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Uncovering the Kink Celebrating my Black Identity: Perceptions on Afro-Costa Ricans Natural Hair¹

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ABSTRACT

It is no secret the racism within the Costa Rican society especially against people of African descent. While this racism is manifested in mostly overt ways it is nonetheless present, and continues to affect people of African descent in a myriad of ways including how they feel about their natural hair. From a very early age Afro-Costa Rican children learn to look down on their natural kink reinforced verbally and through images designed for them to hide, and dislike what is naturally theirs. As a result many embraced synthetic, and other ethnic group's natural hair, preferring to pay any amount of money besides undergoing significant hair, and scalp ill-treatment all with the objective of hiding the natural kink. There is insufficient scholarship on hair within Costa Rican academia hence the importance of this study. The main objective of this paper is to make visible the perceptions of Afro-Costa Ricans natural hair by both Afro, and mestizo ethnic groups, and enquire about some of the effects on people of African descent in Costa Rica. The qualitative exploratory research collected data from four focus groups of teenage mestizos, 20th century newspaper, one workshop, and questionnaires filled only by Afro-Costa Ricans.

Keywords: Afro-Costa Rican, Afro-Costa Rican natural hair, Costa Rica, natural hair, racism.

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1.0 Introduction

Discussion on African natural hair is not new³, nonetheless within the Costa Rican context scholarship on hair is almost non-existent. The only reference is found in the poem⁴ of Afro-Costa Rican Shirley Campbell Barr who is celebrating the natural beauty of one of her daughter's hair. Therefore it was necessary to embark on a qualitative exploratory research which collected information through the application of a questionnaire filled by people of African descent, gathering a sample filled by 10 females. The organization of four focus groups with mestizo students of the 7th, and 8th grade from one of the secondary schools in the province of Heredia, along with the organization of a workshop on black hair. Some 20th century newspapers were consulted along with other secondary sources. Data collection was done during the months of November and December of 2015, and January 2016.

The main objective of this paper is to make visible the perception of Afro-Costa Ricans natural hair by both Afro, and mestizo ethnic groups to demonstrate how Afro-Costa Ricans covered their natural hair, highlighting some of the reasons for doing so. It is hoped that especially people of African descent become aware of the ideological and systematic maneuverings for them to dislike, disparage, cover and reject their hair, and how this has affected their self-esteem and black identity within the Costa Rican society, hence the importance of this investigation.

The main argument for this discussion is that racism in Costa Rica has perpetuated stereotypes around Afros natural hair causing them to find alternative ways of covering their kink not because of style but because of inferiority. While this is disturbing, luckily, they are many who in defying hegemony use their hair in its natural state, and in that way celebrating this aspect of their identity.

Racism is 'the name given to a type of behavior which consists in the display of contempt or aggressiveness toward other people on account of physical differences (other than those of sex) between them and oneself' (Todorov, 1986: 370). The purpose of this paper is not to enter into the dialectic of racism since many scholars long before me have made their valuable contribution in this area⁵. What I am interested in doing is to begin an academic discussion on the natural hair of people of African descent in Costa Rica demonstrating how this racism continues to affect this group in the celebration of this natural feature of their African identity.

According the Oxford dictionary natural is 'existing in or derived from nature; not made, caused by, or processed by humankind, in accordance with nature; normal' (Pearsall, 1999: 950). The racism which is manifested within the Costa Rican society has forced most Afro-Costa Ricans to physically, and emotionally cover their hair which is not 'made, caused, or processed by humankind', their natural/normal hair.

Social construction, according to Jamaican historian Verene Shepherd is, 'the result of social organization determined by men'⁶ (Shepherd, 1999: XIX). The racist social organization has created stereotypes reinforced through images and language designed to dislike, disparage, cover and reject African and African descent natural kink. Within the Costa Rican context this racist social construction devalues, ridicule, and informally penalized those who celebrate their blackness by using their hair in its natural state.⁷

³ See scholarship from different disciplines on the issue of Afros natural hair Banks 2000, Huey 2006, Jones 2007, Johnson 2016, Tharps 2001, and Harris-Lacewell 2004 among others and a plethora of internet blogs, YouTubes and Ted Ex Talks on the issue.

⁴ The poem is entitled "El Cabello de Illari" and can be found on line under the author's name.

⁵ See some discussions from different perspectives Duncan and Powell 1988, Gay 1993, Essed and Goldberg, 200, Jordan 1968, Collins 1995, Mama 1995, Malik 1996 among others.

⁶ See discussion on Essentialism versus Constructivism by Wieringa, 2002.

⁷ There are no laws within the Costa Rican society which prohibit people of African descent from wearing their natural hair, but the racist attitudes are still present within this society which denigrates anything Afro, hence, using one's natural hair will be the target of negative comments by both ethnic groups.

Frantz Fanon asserted in *Black Skin White Mask* in his discussion on the fact of blackness that, 'For not only must the black man must be black; he must be black in relation to the white man' (Fanon 2008:82-3), this translated within the Costa Rican context means that this society have already determined the ways black women and men should participate within it, and how their blackness should be expressed.⁸ In relation to their natural hair, they are allowed to live with their natural kinky and dense hair as long as it is covered. This concealment is done in two ways physically with wigs, relaxers, an extensions, and emotionally by ignoring, complaining, and in some cases denying this type of hair.

Unfortunately, Afro-Costa Ricans are not unique in their experience of this type of racism. Their Jamaican fore-parents endured an even more violent experience of this racism first, through slavery, and later during post-slavery through stereotype and discrimination until our present day. Steeve O. Buckridge in his discussion on *The language of Dress* in Jamaica during slavery notes that,

Europeans in slave owning societies sought to maintain their dominance within the plantocracy by instilling concepts of inferiority in their slaves and by denying them the rights and privileges so as to subordinate them within the broader society (Buckridge 2014: 67).

This subordination was manifested in the difficulties faced for recreating and celebrating their African culture in the West Indies, including hair care. These humans found themselves in a very difficult power relation which did not allow them their fundamental human rights, much less the luxury of hair care.

Buckridge continues to report that,

The hegemony of British culture derogated the African heritage of Jamaican people, including their appearance and physical attributes. European entitlement spawned racial images that contributed to the subordination of an entire population (Buckridge 2014: 111).

The constant attack on African heritage, beauty and intelligence gave rise to negative self-image and stereotypes... ((Buckridge 2014: 138).

The hegemonic Costa Rican culture deprives Afro-Costa Ricans of the opportunity for developing and celebrating their African and Afro-Caribbean heritage through a blatant invisibility experienced through the educational system, and reinforced by the media. This as a result caused inferiority and negative self-image among this population. The 'constant' attack on African heritage' in Costa Rica through invisibility, and discrimination has caused most people of African descent to refer to their natural/normal hair which is versatile, and lends itself for a display of amazing and creative hairstyles, in negatives ways including 'picky, picky', 'natty', 'bad hair', 'though hair', and 'hair difficult to maintain'.

2.0 Hair is political

Each society establishes norms as to how its citizens should dress according to the occasion which also includes the proper way to use their hair⁹. We only need to take a conscious look at the television presenters and notice how they are well groomed in terms of their attire and hair. It is most noticeable in the case of the women that their hair is done up professionally to appear in front of millions of people. For the men they are dressed in their designer suits, hair with low cuts and, clean shaved. Other occasions where hair makes its display is during special events like weddings, or graduations, for these events people spend top dollar in order to sport the latest hairstyle.

During the second wave of the feminist movement, radical feminist demonstrated that the private sphere was political. I am contending that hair is also political since based on which type of hair it is, how it is worn and by whom it is worn will determine social, political and economic relationships. Within the context of a racist society Afros¹⁰ wearing their hair in its natural state are going to cause others to build negative ideas about them, some will be barred from entering certain spaces, unfounded fears will

⁸ Some stereotypical roles are as sport players, dancers, and buffoons, among others.

⁹ See Sherrow, 2006 for the discussion on hair from an historical perspective and Buckridge, 2004, for the discussion on dress during slavery in Jamaica.

¹⁰ In this paper the use of the word Afros is short for people of African descent.

surface due to stereotypes, some will be perceived as defiant since confidence is always interpreted by those who feel inferior, and hold power as being arrogant and full of self. In the case of loving hair, it would be interpreted as not being conquered thus intimidating and suspicious. Three recent examples will suffice in strengthening my argument.

During the month of December 2015 a video lasting a little over a minute socialized via WhatsApp is one of the clearest examples of hair being political within the Costa Rican context and the negative perception around especially the hairstyle locks, 'rasta' or 'dreads'. In this video three mestizo individuals two middle age individual one female, and the other male, and a young man probably around his 20s were asked to express how they felt watching the image of a young black man.

The responses while not surprising are dis-heartening because it shows that in the 21st century we have a long way still to go in terms of the negative attitudes towards people of African descent¹¹. Some of the responses after watching the image were, 'para mi es un rasta', 'fuma mariguana', 'se ve cochino por el pelo'. In the image the young black man is dressed in the typical jean pants and shirt, he is wearing the locks hairstyle hence the stereotypical negative responses. It happens that the young man is a graduate of the University of Costa Rica, a youth leader in the province of Limón, and a tourism lecturer. When this was revealed the participants were in a state of shock and shame.

During the month of June, 2015 a mestizo mother filed a complaint at the Ministry of Education against the primary school her son is attending, because the administration of the school wanted her son, Emiliano de Jesus Venegas Hernandez who is ethnically mixed to cut his hair because it is locked and long¹².

Figure 1



The image is courtesy of Marta Johnson, woman in the image, and Former Mayor of the Province of Limón.

On Jan, 18, 2016 while flipping through channels I stumbled on a Spanish news channel that was reporting on the way some Spanish parliamentarians were attending the meetings using locks or as they refer to this hairstyle, 'rasta'. They were interviewing citizens to get their views on the matter which not surprisingly were all negative. The general opinion was that this was not the 'appropriate' hairstyle for a political space.

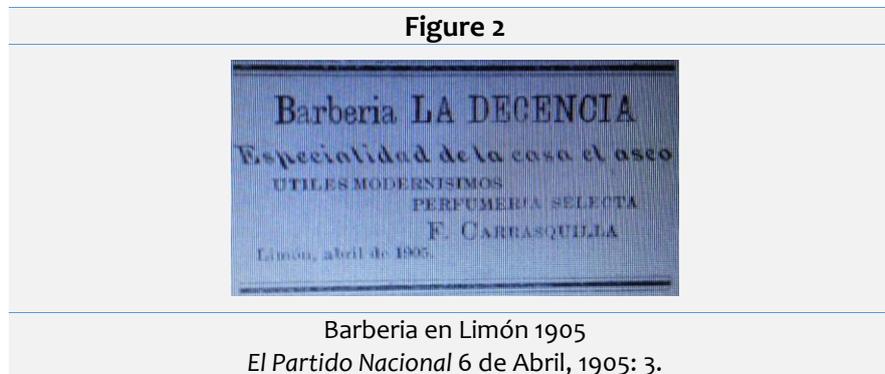
These examples are used to evidence the political aspects of hair within our societies. Hair politics is evident within early 20th century Costa Rican society in the general advertisement on hair grooming. Evident in these advertisements were the negative messages for those who had kinky hair, encouraging them to alter the texture with the use of the products.

¹¹ In post-independent Costa Rica the second wave of African descent entered the country from 1872.

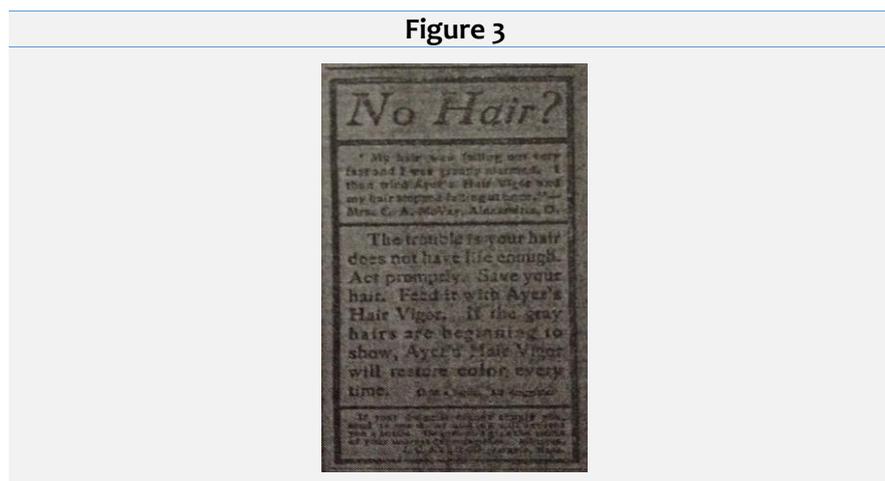
¹² The rules and regulations in many schools for mestizo male students is that they carry their hair at a regulated length. The difference with Emiliano is that they also wanted him to get rid of the locks which posed a problem because it meant getting rid of a hairstyle which left no doubt of his ethnic origin. Marta Johnson confirmed that Emiliano is still attending school with his locks in 2016.

3.0 Importance of hair grooming in Costa Rica

Before continuing with the discussion of the negative messages it is important to mention the importance of hair within the general Costa Rican society. The image below shows the advertisement of a barber shop in the province of Limón at the turn of the 20th century highlighting the importance of hair grooming.



In the *Limon Weekly News. Saturday July 25, 1903: 6* one can notice another advertising of the **Hair Vigor** product to help the growth of, and the covering of gray hair.



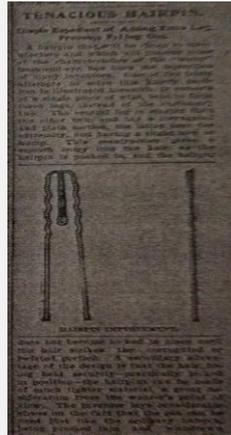
Sherrow in her discussion on nineteenth century advertising notes that for the United States, ‘... during the 1800s people... made and/or sold personal grooming products for the hair—mostly soaps, hair tonics, combs, and brushes... By the 1920s, ads could be heard on radio as well as seen in print media. The first grooming products were soaps... (Sherrow 2006: 5, 8). It is not surprising to find these types of advertising also in Costa Rica due to the influence of the North America culture on Latin America.

It was not only ads to dye or keep the hair from fallen there were also ads for adorning the hair. In the *Limon Weekly News Saturday May 21, 1904: 4* there is an ad advertising ‘a new, and better type of hair pin’, **Tenacious Hairpin**, highlighting once more the importance that hair grooming had in the society. Sherrow continues to report that,

‘Hair ornaments have been found in ancient ruins, grave sites, paintings, pottery, and sculpture. They are worn for their aesthetic appeal, as well as to keep hair in place for stylistic or occupational reasons...’

‘It is believed that hairpins date back to prehistoric societies. They evolved from simple, one-pronged sticks made from natural materials, to simple or ornate, double-pronged U-shaped pins, to modern metal and plastic mass-produced hairpins’ (Sherrow 2016: 1).

Figure 4



4.0 Devaluing, covering, and stereotyping the natural African hair, and hairstyles

Racism led all to believe that people of African descent did not have a glorious or normal past where people were involved in official and mundane activities including those related to hair care. Fortunately for us there is sufficient scholarship available to contradict such assumptions.¹³

Sherrow shed light as to the aspect of hair and hairstyles used in Africa before colonization,

For thousands of years, people living in Africa have devoted time and attention to styling their hair, and some traditional styles are still worn today. Ancient hieroglyphs, sculptures, and masks reveal intricate and varied hairstyles worn by people in different regions of this large continent (2006: 12).

Sherrow continues to report on hair adornments,

'Since ancient times, people in Africa have worn diverse ornaments made from feathers, shells, bone, wood, beads, coins or cloth. These materials, as well as mud containing colorful ores, contribute to the overall hairstyle and also may signify a person's social rank, occupation, age and other traits (2006: 1).

Hairpins, beads, cowrie shells, colored cloth, flowers, and other objects have been used to adorn hair or symbolize particular stages of life events (2006: 12).

It is very interesting to learn as Sharrow informs that,

When they began to visit Africa, Europeans were impressed by the number and variety of African hairstyles. In his book, *Description and Historical Account of the Gold Kingdom of Guinea*, written in 1602, Dutch explorer Pieter de Marees provided a detailed description and drawings of sixteen distinct hairstyles he observed in that region (2006: 12).

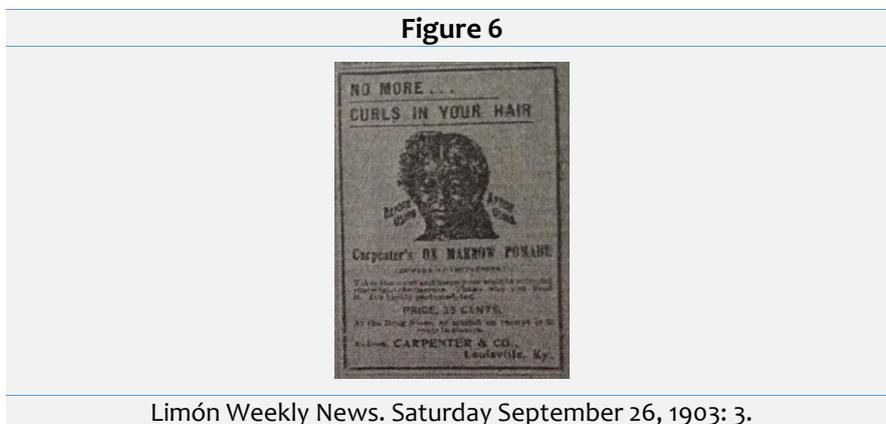
This reference serves to confirm the fact that what has been perpetrated against Africans, and later their descendants was in fact an orchestrated effort of 'eroding' as indicated by Buckridge 'every cultural African vestige', I will also add envy, disrespect and hate by the part of the colonizers, which some of their descendants have inherited. Therefore it is not surprising to find these ideas expressed in the print media of early 20th century Costa Rica through the following advertisement below.

Figure 5

¹³ See White 1995, Rooks, 1996, Lake, 2003, Buckridge 2004, Sherrow 2006, among others.



In the *Limon Weekly News*. Saturday October 10, 1903: 7 this ad ‘**Straighten your Hair**’ along with the other one below ‘**No More Curls in your Hair**’ was evidencing the hair politics through imagery where it was encouraging people of African descent in Costa Rica to straighten and get rid of the curls in their hair. Interesting to note that the imagery was not un-ambiguous as to the ethnic group, and type of hair it was referring to. The image is literally of a black (the color) woman with her hair part in two one side shows the kinky hair, and the other the straighten hair result of the **Carpenter’s Ox Marrow Pomade**. The same image used to advertise getting rid of the curls.



Limón Weekly News. Saturday September 26, 1903: 3.

Some may argue that these are insufficient evidence of hair ethnic discrimination at the turn of the 20th century in Costa Rica, that it could be just a matter of style and preference.¹⁴ The fact is that the following imagery and message weakens that position. Newspaper ads found during mid-20th century Costa Rica shows how entrenched racism was, and how it devalued anything Afro and made people of African descent invisible.

There are two 1959 ads found advertising the hair grease **Glostora**. This ad is trying to convince the consumers that it is a ‘first class product, for an elegant hair-do, it protects the hair... it maintains the hair soft, shine and well comb. The hair-do will last longer and looks better’. While the text might sound innocent the imagery shows the message behind the intent. The ad is classist and racist.

In terms of how groups are depicted in the media Hilary Nicholson 2002 in her discussion on “Gender as a Dynamic Concept in the Media” shares that,

An essential and sometimes controversial component of the mass media is the depiction of women and men. It is apparent to any observer that the mass media portray women and men differently...the media tends to rely on stereotypes as short-cuts in order to elicit responses from us (Nicholson, 2002: 361).

The same holds true for Africans and their descendants. While people of African descent are seldom shown within the Costa Rica media when they do they are portrayed in stereotypical ways, ‘eliciting’ and

¹⁴ There is sufficient scholarship that shows the racism against people of African descent in Costa Rica from colonial times.

reinforcing negative response as it happens with women. These negative responses only underline for the hegemony their disdain for anything Afro including their type of hair.

Patrick Bryan in his discussion about the ranks within late 19th and early 20th century Jamaican society commented ‘Being white in the Caribbean means above all, not being black’ (Bryan 2000: 67). The same can be said about hair. Having the “proper hair”, straight hair, means above all, not being kinky, since kinky means based on the implications above having hard, dull and untidy hair which does not look good. Having the “proper” hair texture also implies that only a certain class of people can sport that look. Note the images below. The women who this ad is catering to are professional, happy, educated, and have time for leisure.¹⁵ Based on the invisibility of Afro-Costa Rican women, assumptions are that they are not educated, happy or enjoy leisure time. The message for Afro-descendants is to alter the texture for a “better” appearance, and for the mainstream is, to enhance their natural texture.



5.0 Finding- negative perception on African natural hair

What follows is the analysis of the findings of the research based on the responses from the questionnaires, focus groups and the workshop. The discussion will begin with the analysis of the information gathered from high schools students from the focus groups about the perception of mestizos on Afro-Costa Rican hair.

The collection of data from high school students was important in determining if there was a positive shift in perception on this other group of Costa Ricans. The finding from the focus groups has revealed, not surprisingly, that the historical negative views of people of African descent remains intact among the new generation ensuring it’s perpetuation as well as the views about Afros hair. The perverseness of negative social construction has conditioned groups in such a way that it was noticeable the struggle to conciliate the stereotypes with the reality.

What was interesting also was their ignorance between Afros-natural hair and the natural hairstyles, for them they were one of the same. When they made their comments about Afros-natural hair all of them made reference to locks or as they call them ‘dreds’ or ‘rasta’.

5.1 Likes or dislikes of people of African descent natural hair

Most of the students commented that they liked Afros hair aka ‘dreds’ while in the same breath mentioned the negative aspects around this hair as noticed in this seventh grader response,

‘Son muy lindos, voluminosos, hay gente que no les gusta pero cuando yo los veo en la calle me llaman la atención aunque hay gente que no les gusta (7th grader Nov. 3, 2015).

I interjected to question her about some of the reasons why some people didn’t like Afros hair. Her response,

¹⁵Few were the women who were in the public sphere, since this was much more a male chauvinist society during mid- 20th century. Women had recently obtained the right to vote in 1949, therefore, these ads are not representative of mainstream Costa Rican woman during that period.

'yo no se, la gente que es racista, o gente que cree que tiene piojos o que tienen bichos en el pelo, porque es algo fuera de lo normal, pero no, la verdad, yo he visto que la gente [Afro] se lo cuidan mucho (female 7th grader Nov. 3, 2015).

A number of things are highlighted in her response first, the recognition of racism which would clarify the negative perception, and explanation about the hair having lice and that the look is not 'normal'¹⁶, two, the idea of what is considered 'normal' for the hegemonic group. Implied in her response is the affirmation that 'normal' is not the natural texture but the constructed determined look for Afros hair. I am arguing that if Afros cover their hair with extensions and wigs, that will be considered normal because As Fanon says 'we are black in relation to the white man' therefore, Afros displaying their hair is not considered 'normal' because it is natural, it is normal when it is disguised to suit hegemony. The last point extracted from this intervention is when she said 'cuando yo los veo en la calle me llaman la atencion'. If Afros were living within non-racist societies their hair would not be focus of curious attention since it would have being the norm whether in its natural state or styled.

Another aspect about negative social construction is that it does not allow for the hegemonic group to learn about 'The Other' since that would be an oxymoron, resulting in a total ignorance about 'The Other' hence the stereotypes. Besides not knowing the difference between the natural or false hair of the Afros there is also misunderstanding around its care. Some perception is that it is high maintenance, while others perceive that it looks the way it looks because it is not washed on a daily basis. The responses from other 7th grade participants confirms,

'Me parece que es como de mantener mucho, mucho cuidado por ejemplo los suyos¹⁷ que si usted lo lava todos los días que se pone feo, es algo de mucho cuidado'

'La mayoría de las personas piensan que los Afro-Caribeños tienen el pelo así, osea, a como caigan y que no se lo arreglan, que no se lo lavan, y se dejan un montón de tiempo y que por eso se ve así, pero la verdad, es original, es diferente' (7th grader females Nov. 3, 2015).

5.2 Dichotomy ugly, pretty, bad, good hair

If the perception is that Afros hair is nasty, looks ugly and is un-kept, it was important to enquire as to their personal opinion about their hair preference since much of what was expressed is based on ignorance and stereotyping. To the dichotomies ugly, pretty hair, and bad, good hair they commented,

'A mi me parece muy bonito porque lo noto muy extravagante y muy...como muy diferente a lo que todo mundo espera de un pelo 'normal' (7th grade female student Nov. 3, 2015).

'No es malo, porque tener el pelo así es un estilo, y en mi opinion es muy lindo, y además la gente que lo tiene le delata mucho de su personalidad, o sus razgos de donde son y eso hace que también se aprenda algo de su cultura' (7th grade female student Nov. 3, 2015).

In these other responses we continue to notice the struggle between the social construct and what they are experiencing as they interact even at an informal level with people of African descent in their everyday lives. It appears as if a collective neurosis was taking place on one hand they like the hair style but immediately highlighted what they think was wrong with it.

Whereas some sounded neurotic in their appreciation others left no doubt as their position which could be just a matter of preference or remnants of prejudice.

A few vociferous 8th graders comment,

¹⁶ Is important to highlight that, all the students used this term when referring the type, and style of hair of the Afros.

¹⁷ I was their English teacher and the only Afro-Costa Rican staff. Besides my hairstyle is sisterlocks, therefore they were being enlightened just by the fact of being their Afro-centric teacher.

'En la gente depende porque a mi no me gusta el pelo afro¹⁸. A mi me gusta como lo tiene usted, aunque de verdad lo veo demasiado pesado, yo no se como lo anda usted, yo lo veo, me gusta, pero en mi no me gustaria (8th grade female student Nov. 3, 2015).

Another female students said her piece,

'A mi gusta los de Sendaya, a mi me gustan los suyos, a mi no me gustan los de Bob Marley' (8th grade female student Nov. 3, 2015).

Another female chimes,

'lo que no me gusta son los 'rastas' los 'dreds', no me gusta, no, no, no!' (8th grade female student Nov. 3, 2015).

Their reference to my hair helps to highlight once more the perception that 'el pelo de los Afros' is not elegant, is not tidy looking, be reminded that they are referring to the conventional locks which is considered ugly, therefore mine which is used in the sisterlocks¹⁹ style looks neater. To echo Fanon, today those of us who wear sisterlocks it seems, are 'black in relation to the white man' or hegemony of our specific societies. So while the sisterlocks appears to be more accepted there is also some negative perception around it noted by the vociferous female student when she commented that is 'looks' heavy and she cannot understand how I use my hair in this way.

Another interesting observation is that while the perception is negative it seems that there is an essential reading to the hairstyle of the Afro which means that only they are entitled to use their hair in the particular hairstyle of dreds. A male student gives his opinion.

'A mi me gusta ver a los Afrodescendientes con locks²⁰ y se ve bien osea, yo vi a un gringo y no se ve bien, no se ve normal (8th grade male student Nov. 3, 2015).

When he used the term gringo he is referring to a white North American, therefore, he sees a contradiction. What is not clear due to further investigation are some of the reasons he considers that this hairstyle does not look good, or "normal". I argue that since whites are perceived as the superior group it is not right for them to be associated to the perceived inferior group by appropriating certain ethnic identifiers. Another consideration could be that since he has already internalized that, that hairstyle is exclusive to people of African descent he needs to learn to see its use as 'normal' by all groups.

5.3 Identification of Afros natural hair

Within the discussion around the hair dichotomies another question arose which was if they were able to recognize Afros natural hair. One student explains,

'es que casi no se ve a nadie con el pelo natural, Maye tiene trenzas y usted tiene locks' (8th grader females Nov. 3, 2015).

'Yo la mayoría de mujeres de afrodescendientes que yo conozco, la mayoría tiene extensiones' (7th grader females Nov. 3, 2015).

The only Afro-descendant student (Maye) who by the way uses plait extensions set out to explain the others her natural hair,

'El mio, el crece verdad, pero en vez de crecer hacia abajo como ustedes, se crece hacia arriba, porque se me ve esponjoso una melena' (8th grade female student Nov. 3, 2015).

¹⁸ She is making reference to conventional locks-which for them is synonymous to Afros natural hair.

¹⁹ Is a natural hairstyle, the technique to get finer locks, was invented by North American Dr. Joan Cornwell during the 1990s. This style has spread all over the world for its versatility, ease, and beauty which enhances both the individual and his/her natural hair.

²⁰ This student uses the term locks because during my interaction with them I told them that we are in the process of shifting paradigms also in language therefore it is better to use the term locks than 'dreds' since the latter conjured negative images.

'A mi me gusta verlo, que lo anden así, colochitos, pero en mi no, se enreda demasiado, hay no! detesto mi pelo, en serio!' (8th grade female student Nov. 3, 2015).

Another student was commenting and enquiring at the same time,

'los negros no son lacios, no son lacios. El pelo es como color oscuro, nunca he visto una negra macha' (8th grade female student Nov. 3, 2015).

The lone Afro-descendant student continues to enlighten her peers, and uses the opportunity to mourn about the difficulties she has with her hair,

'Casi nunca es lacio, y cuesta mucho que crezca. Profe, es muy difícil de peinar! porque no es un colochito sino que es chiquitito.' (8th grade female student Nov. 3, 2015).

This dynamic interaction with Maye and the rest of her peers confirms that most mestizos have no clue as to the real texture of Afros hair. During the discussion in order for them to get a clearer picture I reminded them of the other four Afro-descendants in the school, three males in primary, and one female in pre-school since none of them had altered the texture of their hair. While the school is small and they are seeing these students on a regular basis they had not noticed the texture of their hair.

Another wrong perception is that the hair does not grow long. One of the reasons why many Afros use locks is precisely because they realized that kinky hair can grow long. That was impossible to conceive before the Rastafarians, because there were not adequate products and hair accessories for Afros hair after Africans were enslaved and shipped to the New World. It is for this reason why the only Afro-descendant student finds her hair difficult to maintain and prefers to use long plait extensions, and in so doing just fuels the stereotype that Afros hair is high maintenance, and difficult to grow. The truth is all types of hair require high maintenance for it to grow healthy.

The last point for this discussion is the agony of the lone Afro-student who did not find anything positive about her type of hair even when most of the mestizo students said they liked especially the 'dreds'. As a matter of fact she indicated hating her type of hair.²¹ This is telling of how racism is affecting Afro-descendant children in their hair identity. Not having their natural hair and hairstyles normalized within the Costa Rican society is just another struggle in identity politics in this country.

5.4 Afro-descendants hair stereotypes

Since there is such ignorance around the type, and look of Afro-hair it was also important to find out which would be some of the stereotypes around this issue. The short responses below echo what was expressed in the video commented previously when was faced with the image of the young black man wearing the locks hairstyle. Student responses:

'Que son mariguaneros', 'Que son vagabundos', 'Que son gente cochina', 'Que son gente que solo vienen a estorbar', 'Que no hacen nada por la vida', 'Que el pelo es antihigiénico', 'porque el pelo lo tienen muy voluminoso', 'porque no se lo cuidan', 'porque no se lo peinan', 'porque no se lo lavan', 'porque lo tiene puff'.

Another female student tried to explain the reasons for these stereotypes. She explains,

'Yo veo que el pelo de los Afro-Caribeños²² que se ve un poco seco, se ve un poco dañado, y algunas personas del lugar piensan que no trabajan, que no se cuidan, cosas así, la gente se fija solo en apariencia, en la más mínima cosa' (7th grade female student Nov. 3, 2015).

²¹ She is not unique in her sentiments. Especially Afro children in the minority feel this way.

²² The general population is still uncertain as to which is the politically correct term to use when referring to African descents in Costa Rica therefore the terms Afrodescendientes, Afro-Costarricenses and Afro-Caribeños will be used interchangeably.

In order to demonstrate how entrenched these ideas are, and the ignorance around them in the middle of the discussion about the hair stereotype a student ask,

'Profe, usted se puede lavar el pelo?' (8th grade female student Nov. 3, 2015).

This intervention is a gem in that it serves to confirm the extent of the ignorance of mestizos in relation to Afros natural hair, underscoring the need for education in this area. During the discussion some students in reflexive mode shares about the stereotypes,

'Las personas que se lo quitan, no se sienten cómodos al tenerlo afro. Además en la sociedad los discriminan entonces llegan al punto que mejor se lo aplanchan y lo pueden intentar poner como los demás esperan que todo el pelo es así' (7th grade female student Nov. 3, 2015).

It is clear by this discussion the recognition that stereotypes are damaging to the person/group it is directed at. These stereotypes also cause negative effects to Afros to the point that many prefer to surrender and conform to the way the hegemony dictates which in this case would be altering or covering the texture of their hair.

5.5 Difference between hairstyle and hair texture

These stereotypes do not only affect Afros but also the hegemonic group who through these continue to be ignorant about this group as shown with the responses below where it was difficult to distinguish between hair texture and hairstyle. When asked what comes to mind when they hear the term afro these were the responses:

'Nos referimos al pelo voluminoso', 'Yo me lo imagino así, como mucho volumen', 'Yo pienso como colochó, ondulado, lo tienen como caído, como usted, yo lo veo como colochó, pero colochó no definido'.

In addition of not distinguishing between style and hair type they also were ignorant as to how to refer to the natural hair. The three main references to Afro-natural hair was mentioned 'dreds, rastas, and afro'.

5.6 Defying hegemony

Where there is the imposition of power there is also resistance and even solidarity by some of those who are part of the dominant group. Such is the case in the use of the 'dreds' hairstyle in Costa Rica.²³ When questioned about dreadlocks or 'rasta' students responded,

'Uy! Yo los amo! De eso estaba hablando, osea, para mi, a mi me encantaría porque desde muy pequeña a mi me gusta la cultura rasta y todo eso entonces, la mayoría de los rastas osea para mi se ve muy chiva, pero como es algo que necesita tener mucho cuidado porque debe ser difícil mantenerlo' (7th grader female student Nov. 3, 2015).

'Para mi las personas que se los ponen deben tener tanta voluntad de tenerlo y tanto cuidado que me sorprende, porque yo no lo haría porque yo no tengo los cuidados necesarios para hacerlo, pero las personas que se lo ponen quieren tomar un riesgo y se les ve muy lindo' (7th grader female student Nov. 3, 2015).

With these two interventions one notice that despite the bad press this natural hairstyle has garnered, there are still those from the hegemonic group who consider it just as what it is, a hairstyle. However, it is important to be reminded that these are teenagers whose job is to precisely defy authority hence they would be drawn to this hairstyle as a way to go against their parents, and teachers. It would be interesting to see and hear their views on this matter ten years later.

²³ It is important to understand that within the Costa Rican society there are some individuals who help the stereotype since they interpret using locks equals not grooming which gives a bad rap to this beautiful hairstyle.

There is also the recognition that it requires a level of bravery to use this hairstyle, which sounds contradictory in a society that in its ideological national discourse preaches equality for all its citizens.

5.7 Normalizing difference

This defiance which the students made reference to is not unique to Afro-Costa Ricans today. Historically people have always resisted dominance. This hair resistance is more evident presently in different societies worldwide²⁴. In Costa Rica, it is still a certain group of people who are identified using their hair in its natural state including, sport personalities, musicians, and surfers who have transgressed and got away with it. There is still a long way to go in regards of it being normalized by every sector of the society. This argument is reinforced by the student's responses to the question asked how many people they know with locks and with long natural hair. Below is the response from 7th graders.

'Mis profesores de surf, cantantes, gente rasta, gente que yo veo en la calle, en el bus, en patineta, yo veo gente con dreds'.

'Yo solo conozco a dos'.

'Pero ahora esto, ahora es una moda, a lo que veo ahora, antes eso era un asco, y ahora eso, todo eso Afro-Caribeno se está haciendo una moda. Y digamos, no se, usted va a la playa a sale allí a Heredia, usted ve un montón de gente con el pelo natural o con locks'.

5.8 Impact of Afros using their hair natural

Based on their responses there are more people using their hair in its natural state other than the stereotyped groups of sport players and surfers which is going in the direction of normalizing this aspect of the black identity. Hopefully this uncovering of the kink is not only a fad but a subtle and conscious defiance to Costa Rica hair hegemony. This defiance will, and in agreement with the responses will help people of Afro-Costa Rican to love their kink and Mestizo Costa Rica to learn and respect that kink. To this a seventh grader commented,

'Si las personas Afro-descendientes están seguros de lo que son podrían ayudar a los más pequeños a que no están mal! que ellos tienen derecho a mostrar su personalidad, y a mostrar como son en realidad, porque si son solo como la sociedad quiere que sean ellos van a ser forzados a eso. Así que será mejor que las personas que piensen que es lindo será mejor que lo usen para que los niños vean que es lindo y refuercen su identidad'.

The student's response is recognizing the importance for Afros to use their natural hair and to defy hegemony by uncovering their kink, since it would not only be beneficial to the user/s but also for the younger generations who will grow up accepting it as "normal" hence strengthening their identity.

5.9 Next side of the coin: Effects of racism on the use of Afros natural hair

The mestizo students from the research believed that if Afro-Costa Ricans would wear their hair natural, among other things it would teach other people about themselves and contribute to the building of self-esteem of the younger generation. While these sentiments are noble, and in fact some do, the reality is that living within a racist society makes this rather normal expression a day to day struggle. The repression has caused different reactions among Afro-Costa Ricans some will accommodate by covering their kink in order to fit within the establishment, while a few would show resistance by affirming this identity through wearing their hair the way they feel fit. This section will analyze the responses collected from the questionnaires as to the ways hegemony has affected the way Afro-Costa Ricans cover or uncover their kink.

²⁴ Since the 1990s there have been a natural hair revolution that is slowly being caught on by especially Afro-Costa Rican females. On May 16 in Panama 'El Día de la Treza' is celebrated as a way to defy Panamanian hair hegemony.

The majority of Afro-Costa Rican children will be seen using their hair in its natural state during the early years of their lives. Little boys will use them short or long depending on the parents, and cut short before entering school. With little girls, there will be more display of creativity depending of the length and texture. They will be seen in corn rows, long plaits, and short afros but in the majority of the cases it would not be used open since that would cause knots due to the general characteristics of most people of African and African descent type of hair.

Changes in the covering of the natural kink for the individuals will be noticeable during the teenage years when they are in high school. The combination of sexual maturity and hegemony for the most part, will cause them to alter the texture of their hair from this period. Based on the questionnaire responses, alteration began as early as 8 years old. Of the ten persons who filled the questionnaires only one said hers was never altered. The ages indicated for hair alteration oscillated between 8, and 15 years of age with 20 being the latest.

Hair, while a silent actor on the stage of everyday life as well as for the rest of the Costa Rican society, plays an important role for Afro-Costa Ricans.²⁵ Such is its importance that grooming takes center stage²⁶ especially for special events. The female respondents indicated that the reasons for grooming, especially for special events was basically to look different from the everyday hustle and bustle.

'nos hace ver diferentes', 'porque se considera que uno debe verse "mejor" para esas ocasiones', 'it's important to make you look elegant glamorous', 'I think is a special event, people should dress and look special', 'because you have to dress to impress and your hair must always look good and decent', 'it's not a matter of going to an event you must always give your hair maintenance even if you aren't going to an event', 'in order not to look the same way, special events, special look, that's the way I was thought.'

Grooming is of such importance for Afro-Costa Ricans that, based on the information gathered, from the 1960s in the Port of Limón there were informal hair dressers who offered their services for particularly hair ironing, or 'straightening' or 'pressing hair' as is known by the locals for special events. In conversations with some female Afro-Limonenses they reported,



Image circa 1980s. Courtesy of the Public Library in Port Limón.

'Más o menos desde los 60s you had Ms Ida, and when she went to the States she left Patricia Jackson. Carmen Smith use to live round Spring Field. A rememba, Ms Vida round San Juan. Jean, she use to straighten hair, she was good. Jean, from she was young she was right under Blacks. Ms Vero, Ms Lucille, and you had another one in front the Estadio. When there was any activity everybody with their drop curls...' (Afro-Limonense women Jan. 31st, 2016).

²⁵ Sherrow has already demonstrated the important role that hair plays within the African continent. Despite colonialism, imperialism and racism their descendants have managed to preserve that pride.

²⁶ Distorting the stereotypical notion that people of African descent don't wash, or take care of their hair.

Twentieth century Afro-Costa Ricans internalized the negative constructs that in order for the kink to look elegant for special events it needed to be covered with ironing comb. As a result the covering of the kink, which could be considered positive depending of the point of view, helped in the economic development for many women within the community. This hair grooming while covering the kink, debunks the negative construct that Afros do not take care of their hair.

In 21st century Costa Rica Afros continue to unmasked the negative constructs of hair grooming with the prevalence of a large number of certified and uncertified hair professionals including those dedicated to natural hair grooming. Below the respondents mentioned some they have visited, and knew about:

'Scarlett Barber shop, Deyanira Lindo, Sasha Scarlett, Cosita, Insein Gibson, Carmen Thousand, Condominio las Américas, Karleen Ishell, Shantel Spa, Sandra Ricketts hair salon, Yancy, Anderies at her house, Shana's at her house, King barber shop, Nudia Beauty salon (USA), Karla's, Arlene's Beauty shop, Cindy, Jennyfer Carnegie, and Carmen Hutchinson.

The grooming process for Afro-Costa Ricans not only included going or having your mother processed, and or fixed your hair for special events. This grooming included the use of products. Afro-Costa Rican migration to the United States and to Panama during the 20th century contributed to this important aspect of Afros hair care. The products were meant to help in making the hair look shine and moist as confirmed by the study. Some of the hair products were used included Dax, Dark and Lovely, Vaseline, castor oil, kerosene oil, later on Jheri curl, and relaxer products among others; Vaseline being the most popular.

As mentioned above the grooming process was with the objective for the hair to "look good". Looking good meant for the hair to be shine and moist because, as indicated before, the natural look of the hair is not 'black and shine' as some expressed, hence not the right look which make people feel inadequate and untidy.

Another reason for not wanting to use their hair in its natural state was due to the internalization of the negative ways this hair is referred to among themselves, some include the terms picky, picky, natty, nappy hair, kinky, though, hard hair, bongo hair, bushy, short hair, dry hair, seco, difícil among others. As a result they indicated some people felt shame of their hair, they thought their hair was too short, too puffy, the texture is not soft, does not look elegant, and difficult to maintain being one of the main reasons.

It can be argue that this could be one of the reasons why some mestizos do not know how Afros natural hair looks as indicated by the mestizo students focus group convincing themselves that the only look is the 'dreds' or 'rasta'.

Despite these negative expressions about Afros natural hair there is also some sign of resistance and defiance to Costa Rica's hegemonic notion of hair beauty by some Afro-Costa Rican women who indicated in the section of hair likes and dislikes positive expressions about black hair that is unusual but positive since it is showing a favorable shift in relation to the general negative views.

The finding shows that these women like their natural hair for a number of reasons:

'si, me gusta porque no tengo que preocuparme por estar arreglando el pelo a cada rato porque no tengo que soportar el dolor de usar extensiones', 'me gusta porque es MI cabello y creo que no debo avergonzarme de lo que es mio', 'yes, it is soft curly, easy to manage²⁷, not expensive to maintain, grows healthy, it's part of our beauty and acceptance as how God made us', 'Yes it is easy, unique and versatile', 'yes, I do. I feel free', 'Very practical, less stress', 'yes, it makes me feel unique', 'yes because I realized that is better, healthy, and cool. I must not use chemical products it weakens the hair.

²⁷ She is referring to the sisterlocks hairstyle.

Interestingly while sharing all these positive thoughts around natural hair most of the responses were similar to the mestizo students when referred to the use of 'dreds'; highlighting the effect of the negative social construct on their natural hair. They shared:

'look like in need of a bath', 'look like on drugs', 'look shabby', 'not tidy', 'se ve sucio', 'It's used by antihigienic people', 'referred to drug addicts and vagabunds', 'it's linked to smoking marijuana'.

Only two references expressed a different view.

'se siente fresco y la preocupación por el pelo es menos'

'it looks good and it's healthy for the hair but once you put it in you can't change the hairstyle'

The responses are understandable since it is only recently that we are noticing among Afro-Costa Ricans, locks that are well kept. We have to admit that unfortunately many drug addicts, understandable so gave no maintenance to their locks hence giving real meaning to the term dread. The pseudo 'rastas' also helped with this perception, but it is important to understand that their kinky hair is not ugly for being kinky but ugly for being un-kept.

Afro-Costa Ricans whether using their hair processed or natural believe in looking good, any way it is well known in the country 'que no hay nadie que vista como los negros' o 'los negros visten bien' in that 'vestir bien' hair plays its important role, because of such there were many informal hair salons during the mid-20th century in the Port of Limón, and a whole lot more in the 21st century as mentioned previously.

In terms of the stereotypes around Afros hair, again, there is consensus with the finding of the mestizo. These include:

'natty', 'principalmente se considera feo, se relaciona con cosas feas', 'it puffy, don't grow long', 'difficult to manage and keep', 'smelly', 'that people with afro have short hair', 'ugly, picky, trashy'.

All the respondents knew of some Afro-descendant with long hair but all of these were wearing locks reinforcing the perception that the hair on its own cannot be long.

5.10 Normalizing and uncovering the Kink

There are many today who are defying the established stereotypical norms about the natural hair, and are engrossing the numbers of those who are part of the natural hair movement which began in the 1990s. Today one can observe Afro-Costa Ricans, most noticeable among the women wearing their hair without any chemicals in all the different natural hair styles which would include plaiting the hair and then opening it without combing it out, including locks, whether conventional or sisterlocks. They do this with pride and without fear or shame, imposing with this new collective hair empowerment a stands against the negative stereotypical constructs. Some of the respondents commented,

'...it will be a way to make the youth...conscious of our identity and be proud of being black and natural.'

'They would love it and be proud of it.'

Their responses coincide with that of the mestizo students in that the uncovering of the kink would benefit both groups.

6.0 Conclusion

The study has demonstrated in first instance that hair in Costa Rica is a political issue due to the prevalent covert racism against people of African descent. This racism has created and perpetuated stereotypes against Afro-Costa Ricans in relation to their natural hair causing these in order to survive to adapt to the hegemonic standards of beauty. Failing to comply with these standards they can be sanctioned and/ or

be excluded from some spaces within the public sphere for not being as 'black' in relation to hegemonic Costa Rica demands, hence the urgency of covering their hair with extensions, relaxers, and the like.

The study made visible the negative perception, and ignorance around Afros natural hair. This ignorance coupled with racism is manifested in the way they refer to the hair in degrading terms associating this type of hair with all that is bad. There is also the difficulty recognizing hairstyle from hair texture.

Based on the study the effects of the negative social construct on Afro-Costa Ricans hair has caused many Afro-Costa Rican to dislike, be ashamed, and reject that what is natural, their kinky hair. Therefore, the justification for metaphorically covering their hair, this concealment is problematic for its repercussion on the younger generation of Afro-Costa Ricans who feel disempowered and inferior. The study reveals the importance of hair grooming for Afro-Costa Ricans, and in so doing debunked the negative construct of the contrary.

Despite this dis-encouraging scenario, while not surprising, is the resistance by many Afro-Costa Ricans and even encouragement by some mestizos to wear their hair in its natural state. Fortunately many today are celebrating this new hair love and is displaying it with pride. Much still need to be done at the legal, political and educational level for it to become normalized within this society but it is encouraging to see that in this 21st century many Afros are bold enough to **uncover their kink and celebrate this important aspect of their identity!**

Due to the political nature of Afros hair in Costa Rica there is the urgency for educators, activists and policy makers to bring to the discussion the importance of Afros to feel free to use their natural hair without fear of personal or professional repercussion. Policy implications will include in first instance a political national discussion on Afro-Costa Rican natural hair, following up on this will be the organization of committees of the different political, educational, labor, and legal instances to revise if there are existing laws or practices impeding Afros to wear their natural hair. The instances will work towards changing existing negative practices creating programs to re-educate the Costa Rican society in respecting and celebrating another natural expression of black identity.

Last but not least but important also to the discussion, is the question raised in the research as to the correct term to refer to Afros natural hair in Costa Rica. I am urging youth groups, teachers, religious leaders, community and political leaders, among policy makers to take advantage of this historical juncture where the natural hair movement, and the decade for people of African descent intersects in order to bring about positive changes in the area of hair empowerment for Afro-Costa Ricans.

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