

Hair Oppression and Appropriation

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Hair Oppression and Appropriation

You may not think about hair oppression, or even know that it exists. But, hair oppression is real. In the United States alone, for example, it is currently legal in 43 states to engage in “race-based hair discrimination, which is the denial of employment and educational opportunities because of hair texture or protective hairstyles including braids, locs, twists or bantu knots.”¹ The 7 states that have opted to enact the CROWN Act (Create a Respective and Open World for Natural Hair) to prevent race-based hair discrimination in areas like housing, education and employment, only did so in 2019. Black men and women, in other words, cannot safely wear their hair as they would like without serious moral, legal, social, economic and educational repercussions.

And yet, whites appropriate black hair-types and styles without any fear of negative consequences. In fact, they frequently benefit from stealing Black culture in a myriad of ways, from financial gains to social prestige. Moreover, they do so in the most conspicuous, visible ways. Consider US Vogue magazine’s showcasing (white,

¹ <https://www.thecrownact.com/>, accessed May 2020.

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4 privileged) Kendall Jenner sporting a hairstyle designed to resemble an afro; Marc
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7 Jacobs' models, all white, donning fake dreadlocks as they strut down the catwalk for
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10 the 2016 New York City Spring Fashion Week; Zac Efron, a white male actor, shows
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13 off his dreadlocks on his Instagram, commenting "Just for fun?"; Gigi Hadid
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16 photographed in Italia Vogue's magazine with artificially darkened skin and hair styled
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19 in an afro; and of course, Kim Kardashian infamously sporting Fulani braids and
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22 cornrows, which she ignorantly calls "Bo Derek braids."
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29 Hair oppression, discrimination and appropriation have received scant
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32 philosophical attention, in spite of its pervasiveness in mainstream culture. One goal
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35 of this paper is to raise awareness of hair discrimination and oppression within the
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38 philosophical community. Another is to consider how current theories of appropriation
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41 account for the wrongness of this widespread phenomenon. In doing so, we are
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44 particularly interested in a special case, viz. the appropriation of Black hair textures
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47 and styles by Non-Black Persons of Colour (NBPoC). Most theories can explain why
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50 whites should not appropriate Black hair textures and styles; but appropriation claims
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53 between two minority groups, both of which have been oppressed, albeit differently,
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4 by whites, are more complex. This paper focuses on when, or if, one minority group
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7 can appropriate something from another minority group, and if so, why.
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11 The question of appropriation claims between competing minority groups, has
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13 social and political urgency these days, given the current political climate. Questions
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15 around hair appropriation within minority groups has also had particular urgency, due
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17 to the recent changes in the constituency of the Natural Hair Movement. The Natural
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19 Hair Movement (NHM) arose initially to celebrate natural Black hair in the US in the
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21 1960s; however in the past twenty years (since the 2000s), the NHM has been co-
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23 opted by a variety of groups, including Non-Black Persons of Colour (NBPOCs). This
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25 hijacking has resulted in many in-group fights about appropriation, which typically
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27 presuppose views about (a) which ethnic and racial groups are entitled to belong to
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29 the movement (Blacks, NBPOCs, whites, etc); and (b) which hair features are required
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31 to belong (particular hair types, hair textures, hair health, hair treatments, etc.)
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51 These hair battles raise an important question about appropriation: when an
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53 NBPOC joins the Natural Hair Movement, originally dedicated to Black Americans of
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55 African descent, is she appropriating a movement that she should not be allowed to
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4 call her own? Similarly, when an NBPoC styles her hair naturally or in protective
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7 hairstyles including braids, locs, twists or bantu knots, is she appropriating Black hair
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10 textures and styles? And, if so, is that wrong?
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15 The changing membership of the Natural Hair Movement gives rise to the
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18 possibility of one minority group appropriating from another minority group. In this
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21 paper, we accept that white women engage in wrongful acts of cultural appropriation
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24 when they style their hair using natural or protective hairstyles. But, we argue that the
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27 situation is far less straightforward when we consider NBPoCs. Ultimately, we argue
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30 that distinguishing between hair textures and hair styles can help us better understand
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32
33 the issues at stake in the hair debate: hair texture (as defined by the Natural Hair
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36 Movement) is shared by both Blacks and NBPoC's and so cannot be appropriated by
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38
39 either group in the Natural Hair Movement.² In contrast, however, hair styles (again,
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42 as defined by the Natural Hair Movement) are intimately tied to Black history and
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45 identity, and so can be appropriated by NBPoC's.
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57 ² We grant that outside of the NHM, hair texture appropriation can and does occur – such as in the case
58 of whites styling their hair to appear kinky, in order to resemble an afro. We consider this specific case
59 later.
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4 Our paper begins by rehearsing how the two most recent theories of
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6
7 appropriation, Matthes' Oppression account, and Nguyen & Strohl's Intimacy account,
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10 both explain why whites who wear Black natural and protective hairstyles are
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13 engaging wrongful cultural appropriation. Before turning to the case of NBPOCs and
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16 cultural appropriation, we discuss how the history of the Natural Hair Movement leads
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18
19 to an important conceptual distinction between hair styles and hair textures. This
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22 distinction, however, is key to explaining why hair styles, but not hair textures, can be
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25 appropriated by NBPOCs. We conclude by exploring how and why both the
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28 oppression account and the intimacy accounts fail to account for this conclusion.
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41 **Wrongfulness of White Appropriation of Black Hair Culture.**

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45 Matthes and Nguyen & Strohl have both formulated new theories of cultural
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48 appropriation. In this section, we show how both theories easily explain the wrongness
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51 of whites culturally appropriating Black hair textures³ and hairstyles. This will position
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57 ³ In the literature hair texture has been used as a synonym of hair type, we will follow suit. So, for
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59 example, one might have thin hair, or thick hair; wavy, straight, curly or kinky hair. Texture refers to the
60 natural features of unprocessed hair. Someone with unprocessed, straight hair could process their hair

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3 us to consider why these theories have more trouble when we shift from the case of
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7 white cultural appropriation to the case of NBPoC cultural appropriation.
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11 According to Matthes' Oppression account of cultural appropriation, "the wrong
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13 of cultural appropriation is rooted in imbalances of power."⁴ When whites appropriate
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15 from Blacks, the wrongness of this appropriation lies in the fact that whites have
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18 historically oppressed Blacks:
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26 what makes cultural appropriation wrong, when it is wrongful, is the way it
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28 interacts with the oppression of certain cultural group members.⁵
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31 there is general agreement that if cultural appropriation is morally
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33 objectionable, it is only objectionable when a member of a dominant cultural
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35 group appropriates from a member of a marginalized group: no reasonable
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37 person thinks that, for instance, an indigenous person does something wrong
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39 by employing some Western artistic style. There are many reasons why this is
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41 true, not the least of which is that it is in the nature of a dominant cultural group
42
43 to dominate and impress its culture upon others.⁶
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50 to become curly. In doing so, their natural hair remains straight, but they are styling their hair to appear
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52 curly. They wear their hair in the style of curly hair, in the same way that one might wear their hair in the
53
54 style of cornrows or plaits. You might think we are splitting hairs (pun intended!) unnecessarily, but
55
56 these distinctions will be relevant in later, when we argue that hair textures cannot be appropriated,
57
58 while allowing that hair styles can be.

59 ⁴ Matthes 2019, 176 p. 1003.

60 ⁵ Matthes 2019, p. 1005.

⁶ Matthes 2016, p. 347

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4 Matthes' account makes sense of cases like Zac Efron, Kendall Jenner and the
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7 white models in fashion magazines: a long history of power imbalance between the
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10 Blacks and white Europeans explains the wrongness of cultural appropriation of
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13 minority cultures by whites. The celebration of Black hair textures and styles (natural
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16 or protective) is deeply embedded within, and arises as a direct result of, this long-
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19 standing oppression. Whites who culturally appropriate Black culture - hair, or other
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22 aesthetic assets that are deeply embedded within Black culture - are profiting from
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25 Black oppression, and stripping it from the history that connects Blacks to long-
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28 standing violence, suppression and oppression. The oppression account makes sense
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30
31 of the blatant harm and wrong that white European beauty standards inflict when
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34 whites culturally appropriate Black culture: "black is cool, unless you're black." This is
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37 exactly the right response to white appropriation of Black hair.
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46 Likewise, Nguyen & Strohl have offered an alternative, but equally compelling,
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49 account of cultural appropriation, which also explains the wrongness of whites
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52 culturally appropriating Black hair culture. Instead of imbalances of power, this
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55 account appeals to the intimacy of the practices of the group in question: "We call 'the
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4 intimacy account' the view that considerations of intimacy ground the normative
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7 importance of expressive appropriation claims."⁷ The Intimacy account presupposes
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10 the existence of a community (a group agent or sub-group agent) that shares in
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13 intimate practices. While some philosophers may not realize it, a well-defined natural
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16 hair community exists, whose members share in learning, teaching, and sharing of
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18
19 intimate hair practices for Black hair textures and styles. The Natural Hair Movement
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21
22 takes their hair - styles, textures and treatments - very seriously. Lest one dismiss this
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25 as a mere trend or a passing fashion statement, consider how some members
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28 describe the importance of natural hair:
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36 Deciding to embrace my natural hair was, of course, about so much more than
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38 just hair... Most importantly, it became the defining moment where I truly took
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40 pride in my identity as a black woman. For what felt like the first time, I was
41
42 embracing and celebrating my blackness in a true physical way, instead of
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44 trying to push it to the side.⁸
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46 As a Black woman, I've experienced my own struggles to embrace my hair in
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48 its natural state and, to this day, consider it a vital step in accepting and
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50 defining my own cultural identity.⁹
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57 ⁷ Nguyen and Strohl 2019, p. 989

58 ⁸ Bruno, 2019

59 ⁹ Williams, n.d.
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3 Identity and natural hair are bound together for the naturalistas. Embracing their
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7 natural hair leads them to share and celebrate common cultural customs that embody
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10 the intimate practices of the kind explicitly discussed by Nguyen & Strohl.
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15 On Nguyen & Strohl's account, whites do not belong to the Black hair community -
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18 most obviously because they don't have Black hair - and so have no need to share or
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21 celebrate the natural Black hair practices.
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26 Suppose we accept Nguyen & Strohl's account. One might worry that their account
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29 allows whites to join in, so long as they opt to share and participate in the intimate hair
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32 practices surrounding Black hair culture. And, we have many cases where whites
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35 have done just that – those prominent white models and celebrities do engage in the
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38 intimate practices tied to Black hair! It would seem the Intimacy account must
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40
41 acknowledge that these whites are not appropriating Black hair culture, but joining it!
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47 And, that's definitely the wrong result: whites wearing Black natural and protective
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50 hairstyles are actually wrongfully appropriating Black hair culture.
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55 Thankfully however, the Intimacy account can explain why whites can't and
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58 shouldn't be accepted as members of the Natural Hair Movement. First, remember
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4 that the NHM was created to reject white European beauty standards that had been
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7 imposed upon Blacks as part of forced assimilation: given that whites have not
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10 experienced this, they should not be allowed to join. Of course, one might further
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13 respond by noting that whites may well want to ally themselves with Blacks in rejecting
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16 the white European beauty standards, and support Blacks celebrating their hair.
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21 Should such an ally be allowed to join the NHM? No. To be an ally involves supporting
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24 the group, not joining the group. To be an ally involves letting Blacks develop their
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27 own Black sarkaesthetics.¹⁰ For a white person to join the NHM, to adopt their
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30 intimate hair practices, however, would be to appropriate those practices, not to be an
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33 ally.¹¹
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Whether you prefer Matthes' Oppression account, or Nguyen & Strohl's Intimacy
account, both make sense of the wrongness of whites appropriating Black hair culture.

Of course, these are relatively blatant acts of cultural appropriation, ones that have

¹⁰ Paul C. Taylor's "name for the practices of representational somatic aesthetics - which is to say, those practices related to the body" (Taylor 2016, p. 108)

¹¹ Comment to elaborate on: it's possible that Blacks could invite whites into the group. However, (a) practically speaking, there is evidence within the natural hair movement to suggest that not everyone thinks this is a good idea or would support this; and, again, if they did, it would undermine the very goals set out for the movement, so it's not clear there is any philosophical reason to want to do this.

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4 been condemned widely on social media, often on the very grounds articulated by the
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7 Oppression and Intimacy accounts. Academia appears well-aligned with our everyday
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10 intuitions and beliefs about whites appropriating Black hair culture.
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15 **Wrongfulness of NBPoC Appropriation of Black hair culture**

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For Peer Review

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5 But, the situation is more complicated when we turn to cases where Non-Black
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8 Persons of Colour (NBPoC) join the Natural Hair Movement, or engage in the
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11 intimate practices that traditionally have belonged to the Black hair culture. Are
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15 NBPoCs participating in cultural appropriation, and if so, is this wrong?
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20 We argue that it is also wrong for NBPoCs to appropriate from Black hair
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23 culture, as is commonly suggested in online social media sites:
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28 When non-Black minority groups take from Black culture they are still
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30 participating in cultural appropriation, it doesn't change because both
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32 groups are minorities. Culture is historical and the severity of the action
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34 doesn't change based on who is participating in the appropriation. If it
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36 isn't a part of your culture then there is not a reason for you to use it.¹²
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38 Anyone can appropriate Black culture, including non-Black minorities,
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40 according to Keisha Brown, an associate professor of history at
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42 Tennessee State University.¹³
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45 Unfortunately, neither the Oppression account nor the Intimacy account can
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48 explain this intuition.
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51 Let us begin by thinking about the Oppression account, according to which
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54 "the wrong of cultural appropriation is rooted in imbalances of power."¹⁴ The
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58 problem for the oppression account is that there is no obvious imbalance of
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62 power between Blacks and NBPoC's.¹⁵ Both are comparably, even if differently,

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4 appropriating from the latter. But that's exactly what we don't have in the case
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7 of NBPoC's appropriating from Blacks; hence, it's not clear how the Oppression
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10 account can explain the wrongness of one minority group culturally
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14 appropriating from a second minority group.
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21 A supporter of the Oppression account might suggest that oppressing a
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24 marginalized group is wrong, no matter who does it. The wrongness of cultural
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27 appropriation in this case, then, depends not so much on a dominant culture
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30 appropriating, so much as it depends on the marginalization of the culture being
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33 appropriated - even when the appropriator is itself also marginalized. Perhaps
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36 the Oppression account could acknowledge that appropriation of a minority
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39 group further marginalizes an already marginalized group - regardless of who
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46 does the appropriating.
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49 ¹² Makena, 2020.

50 ¹³ https://www.huffpost.com/entry/non-black-minorities-appropriation_1_5d974be7e4b0f5bf797372ba
51 (accessed 10 July 2020)

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53 ¹⁴ Matthes, 2019, p.1003:ay of understanding the wrongness of Non-Black Persons of

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55 ¹⁵ This claim is so large and vague that it is hard to imagine how one might establish this, or the
56 respects around which such imbalances should be measured: financial, social, legal, political,
57 Colour's culturally appropriating against Blacks. Unfortunately, this explanation
58 educational? There are as many ways to determine an imbalance of power as there are NBPoC's.
59 Perhaps it is sufficient to agree that NBPoCs suffer from imbalances of power relative to whites, at least
60 no longer reflects the spirit of the Oppression account, which prioritizes the
comparably to Blacks, even if we grant that such imbalances cannot be accurately measured.

power imbalances between the appropriator and appropriated. To the extent
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that NBPoCs and Blacks are both marginalized, the appropriations in question

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4 do not rely on existing power imbalances, as they would when the appropriators
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7 are white.
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12 Unfortunately, the Intimacy account fares no better in explaining why Non-
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15 Black Persons of Colour's cultural appropriation against Blacks is wrong. On
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18 this view, "considerations of intimacy ground the normative importance of
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21 expressive appropriation claims."¹⁶ In the case of hair, the considerations of
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24 intimacy centre around the sharing, learning and practising of hair care for Black
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27 hair textures and styles. At first glance, it might seem obvious that Blacks hair
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30 culture's intimate practices are restricted to, well, Blacks. After all, how could
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33 non-Blacks share in these intimate practices, particularly when these intimate
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36 practices, historically, are rooted in the oppression of Blacks? If NBPoC's can't
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39 share Black hair culture practices, then the Intimacy account seems to get the
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42 right answer after all: the Intimacy account could explain why NBPoC's are
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45 wrongfully culturally appropriating Black hair culture.
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54 However, we are moving too fast. Black hair culture is not really what we
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57 should be discussing. Rather, our topic is the Black hair culture, as expressed,
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60 practiced and shared by the intimate group practices in the Natural Hair

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4 historically originating in Black history, now extend to include NBPOC's. Indeed,
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7 taking seriously the Natural Hair Movement actually underscores that both
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10 Blacks and NBPOC's share in these intimate hair practices. Hence, the Intimacy
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13 account cannot explain why it would be morally wrong for NBPOCs to
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17 appropriate from Black hair culture. So, let's examine the Natural Hair
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21 Movement in more detail.
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26 The Natural Hair Movement

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30 The Natural Hair Movement emerged originally during the 1960's and 1970's
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33 in the United States as a race-based movement rejecting white beauty norms
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36 for Black hair, and celebrating instead Black natural hair and hairstyles. At this
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39 point in time, natural hair was synonymous with Black hair, and Black hair was
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44 stereotypically reduced to (male) Afro-textured hair.¹⁷
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49 By the early 2000s, however, the movement had changed along several
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52 axes: (1) it became world-wide, allowing Black *naturalistas* outside of the United
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55 States to identify with the movement; (2) the notion of natural hair was
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59 expanded to encompass all sorts of hair textures - not just Afro-textured hair but
60 ¹⁶ Nguyen and Strohl 2019, p. 989.

also hair textures ranging from loose curls¹⁸ to the kinkiest hair type, which was
<http://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/bjaesth>

classified using Hair Typing System, originally introduced by Andre Walker, but

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4 originally motivated by political desires to fight white European beauty
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7 standards, broadened to include the environmental and health-related
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11 concerns: natural hair was healthier, safer on scalps, and better for the
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14 environment.
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19 The broader set of concerns and hair textures within the Natural Hair
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22 Movement raises the question of Non-Black Persons of Colour's membership.
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26 Whether we should integrate NBPoC's into the movement depends on how to
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29 interpret the NHM: is it a movement about natural hair textures - that are not
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32 unique to Black people, or about natural and protective Black hair styles - which
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35 are certainly unique to Black Afrodescendants. The NHM is sufficiently broad to
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38 do both¹⁹.
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44 ¹⁷ The concept of Afro-textured hair is mentioned by Tameka Ellington, (Ellington, Natural hair, 2015,
45 p.1).
46

47 ¹⁸ The modified version of Walker's Hair Typing System classifies hair as Straight: Type 1, Wavy: Type
48 styles is central to the philosophical question about whether NBPoC's in the
49 2 (2a,2b,2c), Curly: Type 3 (3a,3b,3c); and Coily or Kinky: Type 4 (4a,4b,4c). Each letter represents a
50 different pattern of wave, curl or kink, from the looser pattern (a) to the tightest pattern (c). In the first
51 wave of the NHM, Black and natural hair was identified as Afro-textured hair (Type 4), during the
52 second wave, the conception of natural hair expanded to recognize the diversity of hair textures
53 displayed in the Black diaspora. Hair types 3(a, b and c) and 4(a, b and c) are now identified as natural
54 hair. However, Blacks are not the only ones to have these hair types; Non-Black People of Colour have
55 Type 1 and 2 (a, b, c), as well as type 3 (a, b and c), and type 4 (a, b and some even c). Commonly,
56 people can be born with curly and even kinky hair. This does not imply that hair
57 white people have straight or wavy hair (a, b and c), but some white people also have type 3 and 4
58 (mostly 4a, rarely a white person has 4b or 4c hair).
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texture is irrelevant to Black people - if it were, the NHM would not exist! Black

people's hair have been subjected to abuse and subjugation in many ways,

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4 shaving, the aesthetic and moral ranking of Black people's hair according to the
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7 straight hair rule, and finally, the assimilation of white European aesthetic
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10 standards. Hair is deeply significant to Blacks across many facets of life! But, so
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13 too have NBPoC's been subjected to hair texture-based discrimination. Blacks
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16 are no different to NBPoC's when it comes to the consequences of hair texture-
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19 based discrimination and oppression²⁰.
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26 The situation is different, however, when it comes to Black hair styles
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29 (cornrows, Bantu knots, twists, dreadlocks, freeform locks, to name a few).
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32 Although hair textures are shared across race and ethnic groups, Black hair
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35 styles are not. Black hair styles exhibit "complexity and multifaceted nature" that
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38 are intimately tied to and reflect Black identity.²¹ Black hair styles may take
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41 hours, or even days, to create; they are worn for extended periods of time, even
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44 years, as in the case of dreadlocks or freeform locs. Wearing a Black hair style
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47 often signals recognition of Blackness, group identity, and belonging; it is a
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50 practice that transmits particular and specialized knowledge.
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58 While whites, Non-Black Persons of Colour, and Blacks all can share the
59 ¹⁹ Whether the NHM is meant to include members of all hair textures, or just members of certain races
60 and ethnicities, is a point we will come to, when we consider the question of NHM membership.

same hair textures, only Blacks have an identity claim on Black hair styles. For

this reason, whites and NBPoCs are wrongfully appropriating Black hairstyles

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4 Having examined the Natural Hair Movement in more detail, and the related
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7 conceptual differences between textures and style, we can now appreciate that
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10 the crucial philosophical question is whether the Oppression account or the
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13 Intimacy account can explain why and how the issues of cultural appropriation
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16 really are a matter of hair styles, rather than hair textures. Let us turn now to
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21 this question.
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28 **The Oppression Account and NBPoC Appropriation of Black Hair Styles**

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33 Turning to Black hair styles, we can now ask whether Non-Black Persons of
34
35
36 Colour are wrongfully culturally appropriating Black hair styles by wearing them.
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39 Intuitively, the answer should be yes. Black hair styles are intimately connected
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41
42 to their past, their oppression, their history and their identity. Wearing Black hair
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44
45 styles is a way for Blacks to define, project and express this identity. For anyone
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48 who lacks this identity, wearing Black hair styles should qualify as an act of
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54 **wrongful cultural appropriation.**

20 With respect of hair texture as a source of discrimination, NBPoC's are not allowed to go to school
55 with their natural hair texture (not only with kinky texture but also curly texture); moreover, they are
56 discriminated against while applying for certain types of jobs, either by not being able to apply or by
57 being told to straighten their hair once they are hired.
58 **Can the Oppression account explain why Non-Black Persons of Colour who**
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21 Johnsons and Bankhead 2013, p. 87.
60

wear Black hairstyles are engaging in an act of cultural appropriation? Recall

the Oppression account grounds the wrongness of cultural appropriation in the

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4 group. Again, the same questions of oppression that arose in the context of
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6
7 Black hair culture reappear here: are NBPoCs dominant over Blacks? Do
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9
10 NBPoC's oppress Blacks by wearing Black hairstyles? Blacks are certainly
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12
13 oppressed by systematic discrimination against Black hair culture (textures and
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16
17 styles). But, that hair oppression does not come from another minority group
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19
20 wearing their hair styles - it is deeply rooted in white oppression against Blacks
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22
23 and it is systemically perpetuated by the social, economic and legal systems in
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27 place (which highlights the importance of the CROWN Act). The Oppression
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30 account requires a dominant and a minority group who stand in an unequal
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33 power dynamic; without it, the Oppression account remains silent on the
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36
37 question of whether it's wrong for NBPoCs to appropriate Black hair styles.
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43 **The Intimacy Account and NBPoC Appropriation of Black Hairstyles**

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48 Consider next whether Nguyen & Strohl's Intimacy account can explain why it
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51 is wrong for Non-Black Persons of Colour to culturally appropriate Black
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54 hairstyles. Recall their account successfully explains the wrongful appropriation
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4 of dreadlocks when a white person wears them. On their view, groups are
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6
7 bound together by intimate practices; Blacks are bound together by wearing
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10 Black hair styles, which styles ground a sense of unity amongst the members of
11
12
13 the group. Whites obviously are not so bound together and lack the requisite
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15
16 sense of unity as a result. The case of NBPOCs is less clear. Whether NBPOCs
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18
19 wear Black hairstyles, and whether that constitutes an intimate practice of the
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21
22 group depends a lot on context: an NBPOC from Brazil shares in different
23
24
25 practices for group intimacy around hair than an NBPOC from Costa Rica, which
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27
28 are, in turn, different to those for an NBPOC in Australia or Mauritius. The
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30
31 Intimacy account treats this as a virtue of the theory:
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40 crucially, the intimacy account does not yield objective determinations
41
42 about who can participate in an intimate practice. Intimacy is flexible -
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44 relations of intimacy can be extended, outsiders can be granted
45
46 temporary or long-term insider status, insiders can be exiled, and
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48 boundaries can be re-drawn.²²

49 Unfortunately, this does not help us determine whether NBPOC's can wear
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52 Black hair styles without thereby appropriating them. Ultimately, it depends on
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54
55 whether NBPOC's share the intimate hair practices with Blacks. These groups
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60 seem too large to be helpful in answering such questions.

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4 Fortunately, when it comes to hair practices, we have another group which is
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6
7 more narrow and relevant to the question at hand: the Natural Hair Movement.
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10 We think that it makes more sense to focus on the Natural Hair Movement,
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12
13 which is defined by particular intimate practices around hair care, textures and
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15
16 styling. Restricting our focus to the NHM, rather than these larger groups, may
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18
19 help the theories of appropriation under consideration to explain why it's wrong
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21
22 for NBPOCs to appropriate Black hair styles.
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29 For the intimacy account, "whether or not a given form of appropriation
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32 constitutes a breach of intimacy cannot be determined independently of the
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35 decisions, wishes, and expressions of the relevant group."²³ Whether a Non-
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38 Black Person of Colour is appropriating a hair style depends on the decisions,
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42 wishes and expressions of the relevant group, now the Natural Hair Movement.
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48 But who, exactly, are the members of the Natural Hair Movement? The
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51 founding members of the NHM, who would be exclusively Black members?
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54 Current members, who are both Black and NBPOCs, with varying hair textures
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57
58 and hair styles? Perhaps only those members with sufficient power or prestige
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60 ²² Nguyen and Strohl 2019, p. 991.

in the group? No matter who we choose, it's a mistake to think the members

agree about the decisions, wishes and expressions of the relevant group - there

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4 (3-type) hair; other sub-groups care only about the degrees of retaining natural
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7 hair, ignoring hair textures; others still emphasize hair styles. The Natural Hair
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10 Movement is quite diverse.

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15 A different strategy is not to ask who belongs in the Natural Hair Movement,
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18 but rather to wonder who qualify as outsiders. Perhaps clarifying the conditions
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20
21 governing when outsiders are authorized to join in intimate practices could help
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23
24 us understand appropriation claims - after all, appropriation happens when
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26
27 outsiders try to claim intimate practices of insiders. The intimacy account allows
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29
30 that the “relation of intimacy can be extended, outsiders can be granted
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33 temporary or long-term insider status, insiders can be exiled, and boundaries
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36 can be re-drawn.”²⁴ Even so, this hope is misguided: the question is not whether
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39 outsiders can be granted insider status (as in the case of whites, who are
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41
42 clearly outsiders to the NHM), but rather whether NBPoCs (clear insiders in the
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45 NHM) should be allowed to wear Black hair styles. All parties who have a stake
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48 in the appropriation question, in other words, are already inside the NHM. So,
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51 thinking about insiders and outsiders does not help us address questions about
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²³ Nguyen and Strohl 2019, p. 994.
appropriation by NBPoCs in the NHM. One again, the Intimacy account lacks

The Oppression Account and the Natural Hair Movement

If the intimacy account cannot help us understand appropriation claims within the Natural Hair Movement, perhaps the Oppression account can. Within the NHM, there have been some issues with power imbalances in relation to hair texture. Recall that the NHM originally emerged as a political celebration and reclamation of natural Black hair; of course, initially natural Black hair was falsely identified with the afro's kinky hair (type-4 hair, often considered uncombable, and therefore "bad"). Since then, however, the NHM has expanded to include a diverse range of Black hair textures, thanks to the Hair Typing System, including 3-type hair (curly).

An unexpected consequence of this expansion is that it now raises the question of whether Non-Black Persons of Colour who join the Natural Hair Movement are thereby appropriating the movement, hijacking it, as it were, and stealing it away from the Blacks who originally created the movement. Curly, 3-type haired people have been accused of oppressing the kinky haired, by recreating the very power imbalances that the NHM sought to fight. The NHM,

²⁴ Nguyen and Strohl 2019, p. 991.

originally conceived to support and celebrate 4-type hair textures is now failing in this project, and being culturally appropriated by 3-type curls (who falsely

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4 the NHM is unwittingly recreating the historical prejudices against type 4 hair
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7 (kinky), by silencing 4-type hair, and praising 3-type hair. Where old prejudices
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10 would privilege straight (“good” and white) hair against kinky (“bad” and Black)
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12
13 hair, now we see in the NHM itself, a similar prejudice favouring curly (“good”
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16 and predominantly worn by NBPOCs) hair over kinky (“bad” and predominantly
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18
19 worn by Blacks) hair. Known as “texturism,” this prejudice falsely treats curly
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21
22 hair as more attractive, and misleadingly attributes greater positive aesthetic
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24
25 value to curly hair than kinky hair. The NHM, in other words, has now created
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28 the very stereotypes and prejudices against kinky type 4 hair that used to exist
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31 outside of the NHM, and which were the very motivation for creating the NHM to
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34 begin with!
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43 The Oppression account has the tools to explain this type of predicament as
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46 a result of the practices of distinguishing cultural insiders from outsiders, which
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54 create hierarchies of dominance even within an otherwise marginalized
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57 group, so the power dynamics of the cultural appropriation model are not
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60 necessarily absent in the distinguishing of insiders from outsiders.²⁵

Intuitively, Matthes is referring to social, political or cultural dynamics between

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<http://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/bjaesth>
insiders and outsiders. In the case of the NHM, however, we have none of

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4 to include hair texture in his list. We don't think so. Like the Intimacy account,
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7 the Oppression account cannot make sense of the wrongness of NBPOCs
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11 appropriating Black hair styles in the NHM.
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15 Either way, however, we should reject the hair-texture hierarchy being
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18 imposed - it recreates the racial tensions and racial prejudices that the NHM
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20
21 was trying to avoid by broadening the membership to include all types of natural
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23
24 hair worn by Blacks! Shifting the debate from racial ethnicity to hair textures
25
26
27 succeeds in eliminating these prejudicial assumptions (e.g., that Blacks only
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30 have afros and kinky (4-type) hair, or that NBPOCs only have curly hair (and
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33 cannot have 4-type hair)). But, this means that the NHM membership is based
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37 on hair texture, and that membership must include all persons with texture
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41 whose hair has been oppressed by white beauty standards, regardless of race
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45 or ethnicity.
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51 While there may be plenty of power imbalances within the NHM between
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53
54 different hair textures, there can be no appropriation between these different
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57
58 hair textures within the NHM.²⁶ To appropriate a different hair texture is to style
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60 ²⁵ Matthes 2016, p. 356.

your hair unnaturally, which goes against the very purpose of the NHM. So,

there can be no appropriation in the NHM that would trade on any power

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4 imbalances, whether they are about hair texture or racial, social, or political
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7 power imbalances.
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10 11 12 Conclusions

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16 Where does this leave us? Ultimately, we think the membership of
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20 NBPOC's in the NHM should be granted on the basis of sharing the same hair
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23 texture with Blacks, and of course, on the basis of having been oppressed, like
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26 Blacks, by hair discrimination and by white beauty standards. The celebration,
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29 normalization and emancipation of natural hair represents a common goal for
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31
32 both Blacks and NBPOCs alike.
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38 However, we deny that Non-Black Persons of Colour should be permitted
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41 to wear Black hair styles. Doing so, in our view, amounts to one minority group
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44 wrongfully culturally appropriating from another. Unfortunately, the two
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48
49 ~~competing, recent theories of cultural appropriation - Matthes' Oppression~~
50 ²⁶ Cases of hair texture appropriation can only happen outside of the NHM: to appropriate a hair
51 texture, one must have hair textured in a way that is not natural to your own hair. That is, to have a hair
52 account, and Nguyen & Strohl's Intimacy account – were unable to help us
53 texture that is not your own, you must style your hair to appear textured in a way that your hair does not
54 naturally grow. Since the NHM rejects altering the texture of your hair (because that would involve
55 processing your hair), such hair texture appropriations are not possible within the NHM. However, it
56 can happen - indeed, when whites style their hair as afros, they are styling their hair to appear as if they
57 have 4-type hair. No non-4-type haired person, however, can style their hair to have an afro, within the
58 applicable in a diverse range of cases, neither were able to explain the
59 NHM.
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wrongfulness of cultural appropriation between two minority groups in the
<http://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/bjaesth>

particular case of Black hair styles within the Natural Hair Movement. This is

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4 culturally diverse, theories of appropriation will need to consider how to make
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7 sense of minority groups and cultural appropriation. We hope our paper
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10 reinforces the centrality of this emerging area of interest.
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15 Thinking about hair appropriation and oppression also underscores how
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18 philosophically rich the area of hair aesthetics really is. This paper has sought to
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22 highlight the degree to which hair aesthetics requires sophisticated and
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26 complicated philosophical analysis. We hope our overview of hair appropriation
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29 and oppression will encourage others to continue exploring hair aesthetics in
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33 the philosophical literature.
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