GRESHAM COLLEGE

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# EXPLORING THE BODY: HAIR

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In June 2015, Rachel Dolezal was exposed for having lied about being of African American heritage. Dolezal was head of her local branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; she had given talks at the Eastern Washington University on African American politics, including a class on the role of hairstyles in the Black Power Movement; she was active in the African American community. The problem was: she was not African American. In making the transition, spray tans were never going to be enough. Crucial to her "passing" as Black was the way she styled her hair in long dreadlocks, weaves, and box braids. Even one of her critics had to admit that she "Definitely nailed the hair, I'll give her that".

In May 2019, Anna Sorokin (alias Anna Delvey) was imprisoned for scamming her way to the top of New York's High Society by pretending to be a German heiress with a 60-million- dollar fortune. She may have worn Alexander Wang outfits but her "ratty" hair with split ends betrayed her. In the words of one commentator, "No real heiress would be seen dead without immaculately coiffured hair".

These two cases illustrate the importance of hair to human culture, including its centrality to the performance of self and knowledge of others. There is no mystery over its physiological properties. Except for the lips, soles and the feet, and palms, all parts of the human body are covered with hair. Its primary function is protective – it regulates body temperature and helps with insulation. Like fingernails and toenails, hair is made from the fibrous structural protein Keratin. Like skin, its colour is due to melanin and its growth depends on factors such as hormones, nutrition, sunlight, and climate. Hair scientists tend to divide hair into three parts: the upper segment contains the infundibulum and isthmus; the middle segment contains the bulge which stores stem cells; and the bottom segment contains the bulb.

None of this matters much to most of us because hair is much more than its physiological manifestations. Numerous historians, anthropologists, and sociologist have observed that the body is a site for the cultural production and staging of the self. Hair is one of the most visible of these social markers, in part because it surrounds the eyes, that central foci in any face-to-face encounter.

Hair is a highly visible cultural artefact that is extremely malleable. It can be cut, coloured, curled, braided, knotted, crimped, twisted, straightened, backcombed, teased, moisturized, oiled, gelled, sprayed, shaved, and wrapped. People wear wigs, weaves, hairpieces, and extensions; they cover their hair with scarfs and hijabs, taqiyahs and yarmulkes. We instinctively think we "know" something about a person if they sport the "big bold hair" of Southern US white women. The short, cropped hairstyles fashionable among their professional counterparts living in the urban coastal regions of the US convey different messages.

The centrality of hair to our sense of self is often only fully realized when it falls out. We end up lamenting its loss. The process of becoming bald differs between men and women. Men typically experience a receding hairline from the temple while balding at the vertex while women's hair tends to thin over the mid-scalp and frontal areas. Women experience baldness less frequently than men. Because women have higher levels of estrogen and lower levels of androgens, chemotherapy poses the greatest threat to our luxuriate locks. For many women, losing hair can feel like a bereavement, leading to a fear of socializing, extreme anxiety, and depression.

In contrast, baldness is a normal part of male aging. It happens to twelve per cent of British men by the time they reach twenty-five years of age. Sixty-five per cent of men aged over 65 inspect their bald patches in their bathroom mirrors every morning.

Of course, just because something is "normal" does not mean it is welcomed. Follicle invigorating products are popular amongst men and restorative surgery has become a major area of aesthetic medicine. Modern hair transplantation was started by Norman Orentreich in 1959, using a "punch technique" (punch sizes of 4mm, each containing 16-20 hairs). But the results looked unnatural and often left patients with long scars and "plugs" of hair. In the 1980s, micrograft surgery was introduced, enabling follicular transplantation. However, it too left scars. Today, transplants are almost invisible. But the process remains laborious: a single transplant session can take seven hours and involves the insertion of 1,500 to 2,000 grafts. In other words, men undergoing the process bear a great deal of pain to restore their hair: local anaesthesia is needed.

Part of the reason that hair is so central to personhood is because it sends out signals to oneself and others about gender, class, status, age, generation, marital status, religion, group membership, familial ties, and politics. It is personal, but it is also a highly visible cultural artefact. Elaborate hairstyles tell people that the person has time and money. These messages are profoundly historical. In eighteenth-century Europe, for example, male elites powdered, feathered, piled up, and curled their hair. Up to two pounds of powder could be used to dress the hair of a single man for a single day.

Aesthetics is not merely eye-candy: it is power. Aesthetic judgments about hair are fundamentally political. When early colonists went to America, they were intrigued by the relative hairlessness of Native American men, which they interpreted as proof of the "feebleness of constitution" of indigenous peoples. This was just one more excuse for white colonists to deny them rights to property, community, and self-governance.

To degrade other peoples, hair could be forcibly removed. Shaving practices were important activities carried out during slavery and military conquest. Slave-traders routinely shaved their "chattel" as a form of dehumanization. They also shaved and oiled the faces of enslaved men to make them look younger; buyers would seek to detect this fraud by licking the cheeks of male slaves to detect stubble. In times of war, women who collaborated with enemy men were seized, shorn, and paraded through the streets. Criminals and prisoners might also be subjected to the same indignity: as late as 1829, drunks in the streets of Glasgow were routinely shaved as a form of punishment.

In modern Britain, the obsession with hair peaked in the nineteenth century. Victorians were obsessed with hair, taking for granted that hair conveyed social and emotional messages. Indeed, it is difficult to find a Victorian novel that does not linger on the hair of its characters. Hair was believed to expose a person's inner character and state of mind. In Wuthering Heights, for example, Isabella Linton is portrayed as having artfully arranged curls until, when upset, "her hair uncurled: some locks hanging lankly down, and some carelessly twisted round her head". In contrast, the novel starring Dracula described his hair "growing scantily round the temples, but profusely elsewhere. His eyebrows were very massive, almost meeting over the nose". Bestial hair corresponded to a bestial soul.

Victorians also made hair into works of art. The Great Exhibition on 1851 showcased at least eleven displays of hair art and a prize was offered for "a large portrait of Her Majesty Queen Victoria" made from hair. There was a flourishing trade in hair jewelry, created by professional hair-workers. Swiss jeweler Antoni Forrer was the most famous, employing up to 50 workers at his Regent Street shop "by appointment to the Queen". It was a pastime enjoyed by many middle and upper-class women as well. In their drawing rooms, they crocheted and knitted hair into ornaments, necklaces, bracelets, and purses.

Hair was a particularly prominent aspect of relic cultures in Britain between the 1850s and the 1880s. Wreathes were made from the hair of women who had been shorn in anticipation of devoting themselves to Christ within the confines of convents. Locks of hair were cut from dead infants and lovingly worn around their grieving mother's necks. The infant's hair could be finely cut and then sprinkled on cardboard on which glue had been painted in the likeness of the dear-departed child.

On a happier note, hair relics forged binding connections between lovers. Because there was believed to be a "sympathetic connection" between a person and parts of their body (this included nail parings and excrement as well as hair), locks of hair encased in lockets or rings possessed magical powers as well as representing something of incalculable value. This was why, after Catherine in Wuthering Heights died, Heathcliff removed Edgar's hair from her locket, threw it on the ground, and replaced it with a lock of his own hair. This would ensure an everlasting relationship with the woman he loved. Queen Victoria similarly had Garrard's (the royal jewelers) make her beloved Prince Albert's hair into at least eight pieces of jewelry. When Nelson was dying on board H.M.S. Victory, he requested: "Pray let my dear Lady Hamilton have my hair, and all other things belonging to me". The popular mid- nineteenth century Godey's Lady's Book summarised the sentiments behind such poignant gestures by declared that "hair is at once the most delicate and lasting of our materials and survives us, like love. It is so light, so gentle, so escaping from the idea of death, that, with a lock of hair belonging to a child or friend, we may almost look up to heaven and compare notes with angelic nature. We may almost say: I have a piece of thee here, not unworthy of thy being now."

As historian Deborah Lutz put it in her 2011 article entitled "The Dead Still Among Us", the "hair jewel says… that we will meet again".

Given the importance of hair as a sign, it is not surprising to find Victorians developing elaborate schemes to ensure that people "got it right". The (pseudo-)science of physiognomy was one body of knowledge that could be employed to "read" other people's minds and personalities. Phrenology was an extremely popular ideology that maintained that the brain was the organ of the mind. By examining the "bumps" of the skull, phrenologists claimed that they could identify dominant "faculties" of that person's mind, including "Benevolence", "Combativeness", and "Philoprogenitiveness" (love of children). It was a science that could be used to learn about and judge other people: everything from character to propensities was visible to the "knowing eye". Despite this emphasis on the shape of the skull, phrenology also had a lot to say about hair. Johann Caspar Lavater, the famous physiogomist, taught that hair was a natural symbol that could be used in humoral diagnoses of character. Thus, he lectured, phlegmatic men possessed thin, shoulder-length hair; the hair of melancholics was melancholic; that of cholerics, lively. Lavater also encouraged people to pay attention to beards – at least those sported by men (he contended that a "woman with a beard" was less horrifying than "a woman who thinks in her own right"). Beards were important because male hair was "resorbed semen": luxuriate beards showed that their owners possessed an abundance of semen. Men addicted to the vice of onanism (masturbation) were unmasked by their sparse facial hair.

The colour of a person's hair was as important as its density and texture. Changing colour could be extremely hazardous. In 1872, Scientific American reported that nearly all hair dyes sold to "restore" the colour of hair contained significant quantities of lead, "a deadly poison, highly injurious to the health when applied to the scalp or other portions [sic] of the body, even in minute quantities". Indeed, sixteen per cent of Singer's Hair Restorative consisted of lead.

Colour mattered in other ways as well. In white cultures, myths about the meaning of red and auburn hair have excited the most discussion. Red hair has been seen as indicating treachery (foxes and Judas Iscariot) or female lust (Mary Magdalena). Saint Louis even required the hair of prostitutes to be dyed red in order to distinguish them from virtuous women. According to one account, "the dislike for red hair in England… originated from the aversion to the red-haired Danish invaders of its shores in ancient times. The man with a red beard was held in contempt and regarded as vile with a cruel disposition".

Still others asked whether red-haired men had a tendency to criminality. The distinguished criminologist Hans von Hentig certainly believed so. In 1947, he published an article in the Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology entitled "Redhead and Outlaw – A Study in Criminal Anthropology". Von Hentig noted that a high proportion of outlaws had red hair. This was because (he believed) "red-headedness is often combined with accelerated motor innervation": in other words, red-haired men were swift in firing the Colt. The temperament of redheads was characterized by Jesse James, von Hentig noted: they were "revengeful in nature…. always sanguine, impetuous, almost heedless".

These prejudices have no basis in fact. That surgeons might be wary of redheads is another matter. They had long worried that redhaired patients have a reduced pain threshold and a higher risk of excessive bleeding.

Clinical studies have indeed shown that redheads are more sensitive to perceptions of pain and do require more anesthetic agents during surgery than control groups.

The most common messages conveyed by hair, however, were not about personality, criminality, or sensitivity to pain. They were about sexuality and politics. Hair is sexy. Here I am not referring to Freud's analysis of "Medusa's hair", which he believed symbolized the female genitals and therefore incited castration anxiety in men. Rather, hair was a way to signal dissent from prevailing moral codes. Anthropologists like Edmund Leach and Charles Berg developed elaborate taxonomies based on hair. According to them, societies where long, freely flowing, even unkempt, hair was fashionable were unrestrained in their sexual expression; societies in which short, shaved, or tightly bound hair were lauded were sexually restrained. Of course, their model was highly culturally specific (we just have to think of the long hair of hermits, which could be a sign of celibacy), but there was a grain of truth in their formulation. Women, in particular, often used hair-styles to send messages to their amours. The desire for increased sexual freedoms of women who "bobbed" their hair in the 1920s is one example. During the 1968 protests against the Miss American pageant, feminists not only threw bras and girdles into the Freedom Trash Can, but wigs, hair-curlers, and false eyelashes as well.

Men were not immune to using hair to signal protest. From the 1960s, for example, long hair sent a clear message to those who sought to police the morals of the young. Popularized by the Beatles in the early 1960s (especially as a result of their appearance on the Ed Sullivan Show in February 1964), long-haired young men met with a powerful backlash. Appalled by the trend, schools and universities sought to impose strict regulations concerning hair style and length, sideburns, beards, moustaches, and goatees. In the words of one high school principal, long hair was "un-American". He quoted Saint Paul words, "Doth not even nature itself teach you, that, if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him? But if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her: for her hair is given her for a covering."

According to this principal, "Whenever I see a long-hair youngster, he is usually leading a riot, he has gotten through committing a crime, he is a dope addict, or some such thing". Long-haired men were both femininized and seen as representing a macho-like rebelliousness. These young men fought back. Some rather meekly observed that Jesus had long, flowing hair, but other took their cases to federal as well as state courts. Nine cases got as far as the U.S. Supreme court.

The political uses of hair that I have been discussing so far in this talk crossed lines of gender, class, and race. But some of the most heated debates about hair in the twentieth century emerged from within African American communities. As already mentioned, the history of Black hair has been one of denigration, exploitation, fear, and hatred from white communities. An important turning point occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century when Madame C. J. Walker (1867-1919) decided that the racist link between straight hair and higher social and economic status had to be tackled. Her 1905 hair softener, which came with a hair-straightening comb, was the first hair product developed, manufactured and sold to Black people. Walker's beauty empire, which included not only hair products but beauty schools as well, turned her into the first and wealthiest self-made female millionaire in America. In racially segregated salons, Black women found a place where they could forge successful, entrepreneurial cultures which developed products specially addressing the needs of Black hair. These salons also nurtured specifically Black notions of beauty.

For Madame Walker, soft, straight hair was not a matter of emulating the "look" of white people. Rather, she aimed to promote a "modern" appearance for status-conscious, ambitious Black women. In more recent decades, however, her brand of Black empowerment has been criticized. Straightening hair using relaxers (chemicals containing a high PH) or applying heat using a curling iron or flat iron could be painful and hazardous to customers and hairdressers alike. More to the point, early African American political movements were supremely conscious of the psychological harms done to young Black children due to the constant barrage of criticism about the aesthetics of Black hair. Even Maya Angelou admitted that, as a very young child, she had regularly fantasized about waking up to find herself transformed from "Cinder Ella" to a blond-haired, blue-eyed "beauty".

Hair-discrimination became a central plank in liberationist struggles from the 1960s and 1970s: challenging internalized as well as external racism involved glorifying "natural" hairstyles. Marcus Garvey (the Jamaican activist who co-established the Negro Universal Improvement Association), W. E. B. DuBois (Pan-Africanist), Booker T. Washington (civil rights leader), and Malcolm X (who repudiated the "conked" or chemically-straightened hair he had worn as a young man) were just some of the activists who vocally opposed hair straightening. As Garvey preached: "Don't remove the kinks from your hair! Remove them from your brain!"

The Black Power movement, with its slogan "Black is Beautiful", died down from the late 1970s, when many African Americans moved towards a more assimilationist position. Indeed, from the end of that decade, the afro, braid, and dreadlocks were regarded as too overtly political and threatened social mobility. The sale of chemical straighteners soared, as did the sale of wigs and weaves. Bell Hooks explained that "Many black folks were rejecting the ethnic communalism that had been a crucial survival strategy when racial apartheid was the norm and were embracing liberal individualism…. Consequently, black folks could now feel that the way they wore their hair was not political but simply a matter of choice."

But the debates about hair remain as powerful as ever. Writers like Bell Hooks enthusiastically promoted "natural" styles. Her children's picture book, called Happy to be Nappy (1999), celebrated hair that was "frizzy and fuzzy, twisted and plaited, brushed and braided nappy hair and nappy-haired little 'girlpies'". However, for every African American commentator who contended that hair straightening was assimilationist and a form of denying Black beauty, there were many others who counter their position by insisting that there was nothing inherently wrong with "trying on a new look". This came to a head in June 2013 when Antonia Opiah (founder of Un-ruly.com) along with other black activists staged what they pointedly called an "exhibit" in Union Square, New York City. They controversially addressed what they regarded as a baffling desire amongst white folks to touch Black hair. They stood with signs embossed with the words "YOU CAN TOUCH MY HAIR" and encouraged white passersby to touch their hair in an attempt to understand why non-Blacks were so curious about Black hair.

The backlash from within the African American community was heated. A counter-exhibition was staged, with Black women holding placards saying "YOU CANNOT TOUCH MY HAIR" and "I AM NOT YOUR SARAH BARTMAN" (a reference to Saarjie Baartman, the Khoi-San woman who was coerced into being exhibited as the "Hottentot Venus" in a travelling show). The point being made by these counter-exhibitors was that "they were unwilling to grant strangers physical access to their bodies", claiming that they was another step in a long history of racism, corporeal availability, objectification, and dehumanization of Black women.

These debates about hair had had major ramifications in terms of labour rights. This can be summarized by exploring one of the most influential cases about hair to reach the US courts. In 1981, Rogers v. American Airlines upheld the right of that airline to discriminate against an African American plaintiff who was told she could not wear braids at work. Renee Rogers had argued that the airline's prohibition discriminated against her as a woman in general and as a black woman in particular. The court ruled against her. As Paulette M. Caldwell has argued in an article entitled "A Hair Piece", published in the Duke Law Journal, the court contended that racism and sexism operated independently even when the claimant is a member of both a subordinated race and a subordinated gender group. The court refused to acknowledge that America's policy need not affect all women or all blacks in order to affect black women discriminatorily. By treating race and sex as alternative bases on which a claim might rest, the court concluded that the plaintiff failed to state a claim of discrimination on either ground.

There were three explanations for the court's decision. The first was that the airlines' disallowing of braided hairstyles was neither gender not racial discrimination: it applied to both men and women of all races. Second, the court claimed that the company was not engaged in classify employees on the basis of any immutable characteristics, whether gender or racial. Thirdly, their policy did not violate the exercise of a fundamental right. They claimed that braided hair was not a "natural" hairstyle (like the afro, for example) but an "artifice". When Rogers argued that the wearing of braids "reflected her choice for ethnic and cultural identification", the court responded by contrasting "immutable aspects of race" and sociocultural ones. When Rogers contended that the policy had a "disparate impact on black women", the court contended that the style had been popularized by the actress Bo Derek – a white woman. The fact that Black women had "popularized" the style for centuries did not make any difference to a court who could only "see" braids when worn by a white actress.

This is why Rachel Dolezal's hair matters. Hair remains a system of power. It is shaped by cultural acts; it configures relationships among women as well as between the full range of genders. Renee Rogers' 1981 legal plead to have the multiple intersectionalities of her life respected resonates in the twenty-first century. In 2017, a black woman applying for a job at Harrods was told to chemically straighten her hair. Today, schools routinely apply rules that stigmatize Black hair styles. It was only in July this year that California became the first US state to ban discrimination over natural hairstyles. The 2015 scandal over Rachel Dolezal's lying about her race reignited debates about the politics of hair. Hair continues to communicate multiple social and cultural meanings.

This is a summary of a public lecture Joanna Bourke gave at Gresham College (30 Holborn EC1N) on 31 October 2019 between 18.00 and 19.00.

It is part of a series she will be presenting as the Gresham Professor of Rhetoric. Other topics include: Eye, Breast, Stomach, Clitoris/Penis, Foot. https://www.gresham.ac.uk/series/exploring-the-body/

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