fashion or style?
   a. If yes, who is your style icon and why?
   b. If no, why?
5. When you think about Rapunzel, what is the most striking thing about her? Why?
6. Do you think hair in real life has the ability to be as powerful as Rapunzel’s?
7. What do you think is so fascinating about long hair?
8. Would you call your own hair, very short, short, mid-length, long, very long or something else?
9. Do you like your hair length? Why or why not?
10. Do you think your hair length gives you self-confidence if you were to be flirting with a guy, at a party?
    a. At a business interview?
    b. In the classroom?
    c. During sex?
11. In these situations, would you consider changing the way you present your hair to better acclimate in these situations? Do you make it seem shorter or longer? Is it possible to acclimate?
12. When you look at other women do you find them more beautiful if they have longer or shorter hair?
13. If you are heterosexual, do you find men with long hair attractive? Why or why not?
14. When you see women with hair to their waists, what do you think? When you see women with short haircuts (above the ears) what do you think?
15. Do you think short haircuts are feminine?
16. Do you think the essential feminine identity has long hair?
17. How do you think of your own hair length now, at the end of these questions?
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