Hair Politics: Understanding body politics through Dominican women's hair choices

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HAIR POLITICS

Understanding body politics through the lens of Dominican women's hair choices

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Glossary

Dominican Blowout	the expression used for getting curly hair straightened at a Dominican salon
mestizo, coloured	words used to describe creole Dominicans
Black	while few Dominicans self-identify as black and usually do not think of themselves as black, for this thesis however, this author will refer to Dominicans as black, whenever she mentions international categorisation of Dominicans (especially to curly-haired Dominicans), it is also the word the author will use for darker-skinned Dominicans or Haitians
tubi	hair net Dominican women use to protect their straightened hair from the elements
BLM	Black Lives Matter movement
Dominicana	synonym for Dominican Republic
Salonist	word invented by author used as synonym for salon owner
Big chop or gran corte	expression used by curly women when they refer to the moment they cut all their heat-damaged, straightened or overprocessed hair off, it marks the beginning of the curly hair journey

Chapter 1: Introduction

…

I sit on a couch next to Bianca, my 12-year-old cousin. She has her blue headphones on, a tablet on her lap, her lips are pressed together, her arms are crossed. It's Friday afternoon and it's Bianca's weekly visit at the hair salon. She's annoyed because she fell asleep in the car; her mom picked her and her sister up from school, and she is tired. But here we both sit now, her waiting for her turn to get her hair washed, and me the awkward anthropologist, observing. After a few minutes of us sitting in silence together, an employee dressed in black, comes to get her. Bianca reluctantly takes off her headphones, follows the employee and sits down in the chair in front of the washbasin. Four women are sat next to her, also in different stages of getting their hair washed. Two of the four are Bianca's mother Yoselin and her 14-year-old sister, Camila. As soon as the water hits Bianca's long, straightened hair, the curls start to show. The water unlocks the natural texture of the young girl's hair, her wavy long hair strands breaking free. I leave Bianca in the care of the hairdresser, and I go around the salon. The walls are coloured pink, to my right, next to the room for mani-and pedicures, I see a pink neon sign saying: "Beauty is Power". The styling room, that lies right before the washbasins and hairdryers, is where the action takes place. A woman sits in front of a large, oval mirror, she holds her hand over her ear as an employee is blow-drying her afro hair. Another woman is scrolling on her phone while an employee is unfastening the curlers from her long hair. The smell of burnt hair is filling the room. Hot smoke from the contact between blow-dryer and hair lingers like a fog over the salon. Bianca passes me and sits down in front of the large mirror. Her hair is dripping. The hair stylist immediately starts to dry the teen's hair with the blow-dryer. "Is there a reason why Bianca is not getting the same treatment as her mother and sister?" I asked. I thought it was strange that her sister and mother were sat beneath the low heat hairdryer, which is known to cause less hair damage compared to the 200-degree blow-dryer the employee was using on Bianca's hair. "She doesn't like it." "Why?" Bianca sits solemnly in her chair. The employee caresses the girl's hair and laughs "Because she doesn't have the patience for it!" She takes another long hair strand and pulls the hair straight with the blow dryer. Bianca's hair starts smoking. The curl is slowly getting burnt away.

…

The reader must be wondering why I chose to write an entire ethnographic thesis on hair. The reason is fairly simple: I am fascinated by hair. And I must admit, my own hair is part of the reason why I was doing this research. My hair is curly, often frizzy, sometimes knotted up, at night my hair is tied in a bonnet. My hair is puffy, it is voluminous. My hair is stressful, makes me come late to class, oh how I wish it were straight sometimes… But my hair is also beautiful, "Marie your hair looks fluffy today." "Wow, look at all the hair you have!". How I love it when people love my hair. My hair is me; it makes me feel womanly, other times I feel like a wicked witch.

So, if you were wondering why hair? My answer: why not hair? Though I grew up in Europe and have had a fair share of hair-related problems, ranging from hairdressers cutting it off without asking my consent, to getting it brushed by my loving, yet oblivious straight-haired mother, in order to make it 'tame', hair to afro descendent women in the Dominican Republic, means so much more. In a country with the most hair salons per capita in the world, hair means beauty (Murray and Ortiz 2012: 6). In 'Dominicana', talking about hair is unavoidable. The reader needs to understand, that part of growing up as an afro descendant human means growing into hair. Curly, kinky, thick, coarse, black hair is not easy to maintain, it needs a lot of care and expertise. Black and coloured people have an entire culture around the maintenance of their hair, stories of getting groomed in their childhood to being dragged to the salon, their hair makes them who they are. It is an indicator to their ethnicity, a symbol of pride and prejudice. Something many Europeans have problems understanding. It is crucial for anthropologists who are interested in race, beauty, gender and body to understand how black and mixed women's hair intersects with all these concepts. Their hair is both empowering and disempowering, but scholars are quick to judge hair straightening as an imitation of Eurocentric beauty standards, while on the other hand almost no literature exists concerning the growing natural hair movement. This thesis aims to draw a holistic picture of understanding Dominican women's hair, by addressing both the empowerment and disempowerment of their decisions, and by not painting one decision better than the other.

Even when we think something is oppressive, it is not always, and when we think: wow this is empowering (spoiler to the third chapter), well think again! I use hair as the leading thread for this thesis, and engage critically, but also fluidly with the concepts of hair, beauty, race, black and coloured women, and aim to demonstrate how paradoxical hair practices in the Dominican Republic are. How can a woman feel pretty after getting a *blowout* at the salon? Is she not erasing part of herself? On the other hand, who is actually allowed to wear their natural hair? Is there a difference between Dominicans and Haitian-Dominicans concerning the subject of hair choices?

Dominican women's perception of their hair is tied to socio-cultural processes of the creole imaginary. The Dominican traditional hair salon is therefore the perfect starting point to understand this complex Caribbean mindset. This complex problem manifests itself with the Dominican salon specialising in uncurling curly hair. Before going to Santo Domingo, I admit that I was sceptical of the famous *Dominican blowout*, because I am an appreciator and assumed 'member' of the natural hair movement. I love curls, coils, afros and any type of textured hair. I personally always refused to straighten my hair, because I knew how damaging it was to my curls, my already dry hair could not handle heat without breaking up in split-ends. I was truly intrigued and wondered: "Why do these women not love their curls?" You see, the traditional hair salon in Dominicana is a place where creole and black women go to get their hair curly hair straightened. Some critical academics argue that this practice is anti-black and entrenched in Eurocentric beauty standards that Caribbean women try to imitate by going to the salon. The vignette I chose, lays out the tradition of going to the hair salon as a weekly practice, and many Dominican women start going there from a very young age. I am fascinated by the feminist and neoliberal headlock of beauty, how come a woman is truly empowered, if she has to literally spend money on body modification to feel good about herself? Is she fully agent in her decision to beautify herself or is she influenced by the neoliberal idea that beautifying herself is empowering (Ging-Dwan 2016: 147)? Why is Bianca, at only twelve, dragged to the salon on her free Friday afternoon? How can this practice be understood, beyond the racial binary that many scholars, and anthropologists see it as (Hassel 2022: 193)?

1.1. Structure of thesis

Above, I laid out a short oversight of the complex issue of hair and beauty in the Dominican Republic. To answer my research question: How do hair politics and existing hair ideals reflect on the racial and gendered realities that exist in the Dominican Republic? I separated my thesis in two sections, the first is foundational, it explains the reasons why straight hair is an ideal, and even a necessity for social assimilation. From gendered expectations at work, to race dynamics that manifest in hair, to gendered familial beauty rituals. The second chapter discusses how race and gender disproportionately affect black and mestizo women's ability to wear their hair how they want. It is the reaction to the straight ideal. I write about the natural hair movement that is challenging the beauty agenda of the *Dominican blowout*. Both chapters discuss race and gender and how they affect Dominican women's everyday lives.

Chapter Two introduces the reader to the starting point, the idea that black natural hair is not professional and does not belong in salaried workplaces. In the Caribbean, the respectability paradigm dictates what women ought to wear, how they should behave, how they should look. These notions of respectability stem from a history of black women trying to fit into white people's spaces. Urban black women literally invented the hot comb in order to grow their chances of getting hired by white employers (hooks 1989: 1). Caribbean women, who are particularly proud of white-collar work, due to the difficult colonial past and a rather recent trend for these women to work at bureaucratic institutions, claim their work with pride, even reproducing expectations of respectability (Freeman 2000: 249). In the Dominican Republic, women at banks, bureaus, and even supermarkets wear their hair straight. This first section discusses how this hairy oppression is distinctly affecting two participants, but also discusses how Dominican women reclaim their hair, and oppose to the hair rule, impacting bureaucracy's embargo of natural hair at work.

The second section is an ethnographically rich analysis of the straight hair ideal that exists and persists in contemporary women's minds. When is hair good, when is hair bad? I discuss where salon culture comes from, relating it to Dominican emancipation and explain what good hair bad hair actually means. Darker-skinned, or black Dominicans are more affected by the hair ideal than lighter-skinned mestizo women, given that coarse, bad hair is statistically more prevalent with darker individuals. But hair straightening as a practice is also internalised and reproduced through female socialisation, women from the direct environment, or from a similar social circle, reproduce a similar beauty ideal (Edmonds 2010; hooks 1989; Rice 2002).

The last section of the second chapter relates the body to the social world, by assessing how hair "gives you away" (Caldwell 2003: 22). Class and race influence the means to get your hair done within the consumerist beauty culture on the island. There is significant correlation between poor women having 'bad hair' and wealthy and middle-class women having 'good hair'. Murray and Ortiz argue that the frequency of salon visits, in combination with the quality of the salon, indicates how women differentiate through the capital they can invest in their bodies. While salons exist through all classes in urban settings, from high-end salons in rich neighbourhoods, to hood salons in slums, salons are also a commodity that is for everyone (but the frequency and quality differs). However, women in the countryside, are doubly excluded from the beauty culture, due to lack of finances and lack of salons available. Poverty is also a hairy issue (Reischer and Koo 2003; Edmonds 2010).

Chapter Three section one is theoretically focused, I make use of the history of the black female body, how colonial eugenics have constructed the black woman as savage, sexual and ugly (Fausto-Sterling 1995: 8). This construction impacts afro descendant women's self-esteem until this day, because their bodies are still associated with primitive ideas, as if their features would make them less intelligent.

From this starting point, I make sense of the curly hair boom that has taken over the island. From a few salons back in the 2010s to curly hair salons popping up all over the capital, the curly girl community is growing steadily. I met some of the important actors, which are all women, and how they make use of the internet to spread their message. The internet also serves these curly heads with knowledge, as there is a growing trend of "resurgent black culture" (Edmonds 2010: 112). The black US and African diaspora are building a culture for themselves, claiming their ancestry, feeling proud of their race and claim their beauty.

In the last section I analyse the consumerist nature of the black culture, and how cleverly the beauty market has made use of black women's features for money-making. Big hair brands such as L'Oréal, which have never catered toward people of colour, now produce entire curly hair product lines. On the other hand, the natural hair ideal is not as empowering as one would think. It replaces one beauty ideal with another that is just as strict and connected to consumerism (Rice 2002: 169). The afro hair salon, though supportive of black women's hair, does not deconstruct consumerist pressure to spend money as a way to get your hair styled. In that fashion, the curly hair salon is quite similar to the traditional one (Lyon 2020: 2135).

1.2. Doing fieldwork as a young curly haired European girl…

I chose to go to the Caribbean for my research mostly for practicality reasons: I have family living there. While I chose the global ethnography track and had a deep-lying urge to go far away and do ethnographic research, I was also scared to fall into the trap of "scientific colonialism" (Bourgois 1990: 45). I did not want to be the anthropologist studying a culture outside my own, and study Caribbean women, and end up framing them as something they are not (King 1977: 208). The Caribbean has been historically understudied and categorised by Western scholars as a place that is neither black nor white but still obsessed and oppressed with the colonial past (Yelvington 2010: 109). The Dominican practice of women's hair straightening has fallen into this trap especially (Murray and Ortiz 2012; Hassel 2022).

Therefore, I need to elaborate on my positionality for this research, and how it made my ethnographic fieldwork engaging and enabled me to make connections I would not have otherwise gotten. First, I need to address that I recognise myself as an insider and outsider to my research population, the latter I will describe later (Greensword 2023: 114). I am an outsider, because I am a researcher from Europe. I have no Caribbean blood, nor did I grow up there. I grew up in white, middle-class Luxembourg, one of the wealthiest countries in the world, and I acknowledge that I was able to do this research because of funding that I received from my university and the Luxembourgish welfare state. Secondly, I am also an insider, a woman with curly hair. My hair texture resembles that of many mestizo women on the island. Therefore, I could go to afro and curly hair salons or events without anyone questioning my presence there. I could immerse myself in some situations or relate to women through my hair (Poopu and Berg 2021: 250). For example, when I went to the afro hair convention in Santiago de los Caballeros in March, I got a haircut from a curly hair professional there. I was part of the crowd and could genuinely participate in the event. No one stared at me or asked me what I was doing there. My hair often spoke for itself, so I did not need to. Still, I am conscious of my ethnicity. Although my hair might be similar to some, I have never been scrutinised for my features like many of the women in my ethnography, nor have I lived through poverty, financial losses or racism.

Anthropologists who work in the realms of beauty and aesthetics, often experience that their interlocutors perceive them and even comment on their looks. Freeman and Liebelt have had instances where interlocutors would tell them they should improve their looks through better attire or makeup (Freeman 2000; Liebelt 2022). That is why, I adapted my wardrobe to the casual style of

Dominican women, wearing a t-shirt and jeans that cover my stomach and chest but are not too formal. As usual, I applied makeup and styled my hair, and mostly got positive feedback from my interlocutors.

1.3. Interlocutors and methodology

A research fail…

In my research proposal, I wrote about the empowerment and disempowerment of female entrepreneurship, the feminist discourse of development regarding women's independent work and how beauty intermixes with entrepreneurship and empowerment (Batliwala 2007; Duflo 2012). Therefore, I assumed that since I looked at the beauty sector of Santo Domingo, I needed an influential gatekeeper with a reputation and many contacts to get me in touch with the salonists and beauty creators of the Caribbean metropole. However, within the first month of my research I discovered that the gatekeeper, who is not one person but a development centre at the Pontifical University of Santo Domingo[1], used some very intrusive tactics to get women to participate in my study. The employees of the centre made phone calls behind my back asking beauty entrepreneurs, both former and current students at the university, to participate in my research. As stated in the AA code of ethics, it was my duty in that moment to not agree with the aggressive way the centre was trying to make women participate in my research. After this ethical issue, I decided to sever my ties with the centre entirely and rely on myself and family for future research (AAA 2009: 4). I understood then why I did not get the response from participants that I hoped for, e.g. them not responding to my WhatsApp messages, cancelling interviews last minute or being overtly suspicious of me during online interviews (which some of them insisted upon before meeting me), I wondered: What can I do to make these women trust me?

Informal networking: What I had to learn quickly, is that some methods just do not work everywhere nor with everyone, like working through a gatekeeper or following formal guidelines like you would need for an internship in Europe. This communication method is not customary for my population, especially not with non-academic hard-working Dominican ladies working in the hair industry. However, what works absolute wonders in comparison, is snowballing your population by walking

[1] This development centre is called Centro MIPYMES.

into a salon and shortly introducing yourself and your research overtly or getting a manicure and covertly observing the salon without talking as a researcher, but rather as a random everyday client. Therefore, formal networking and thinking of 'responsibility', as the AAA code says, does not include important factors such as simple human-to-human emotional and complicated relationships and are feminine-coded (AAA 2009). I felt that as a good researcher, I had to treat my interlocutors like I would a 'sister', Dominicans are known to call people they are not related to as family (I was often called 'prima' = cousin, or 'jovencita' = young girl). These methods will yield thousand times more results. I had to truly throw out methodologies I learned in my bachelor's to yield the results that I wanted in the context that I lived in (Poopu and Berg 2021: 250).

I will tell you a story to help you understand the networking I did, which illustrates a symbolic representation of how I did most of my research. One day in early March, I booked a waxing appointment at a more high-end salon in Santo Domingo. I talked to a few employees there and ended up chatting for half an hour with the pedicurist. She suggested I go to the nearby mall and talk to the beauty employees there. I followed her advice. After some wandering about, I ended up at a hair care store in the mall. I bought some much-needed hair products and asked an employee about the shop's clientele. I also asked her if she knew any salon owners I could talk to. She gave me Erika's WhatsApp, and told me to text her. She also texted Erika to inform her that she knew me, and I was trustworthy. Erika and I organised an interview for the next day at her afro hair salon. After our interview, the afro salonist suggested I should attend the curly hair festival in Santiago, as she would work there, and I could get to know the curly hair community better. When I went to the festival, I walked up to Erika's stand, where she was styling an attendant's hair. She took me by my hip and guided me toward Perla, another curly-haired influencer and dear friend of hers. I interviewed Perla then and there. After I was done talking to Perla, she offered to help me find more participants to talk to. She walked up to three women, pointed her finger at me, returned, and told me the women were ready to talk. I asked her whether she knew them "No, but they are visitors to the festival; they should have interesting stories to tell you." As this example shows, nothing is more effective than letting your participants be involved in finding other participants, especially when they are trustworthy references (like the employee at the hair shop or Perla at the festival).

I also relied on my family and friends for research. My aunt drove me to one of the most fruitful encounters of my research, to Françoise's salon. I would have never been able to go there without her help and support (and her car). While she was getting a pedicure, I extensively interviewed Françoise. Another time, my aunt's niece brought the two of us to her and her daughter's weekly salon appointment. There, I struck up informal conversations with employees. Another time, I discussed how I thought I needed to see salons from all social spheres. At that point I had already

visited upper-class, middle-class salons, but not yet a 'hood' salon. However, it was crucial for my safety not to go to this part of town alone, preferably in company of a male (Bourgois 1990; Greensword 2023). One day, Carmine, a participant whom I had met in my research's exploratory phase, and I went for dinner together. I told her that I wanted to see a salon in the 'barrio', and she enthusiastically suggested that she wanted to accompany me and that she knew a friend from university who lived in such a neighbourhood. The friend, Alex, showed us around his neighbourhood and introduced us to Rossy and Mileidy, two 'hood' salon owners he knew personally.

Participant Observation: I have made many findings by observing and hanging around places "of the people that I study" (Bryman 2016: 393). So, I spent considerable time at my local park, looking at people's and children's hair, for example. Or even talking to women at the park and asking them how they care for their hair. Every Saturday, sometimes even Sunday, my aunt and I would go to a mega supermarket close to our residence, for lunch. We ate fast food at the food court, and right next to the food shops was a hair salon. During the weekends, is when most women go to the salon (Murray and Ortiz 2012: 99). It is when they are free for the weekend, and before they start working again on Monday. While eating, I would observe how mothers and daughters would go to the salon after lunch, leaving the dads, brothers, and smaller children by themselves. In front of the salon were chairs, where waiting family members could sit. I drove countless times through various neighbourhoods of the city and counted how many salons were on the way. The combination of observing and participating by striking up conversations was part of my research plan and by immersing myself in the banal everyday life of Dominican society, I got a clear understanding of hair dynamics in the country. Twice, I went to the salon on a Sunday as a client myself, getting a mani or pedicure, to observe what was happening around me. Through participating in the beauty culture, I understood the "why" and felt the "wow" effect of the salon first-hand. These experiences helped me to deconstruct my own bias toward beauty and get a more holistic view of my research subject (idem.). For example, I got my very first manicure at a salon. When I went to Margarette's curly hair salon, she offered me a free styling session after our interview. My curls never looked prettier. The bias I felt toward the traditional hair salon, which I interpreted as a place where women go to get their curls removed, diminished the more time I spent in such a salon. I could see the value of the work and could appreciate the smiles women had after leaving the salon. Being participant in the Dominican beauty culture made me understand the complexity of hair and beauty much better, and I will never forget this experience.

Open interviews: Before going to Santo Domingo, my supervisor suggested I do open interviews. This interview style is advantageous because the conversation is fluid rather than guided. I never prepared an interview with specific questions in mind. Instead, I had some guiding themes I wanted to discuss, or I opened the interview with the same question (Bryman 2016: 467). When I talked to a salon owner, I would ask: "So tell me why you started working in the beauty industry. Tell me about your life." Most women started their stories from when they were children and had their first encounters with hair practices; this coincides with the lived realities of black or mestizo women (hooks 1989; Greensword 2023; Harvey 2005). Most of the times, the women automatically discussed salon culture, hair practices, race and stigma, and socio-economic challenges they had faced in their lives. In general, I was faced with good interview partners, I barely had to intervene with my own questions. I would say that this interview style is not applicable to all settings, however the beauty spaces I spent my time in are not formal spaces. So, it felt more natural to talk to the women who were there, by imitating a natural conversation as well as I could. I often lost track of time because my interlocutors and I had such a fluid conversation, based on mutual respect and female understanding. Even though we were worlds apart, when it came to hair, we had something in common.

Social media analysis: A big part of my research took place online. Some key informants use online platforms as an extension of their labour. Françoise, Erika and Margarette owe most of their clients to TikTok or Instagram posts. The algorithm generates income (Kneese and Palm 2020: 2). Hine suggests that ethnographers need to take into account how important social media are for understanding the "socially transformative possibilities of the internet" (Hine 2015: 33). That is why I analysed the impact the curly girl and BLM movement had on the lived realities of my interlocutors. I followed Françoise's Instagram stories religiously; she always films how she goes about straightening or relaxing clients' hair, and she has truly shown me how hair straightening is not just an oppressive beauty standard but so much more. Some online ethnographers also suggest reading comments under posts to make thematic analyses. That is why I read comments under Instagram reels or posts to see how users react to the content my interlocutors posted and assess how they feel about the theme of natural or straightened hair (Bryman 2016: 564).

Participants: Lastly, I will discuss who my participants are. Since I focused my research on hair politics, I decided to talk to both traditional and curly/afro salon owners, and employees. For traditional hair salons, I have a more varied population, from significant social classes, to make a comparative analysis (Murray and Ortiz 2012: 92) of the differences between those salons (high-end salon: 2; middle-class salons: 4; hood salon: 2). For curly hair salons, I only visited two two middle-class salons. At the Cibao Rizado in Santiago, I talked informally to 4 women and had one interview with Perla. I had twelve open-ended interviews, but for my theoretical and ethnographic focus, I only used eight of those for the analysis. The interviews were mainly with salon owners. I gathered the rest of the data from informal conversations with visitors of the curly hair fair and random parkgoers. All names used in the thesis are the original names of my participants, who all agreed I use their real surname. The only names changed are those of my immediate Dominican family members and minors.

Chapter 2: Good Hair Bad Hair

2.1. Hair professionalities

…

It is 9am, the streets of Santo Domingo fill up with motoconchos (= motorcycle taxis, usually men), guaguas (= public buses) and private cars packed with people going to work. One of the main avenues of Santo Domingo, called Nuñez de Cáceres, is loud with noises from the ongoing traffic. The morning 'tapón' (= traffic jam) already at its full height. I am thankful I sit in a well-conditioned car and not on a motorcycle, like so many others. Although the speed some of these motor taxis go, should be a refreshment in itself. The women working at banks or corporate jobs are wearing their pretty blouses and suit pants. I see a motorcycle drive past, with three women sitting closely together, hugging one another so that they don't fall off. They're sliding their way past cars and buses, and even red lights to get to their job. The three of them still have their tubi in their hair. This fishnet-like looking cap women put on their hair to keep their pressed hair straight and protected from the elements. I imagined how once they arrive at work; they quickly run to the bathroom to refresh their hair and get it out of the tubi.

…

When does one look professional or presentable for work? How does hair, attire and even your nails contribute to this professional look? Why are some hairstyles 'not professional'? These questions need to be understood within the context of women and the interpretation of their bodies and how the latter influence their social realities. Women and their bodies have throughout the passing of time been the subject of men's talk, but discourse around their aesthetics and their work, really started once women started large scale low-wage labour in 19th Century Europe (Mears 2014; Freeman 2000). The concept of "aesthetic labour" became a prerequisite for Victorian era women who worked in working-class jobs but distinguished themselves from factory workers through their dress and attitude. Retail workers working at clothing stores, for example, were valued for their kindness toward the customer, their style of dress and "genteel" attitude. Looking good added a skill and also pressure to women's labour, which was not required at other Fordian factory work, such as cotton mills for example (Mears 2014: 1331-1332). Even though "white collar" jobs, e.g. department store jobs, typewriter jobs, for women were still technically working-class labour, the aesthetic

component both posited them over traditional factory labour, while at the same time continuing the underpaying and unsafe working conditions that existed at factory jobs[2].

The history of women's aesthetic labour is so important to understand, because creole labour practices are both connected to past working principles of European "respectability" and African women's tradition of economic independence (Freeman 2000: 109). Freeman calls the brutal slavery past and the subsequent need for Caribbeans to build an identity apart from this past, resulted in both an adoption of principles from the European masters, and a converging need for independence which for women strongly manifested through wage labour (idem.). Creole women had to affirm themselves by claiming spaces they were historically excluded from, through their gender and their race. Thus, dress codes are a sort-of status of pride and distinction, showing a corporate professionality. While also adding "invisible, unpaid body labour" into the mix (Freeman 2000; Mears 2014). Body work is the work women put into their physique (such as going to the salon, buying professional clothes or getting a manicure) to fit their job's image. For Caribbean women, these aesthetic values are both required by many wage jobs (corporate bodies like banks, education facilities, data companies), and also reproduced by many of the women themselves for pride and respectability reasons. Why is this aesthetic component so interesting for hair politics in the Dominican Republic? Well, black and coloured women are more policed for their bodies, especially regarding their bodies' professionality. In my second chapter, I explain how the African body type is historically constructed as primitive and unprofessional, something that continues to haunt many black and coloured women until this day and influences their work opportunities (Liebelt 2016: 18). For Dominican women workers, however, their hair is the main identifier to this problematic history.

Black women have to quite literally fight their bodies to enable their upward mobility, and from there stems this long-held tradition of hair-pressing, which enabled women of colour to enter into the formal working sector in urban areas (hooks 1989: 2). Dominican scholars and ethnographers describe how in these norms of presentability, in a Dominican and Caribbean context, for many Black and coloured Dominican women, there is this look they need to fit, usually through professional attire, a well-kept aesthetic and conforming hair (Freeman 2000: 219). Edmonds in his ethnography about beauty in Brazil, describes that for some people of inferior social standing (by class, race) attaining a certain amount of beauty, can be an essential tool for getting formal opportunities which they would otherwise not get (Edmonds 2010: 20). Still, These rules of beauty, and especially of allowed and forbidden hairstyles that are disguised under the term 'respectability' or 'presentability'

[2] Information retrieved from the website of the Department of History at Warwick University, accessed 17/06/24 https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/history/students/modules/hi253/lectures/lecture3/

demonstrate how anti-Black sentiments continue through micro-managing hair rules, especially toward Black Dominican women (Craig 2002: 163).

Dressing for success

First, I would like to discuss the agentic and empowering aspect of creole female professionalism, as it offers an avenue for self-expression and complicity for working wage labourers. Freeman addresses in her book about middle-class women working at a data company in Barbados, there is this work ethology within company policy and also between the women workers of "dressing for success" (Freeman 2000: 2229. This dress code, which encompasses hair, outfit and makeup or nails, combined with a desire and expectation to act professional and being a more than good employee, is albeit strict, also desired and a visual confirmation of success for the women in Freeman's ethnography. Just like Freeman, I have also noticed this attitude from women employees, or independent entrepreneurs as well. Especially in more 'professional' spaces such as the bank, university or mobile data provider such as Claro, Banco Popular, the attire women wear, reflects how they perceive their job and that they like to dress accordingly too. How Caribbean women dress for work then, is in itself proof of a feeling of pride and empowerment they get through "looking professional" (Mears 2014: 1340). They make a statement to clients, or as Freeman also mentions onlookers when they travel to and from work.

One day, while I was visiting the entrepreneurship centre at the Pontifical Catholic University Madre y Maestra for a meeting with some employees, I noticed what Freeman describes with the women professional workers at Data Air in Barbados regarding dress attire and obvious female complicity through dress and looks. The centre is part of the university, thus a very formal, professional atmospheric space. When we entered the office of Mipymes, it seemed like a female-led office. My aunt and I joked that they hid the one man in a corner of the office, where no one could see him. This is what Freeman also describes in her ethnography about employees at Data Air, where the female majority of the space underlines the powerful presence women are claiming in professional spaces, even defying patriarchal norms by for example quite literally banning the one man in the office to a remote corner, where no one can see him and where he certainly is not receiving any guests or clients. The attitude of the women was also efficient and professional, telling my aunt and I to sit down while we waited and offered us coffee and tea. The employees wore white or coloured blouses, black or blue suit pants and all wore their hair straight. On their feet, they wore ballerinas or

even small heels. I felt incredibly underdressed and unprofessional, I decided to wear a black flared legging and a blue crop top with pink sneakers, and although my aunt gave me a judgemental look before I got in the car, I could not imagine how serious dress attire was in those academic or professional spaces. Much like me, Freeman during her time with Data Air women, had a dress problem in the beginning of her research at Data Air and received snarky comments by the employees to not wear 'leisure clothes' like sandals or shorts at the workplace. So, she had to adapt her wardrobe for her research at the data company (Freeman 2000: 220). I was very happy that I brought a blouse (just in case) that my aunt had lent to me, and I put it on immediately while I was waiting in the office of the centre. For a European who grew up with teachers going to school with jeans, and seeing people wearing sandals to work, I was quite impressed and unprepared with the tenacity of the outfits I witnessed from women going to work. One can feel the pride in the way they dress (Freeman 2000: 224).

For creole women, working hard is a gendered aspiration, an ethic they follow vehemently, taking their jobs seriously because they do not take this formal work of theirs for granted. That is why, before colouring Caribbean women's self-ascribed and normalised body labour as purely oppressive and conclude it to an internalised ethic they adopted from their colonisers, we anthropologists need to also understand that this personal choice and the corporate expectation of their looks is another consequence of post-colonial creole identity formation (Freeman 2000: 109). And while this side of Caribbean women claiming intellectual and professional spaces, through expressing professionality both through dress and comportment is rather positive, there is also a side to this etiquette inscribed from 'above' e.g. employer or company policy, but also reproduced by the women by conforming to it, that is not so empowering. A 'small' detail such as the state of one's nails for example, may garner a comment or two by fellow employees or an employer, because the professional atmosphere requires it (Freeman 2000: 222). The devil really lies in the detail. Especially in the hairy details, so to say.

Your hair is not formal!

As Freeman explains, looking presentable for work, as a woman living in the Caribbean, entails a wide array of expectations to fill. In a society, such as the Dominican one where although, the majority of the population is from African descent, thus one of the consequences being that many of those descendants have some sort of textured hair. There is a past and continuing discrimination going on against wearing 'natural' or even 'African' hairstyles to work (Sanders Gómez 2018: 106). "She didn't comb her hair" (Freeman 2000: 219), which is a direct quote from an employee gossiping about another employee's hair, introduces this professional hair problem well. Indeed, Afro hair and hairstyles are deemed 'unprofessional' and preferred hairstyles such as straight, or tightly bounded hair are more accepted in professional spaces. The idea is that African hair, as in coily hair is 'bad', it is wild-looking and not formal enough (Hassel 2022: 167). Such hairstyles were and some still are, forbidden for people to wear at jobs. For example, many people I talked to told me that about ten years ago women protested against discriminatory policies that were up until then very present in the corporate world.

One big shifting moment, that I even came across twice in my literature (Lyon 2020; Sanders Gómez 2018) is of this young woman requesting a master's scholarship for abroad at the Dominican ministry of education. In order to qualify for this scholarship, she had to pitch her candidature by the then minister of education, Ligia Amado Melo. The minister outright refused to give this aspiring student a chance for the scholarship for only one reason: the young girl's hair. "I don't give scholarships to people who have hair like yours, I'm old-fashioned but no…" (Lyon 2020: 2121). Naturally, this student was outraged by the treatment she received from the minister and immediately posted about her experience online. Her post went viral and avalanched a discussion on the discrimination so many young girls and women face when they make the hard choice to wear their natural hair. The protests of the 2010s, and the growing social media outreach pressured many institutions in the Dominican Republic, but also at the global stage such as the United States to change their hair policies regarding textured hair. The well-known 2019 CROWN act "prohibits discrimination based on hairstyle or hair texture" (Hassel 2022: 180).

Even though hair rules are much less strict, some hairstyles are still forbidden. And unofficial below-the-rug hair comments continue harassing girls at school or women at work. For example, until today, many workplaces forbid women to wear their hair in braids, because there is an existing and strong societal narrative that braided hair is "not professional" or even "ghetto" and therefore does

not belong in an office or at a school (Greensword 2023: 114). These “delinquent hairstyles” are an important aspect of hair politics, as they feed into the idea of “looking professional”, and they dictate what Dominicans are allowed to look like, especially in educative and professional spaces. Hassel explains that there is a ‘dichotomy’ between natural hair and braided or cultural hairstyles, as ‘natural hair’ such as the afro, or curly hair in general is what someone is born with, therefore cannot be discriminated upon by having this hairdo at work. However as braided hair is an aesthetic choice, rather than hair one is born with, it disqualifies these “synthetic” hairstyles from being included in the natural and Black hair category, meaning that many workplaces in the Dominican Republic, but also in the US are still free to forbid employees from wearing them (Hassel 2022: 179). This is the official reason anyway, but the reality is really that there is continuous Black discrimination, especially targeted toward darker people who have hairdos that have been passed down for generations. Cornrows, a typical braiding pattern dating back to the days of chattel slavery, are embedded in a history of resilience and Black women’s oppression, because through these braids, women stored food like grains or rice to hide from their white masters and cook then in secret (Hassel 2022: 174-175). Therefore, it is even the more lamentable that today, in Dominican society, such a historically rich hairstyle is deemed as ‘delinquent’ and ‘unprofessional’. There is now a distinction made between natural hair and artificial hair, but one needs to realise that true hair liberation cannot be complete, if not all hairstyles are accepted at corporate jobs or in the formal wage sector (idem.). I believe this is a fitting moment to bring up George Orwell, who would say: all hairstyles are equal, but some are more equal than others. For the sake of this subchapter, I will not delve more into the racial story against black women’s bodies, as I will address this in depth in the 3rd chapter, it is just to demonstrate how ethnic hairstyles are not accepted in many workplaces, and I will now by the example of two women from my research, elaborate on real-life cases to depict the polemic of curly hair at work.

As Margarette, another one of my interlocutors and a curly hair salonist, observed: “I think it's because either the owner or the manager doesn't like it [=curly hair]. Because I have a client who tells me that she is an architect's assistant and she [=her boss] always tells her that she has to do her hair like this, for example. There are others who work in banks, very formal institutions like that, who don't allow it and so on.” I will now provide two of those examples: one who worked for a big institution and the other is a doctor’s assistant.

Ethnographic Portraits

Betania

Betania is in her mid-thirties, I met her at the curly hair festival I joined in Santiago de los Caballeros and was introduced to her through another curly hair advocate I had talked to earlier. Small world indeed.

Betania lives in Santo Domingo, where she now even owns a curly hair salon, specialising on afro and braided hair. She had her 'big chop'[3] or 'gran corte' as Dominicans call it, seven years ago. Betania's story starts that day all those years ago. After chopping off her heat-damaged hair, from years and years of using the 'blower' (=hair blower) and the 'plancha' (=straightening iron), she made the transition to curly hair. She also added that her ears had suffered from these repeated, weekly heating tools as the hot air, or scorching iron regularly come in contact with the sensitive tissue on the ears. She had had enough of her hair being dry and damaged and her ears hurting her. Betania worked at Claro prior to starting her curly hair journey. Claro next to Altice is the equivalent to KPN or Ziggo in the Netherlands, being the two Dominican national mobile data providers. At Claro she felt forced by her superior, to straighten her hair. Ultimately, she left because of it. Especially after cutting her hair off, she also wanted to cut ties with a place that did not accept her hairdo. Now, she has a thriving salon with 5 employees, which she is very proud of.

Laura

Laura, just like Betania was an attendee at the Cibao Rizado in Santiago. She had beautiful, coloured blonde curls and she was introduced to me by chance. Perla, the curly influencer that also introduced me to Betania, walked up to Laura and asked her by pointing the finger toward me if I could ask her some questions. Laura is a doctor's assistant, and she works and lives in Santiago. She cut off her relaxed and chemically overprocessed hair in 2020. She was very scared of doing it, because of fear for losing her job. The doctor, who she still works for, had a very negative opinion of curly hair, and although he was technically not allowed to fire her for having curly hair, she confessed to me that it felt especially daunting as she was the first and only woman in the practice to transition. Indeed, the other employees all wore their hair straight. At first, her colleagues made snarky

[3] To see an inspiring video and at the same time understand the emotional and empowering value it has, see this video: https://www.instagram.com/reel/C6GvWssOhQN/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==

comments at her calling her hair “wet looking”. But Laura did not cower and now, she told me, most of these women who initially thought her hair was ugly, have also undergone the transition. Because of her being the first one transitioning at her job, and this resulting in talks about hair, she convinced most of her work friends to follow into her footsteps. She supported many of them, by explaining to them how to take care of their curls and by emotionally supporting them with their insecurities.

When I asked Laura what she wishes more to change regarding hair acceptance, she immediately answered that she was quite annoyed that braids are still forbidden in the doctor’s practice. Her boss thinks that this hairstyle is not appropriate in a private practice. She feels very strongly about this and wants to be able to wear her hair however she wants.

Both these women’s stories show the past and ongoing struggles of accepting natural and braided hairstyles at formal and corporate jobs. The work environment Freeman describes in her monograph regarding women employees making comments at each other about their physique, and addressing themselves how they should or should not look for work, coincides with Laura’s story (Freeman 2000: 219). The pressure of conforming to the boss’ (or company) dress and hair code, can indeed amount to peer pressuring to conform to this look. Her colleagues at first made her feel uncomfortable and even scared to make the hard hair transition, but over time, she managed to change the formers’ minds, because she stayed true to her decision and grew even more confident, with the result that almost all of her colleagues also cut off their hair to start wearing it curly. There is then, a positive side to the work and professionality hair problem, as sometimes changes do not only need to be set in laws or policy changes, but also with representation and the work force uniting, a hair alliance so to speak, like the women at Laura’s job. The body, as such can then also serve as a “capacity to challenge” the norms established at Laura’s practice (Reischer et al. 2004: 315). What started as Laura’s single rebellion, progressed to the acceptance of female employees’ hair at their job. Betania, however was not so lucky. She felt like she had to quit her job because she felt discriminated by her employer for her body. The consequence of “racism and exclusion” that Betania was subjected to at Claro, pushed her to become self-employed and open her own salon, which is a trend that ethnographers have noticed already (Anthias and Mehta 2003: 106).

Perla, the curly advocate I already mentioned before, also explained to me that curly hair is still continuously policed, and the acceptance for it at work stops at some tiny details (Mears 2014: 1331). For example, women who do work with their curly hair out, need their hair to look really defined and neat, with little frizz or undefined parts. Undefined hair, for example takes up more space, literally speaking. But for anyone who has or knows curly hair, would know how incredibly

unrealistic such a standard is for curly hair. Indeed, ethnographers criticise the "unattainable images of beauty" women are subjected to, and which are especially poignant with minorities (Anthias and Mehta 2003; Reischer et al. 2004). Our hair reacts to the environment, the amount of moisture in the air, or even a gust of wind can frizz it up. But Perla's observation struck me, because the few women that I saw wearing their hair curly at the bank for example, either had it in a tight bun, or it looked freshly styled, with minimal frizz. I even felt insecure about my own curls at times because I had some amount of frizz and loose hair strands about my head, while they had it so prettily layered. So then hearing about Perla's insights, I understood that this was most probably a deliberate choice these women had to make: either bound their hair up or spend some considerable time in front of the mirror to make it look as neat as can be (Rice 2002: 154).

The dress and hair etiquette present at so many formal and corporate jobs, micro-manages women's appearance and problematises the racial and gendered discrimination present in the Dominican work environment. And although this Caribbean 'respectability paradigm' (Freeman 2000: 227) is reflective of Caribbean women claiming professional spaces which they have been historically excluded from on basis of their gender and race, it is also discriminating and readdressing the problem of Black women not being able to show their bodies and identity freely, as that is still considered 'unprofessional'. Corporeal ideals can be felt as a symbol of pride and social mobility, through hair and dress, but they can also discriminate. Black women are especially subjected to the creole work ethic, which puts them at odds with female body expectations, built on a history or racism and sexism, but this history can also offer empowerment, such as we can see in the discrimination stories of Betania and Laura (Freeman 2000; Mears 2014; Reischer et al 2004). Both women, have in ways defied the hair politics from their employer and found a way to feel empowered with their decisions. Both Betania and Laura's stories touched me and are proof that relaxed and straightened hair is still normalised and preferred for women to have at their place of work, but that there is also a change happening.

Figure 1

undefined (left) vs. defined (right) hair. Undefined, frizzy hair is still highly stigmatised and not desired at many employed jobs.

Source Facebook, Hi Texture Hair Salon

2.2. Beauty idea(l)s

In the previous section, I discussed the polemic of professional hair. For many years, wearing straight hair at the job was not only the norm, but even the rule for many Dominican women. In this section, I want to delve more into the straight hair beauty ideal and draw upon the literature of anthropologists who have all written about hair straightening practices within Black communities in Brazil, the Dominican Republic and the United States. How do women perceive themselves with their hair as beautiful and how these ideas reflect beauty politics in the Dominican Republic? The long-standing tradition of the Dominican hair straightening salon is sometimes assumed to be a place of reproduction of an anti-Black hair sentiment. And although there is some truth in this, and I will also address this, the hair straightening tradition is more than a mere reproduction of a beauty standard, because it is also a passed-down and gendered experience, that unites women with "bliss and comfort" (hooks 1989: 1). It is also important to note that this hair-straightening ideal offers many employment and business opportunities for black women entrepreneurs, who seek economic mobility from women's need to go to a salon (Craig 2006: 171). In actuality, the hair salon is the "most numerous female microbusiness in the country" (Murray and Ortiz 2012: 5). This hair straightening practice is also an important gendered experience ranging from a moment for a girl's transition to womanhood, female companionship at a salon or even as a familial beauty practice, that is shared among the women of a family.

Pelo bueno, pelo malo (Good hair, bad hair)

To start, I want to explain why long, straight, frizz-less, and 'soft' hair is the normative beauty standard on the 'Isla Hispaniola', is. One day, while waking in the local park, I started a conversation with an older woman sitting on a bench, hoping she not be bothered by my interrupting her moment of. Thankfully, she indulged. I introduced myself quickly and that I was interested in the beauty culture in the Dominican Republic. I said: "You wear your hair naturally." She said: "Yes!" with some pride. I asked her why she wore her hair like this. "Because I like it like that." "And why do others straighten it?" "Well because they say it's because of beauty. Beautiful hair to them means long and soft."

The Dominican typical hair salon offers services such as *blowouts* and hair relaxing treatments and is internationally renowned for its expertise at making 'hard' hair 'soft and luscious' (Hassel 2022: 169).

The beauty ideal of long, straight hair touches a sensitive topic that especially curly-haired women such as this lady at the park or the curly hair salonists mention, that is that curly hair is still perceived as not being beautiful, or even 'bad'. In the above section, I discussed how black hair and hairstyles was and continues (now to a lesser degree than even a decade ago) to be deemed "unprofessional". Black individuals, across western nations and former colonies, have been excluded from "respectability politics" by the white majority (Hassel 2022: 169) Thus, black women have cultivated this respectable ideal image of the virtuous woman, carefully creating and representing themselves as respectable through hard work, and physical body modification (Craig 2006: 171). This is why hair straightening is a marker for Black women to be socially accepted, while at the same time needing to change their features for that same purpose. In the Dominican Republic, creole women started going to the salon and taking care of their bodies, partly to reinforce their respectability, even going so far as taking care of themselves to distinguish themselves from "the Spanish who don't wash themselves" or the "Americans who wear bad clothes when they go outside" (Murray and Ortiz 2010: 44). Bodily grooming is then a reflection of black women's "moral selves" (Liebelt 2016: 9). Indeed, Europeans and especially "Spaniards" who were their former colonisers, are comparably dirty to Dominicans, who are so proud and well-known for their beauty and body culture. The Dominican hair salon where hair straightening takes place, is a reactionary tradition, grown out of the pains of chattel slavery and has become a national symbol of pride (idem.). It is therefore interesting to find that hair straightening is both a racial experience, as much as it an aesthetic one. This is why scholars both Dominican and not, have differing opinions on why Dominicans straighten their hair, because it is hard to distinguish racism from agentic aestheticism in such a mixed-race society (Hassel 2022; Murray an Ortiz 2012; Lyon 2020).

The Dominican Republic is what Murray and Ortiz coin a "hairocracy", where one's aesthetic value is centred around one's hair (Murray and Ortiz 2012: 38). Hair is usually classified in four categories (and subcategories[4]): straight, wavy, curly, and kinky. Good hair refers to hair that is easier to manage[5], long and soft to the touch. Bad hair is hard to manage, thick, shorter and hard to the touch. There is this very strong social expectancy of having straight hair for Dominicans. This ideal has been long-existing and is deeply ingrained into the beauty culture and is passed-on by generations of Dominicans, especially women. The adjective 'soft' hair has often come across in my interviews or conversations. Soft hair is like the words says, soft to the touch, but more than that attained through rigorous hair straightening or, through luck in the genetic lottery. In my literature, I

[4] See Figure 10 and 11 on page 43 for more context on hair texture classification!
[5] Easy to manage refers to the amount of time and tools necessitated for straightening hair. Mixed hair (wavy and softer types of curly) for example is much easier to style than say afro hair. Afro hair needs an extra level of expertise for it to get straight and is more reactive to heat treatment.

came across a similar parallel of 'soft' hair in Santo Domingo, and "swingy" hair in Brazil (Caldwell 2003: 23). Soft and swingy hair sways with the wind, and "your hand does not get stuck in your hair when you brush through it" as a young Dominican boy said in a YouTube video (GBrothersrd 2019). Countless times, have women told me my hair looked pretty and 'soft', and directly contrasted it with their 'hard' or 'kinky' hair, speaking of our hair as one being better than the other (Burdick 1998: 143).

Close to my home, there was a salon offering the typical services: hair wash, hair straightening, mani- and pedicures. I would go there weekly as a client, either getting a pedicure or a manicure. After I had gotten my manicure and was about to pay at the register, the owner asked me whether I was that girl that was texting her over WhatsApp. I confirmed and she asked me where I was from and how long I was staying here. She was really interested and told me that she loved my hair. "I have hair like yours." But her hair was straightened. She then asked: "When did you last get your highlights done?" "Oh, that was in October." I answered "Well, I can refresh them for you. It will take around five hours though, so you would need to tell me in advance." "5 hours?!" "Yes." "Should I also do a *blowout*?" "Why would you do that? Your hair is gorgeous![6]". I wondered then, why my hair was considered pretty, and other curly heads' not? Why did the salon owner even outright dissuade me from straightening my hair, and would she ever try and dissuade one of her kinkier-haired employees or clients? This idea of hard, kinky and Afro hair being 'bad' or ugly, or undesirable and the idea that wavy, soft hair is good or 'pretty' is deeply engrained in the self-image many Dominican or other Latin blacks have of themselves (Burdick 1998: 143). It felt strange to me that my curly hair was accepted, but the same rule would not apply to a woman with darker skin. While Murray and Ortiz argue that the rejection of natural hair has nothing to do with skin, and is purely related to hair, from my research, I have noticed that hair and skin are in fact connected, especially when dark-skinned individuals are involved (Murray and Ortiz 2012: 26). Because women who are born with coarse hair, their "hair gives you away" (Caldwell 2003: 22), meaning that hair texture is often related to identifying the level of blackness. As mentioned above, my hair is called 'soft hair' and is typically associated with white, mixed, or light-skinned people, whereas Afro hair is called 'coarse' or 'hard' hair, and typically associated with being black (idem.), or in a Dominican context even Haitian people. Indeed, as there is a "deeply rooted tension with Haiti [it] transforms Blackness into Haitianism" (Hassel 2022: 134), and it is quasi-impossible to understand norms of beauty in the Dominican Republic, without involving the country's difficult relationship with its direct neighbour.

[6] For the sake of this thesis, whenever I refer to my own hair, the reader needs to know that my hair is a mix of waves and elongated curls. For Dominicans, my hair is classified as good hair.

Françoise

Beginning of March, my aunt and I decided to go on a little adventure together, and to drive to a salon in a more 'popular' part of town. We clicked on a random salon on Google maps, given there are thousands in Santo Domingo. We followed the navigation and ended up going to a salon at the corner of a street next to a clothing store. As we walked into the small salon, we were greeted by the owner, Françoise. On the right side of the room, a young girl sat in a chair getting her hair straightened with a heating iron by the only other employee present. My aunt requested a pedicure and I introduced myself after my aunt was talking a little to the owner. Françoise was very open and immediately said: "I'll answer your questions, come with me!" We sat down on a couch, and I started asking her the typical questions: "So tell me about salons here."

She started talking about her salon and the procedures the women would come in for. Her salon is more traditional, as in, she mostly offers *blowouts* or permanent relaxing hair treatments. The salonist told me that the average Dominican lady goes to the salon for a hair appointment every eight days, and for the nails every fourteen days. When Françoise started explaining hair straightening practices, I realised from her frank way of speaking that I could ask her about beauty ideals, especially regarding the difficult politics regarding straight(ened) hair. Françoise, it is important to note, is of Haitian descent (her father is from Haiti, and she speaks some basic level of French) and agreed that there is indeed a growing number of curly hair acceptance. I asked her which type of curl pattern she had "4c!" She points her finger to the wall where she has a little painting of the different curl types. "I have very coarse afro hair." She complained about it loudly to her friend and employee, who was flat ironing the young girl's hair. "God, I don't have your soft hair!" But she then touched my hair and pointed to my skin and told me that people would admire my hair and the way it looks because of my skin colour. As she is half Haitian, she is quite dark-skinned and said the same would not apply to her. I asked her who would make comments: "Family and the women from your environment. If I wore my hair natural, there would be people saying "Comb your hair! Go to the salon." The hair discrimination continues to exist and is especially strong toward darker-skinned people. So, Françoise wears very long black hair extensions, which are attached to her hair and continues making other women feel good about their hair as well. When I asked her how people react to her services, she pulled out her phone and showed me pictures of her clients' hair with the before and after. I asked her if she made women smile a lot after coming in, she again showed me a video of a young 19-year-old client. The young girl had come in for a double treatment with her mother. Her and her mother's hair, although having it natural, meaning afro, looked damaged. "Look how her hair looks before. It's dry, puffy and very messy. Look at her after! She's laughing!" True enough, the girl was smiling and shaking her hair to the camera. The boomerang

effect replaying her headshake repeatedly. Although the young woman got her hair straightened, the results was extremely shiny and much healthier-looking hair. Françoise also showed me the results on the girl's mom, who was equally as happy after the styling. Françoise also displays a few products she creates, a hair Botox mask that nourishes the hair, this can be used at home or at the salon before heat treatment. She also has a relaxing product, called "Laminado Bliss" (= Blissful relaxer) that can be used on children and pregnant women, and which is not as harmful as many other relaxing products.

Françoise's being a very dark-skinned Dominican with recent Haitian ancestry, makes her more sceptical of the influence of the curly hair acceptance movement. The reason for this not only being about her conforming to an anti-Black hair ideal, but rather as a case example how just because she is so overtly Black, and even Haitian, that she feels like there is a heightened stigma towards her hair and level of Blackness (Liebelt 2016: 13). Françoise is in fact very proud and open about her race, telling my aunt and I about her Haitian father, which many other Haitian Dominicans do not feel comfortable about talking. This might be for reasons such as fear of deportation, continuous social and structural harassment against Haitians or Dominican Haitians (Hassel 2022: 187). Also, she addresses the difficult problem about skin tone and how that changes the way others perceive her hair, actually proves that she is assuming her identity. And it would be unfair to Françoise who owns a salon specialising in relaxing and straightening Black and coloured Dominican's hair, would negate the former's acceptance of herself or others.

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 2 and 3 A client's hair before and after Françoise's application of her own relaxer called "Laminado Bliss". This woman has natural, afro hair and came to Françoise to have it chemically straightened. Fulasade, Françoise's salon, is locally known for her excellent products and skills for treating heat- or chemically processed hair. She even has clients who come from afar, to get their hair 'saved' after getting their hair damaged at another salon.

Source Fulasade Instagram story (May 2024)

Familial female beauty

Beauty ideals do not only depend on a person's personal relationship to beauty but is an entanglement of many things, and people. Above, I have written about how the straight-hair beauty ideal is partly related to an anti-Black, and very Dominican social problem relating to "Dominican racial identity as Black denial" (Hassel 2022: 185). However, beauty is also a gendered experience, and especially in the context of Black and people of colour, a familial one. When Françoise told me that she would get comments from familiars, especially women of her family and social circle, regarding her looks, I started to understand that beauty traditions run in the family. Edmonds writes, that especially in mixed race societies such as Brazil or Dominicana, some beauty practices such as hair straightening or beautifying operations are part of the cultural agenda of mixed and black families, by which they relate colourist ideals (Edmonds 2010: 147; Lyon 2020: 2126). This "colour consciousness", is what young girls are exposed to in creole or black families, where the former are made aware of their features, like Françoise who is blamed for her afro hair (Rice 2002: 162). However, both he and hooks also mention how body rituals are also a relational experience between women of the close family. hooks calls this hair-straightening ritual within women of colour and/or Black families to be "rites of initiation into womanhood" (hooks 1989: 1) and sharing intimate bodily moments with sisters, mothers or even grandmothers, to bond and talk.

I made my research a known subject of conversation with my political family in Santo Domingo. I even had the opportunity to talk to my aunt's niece and her daughters about their relationship to their hair. My political 'cousin', Yoselin who is 42, and her two daughters Camila, 14 and Bianca, 12 go to the hair salon every week on Fridays after school. All three of them straighten their hair at the salon. My aunt and I joined them for research purposes on my end, and for curiosity, on her end. While we were all sitting in Yoselin's car that Friday afternoon, I got to experience how hair and going to the salon to get their hair done, is an important moment for this mother and her daughters. Especially when Yoselin is working as a photographer during the week, and her daughters spend most of their time at school, it is these moments shared together at the salon, that bring them together and that initiate the start into the weekend (Liebelt 2022: 211). Camila and her mom sat next to each other the whole time they were there, talking to each other, while her mother would regularly touch Camila lovingly by putting her arm around her daughter or caressing her child's shoulder. It was quite a funny picture as well, as both mother and daughter had 'rolos' (= curlers) in their hair and later, sat next to each other while their heads were nestled under the hooded hair dryer. To me it felt like an intimate mother daughter moment, engaging and relating through each other's bodies. The intimacy shared between women at a salon, where they are touched by

employees, or touch each other is a common factor at black hair salons (Greensword 2023: 115). In that sense, “Hair pressing [is] a ritual of black women’s culture of intimacy” (hooks 1989: 1).

Figure 4

Camila with ‘rolos’ (= hair rollers) in her hair. The hair is stretched out, then carefully rolled up onto the plastic roll. The roll is attached to the scalp with a hair clip. Then this ‘fishnet’ is put on top. After this, women are sat under the standing hairdryer. The drying of the hair can take up to 30mins.

Source Author (March 2024)

Figure 5

Dominican women sitting beneath the standing hairdryer. They have ‘rolos’ in their hair. This is how Camila and her mother also sat next to each other.

Source Masterfile

A week after this visit at the salon, where Camila was one among three to get her hair straightened, there came an interesting turn of events. The young teenager told me that she liked my curly hair. My aunt, who is as much a fan of my curls as myself, tried to convince Camila and her mother to let me style her hair, and after some more convincing from my aunt’s part, the former acquiesced. Since

Camila had not worn her natural hair for years, I knew it would be quite a challenge for me to "make it curly", and I was no professional either. Camila told me that most of her friends wear their hair straight, but that her best friend was curly-haired like me. She showed me a picture and I asked her if she felt that her friend's hair was pretty. "Yes, it is but I don't know how to make mine look like this." So, one Tuesday afternoon during Holy Week, Camila and her mom came to my aunt's apartment, and I washed, conditioned and groomed her hair for about three hours. The result, as my aunt, Camila's mom and I expressed was "beautiful", Camila's hair had reacted very well to my products and the result was a wavy-like pattern over all her head. However, Camila's reaction was unconvincing at best. She had never seen herself like this before and very obviously felt uncomfortable by the three women complimenting her for her hair. I told her that I did not mind if she would not like it and go back to her usual hairstyle. "You're a teenager. I was the same when I was your age. Changes are hard and pressure from classmates or how a boy could react are quite stressful." Indeed, the process from straight to curly hair is difficult, and the perception of others, is crucial for women and young girls' decision-making regarding their hair (hooks 1989: 4). Also, especially teenage years for girls are extremely marked by constant anxiety of one's own appearance (Craig 2006: 162). Growing up female, the pressure of looking feminine is reflected by comments from peers, and this can be a frightful experience (Rice 2002: 154) So, knowing this I tried to comfort Camila without making her feel like she had to appreciate her curls or would risk hurting my feelings by not loving the result. Camila and her mother left, and I was all but sure that she would probably straighten her hair as soon as she could. Her modest reaction when looking at her reflection in the mirror and her awkward smile to her family's reaction after, were very telling.

I saw Camila again, a few days later, at a family function and she had her hair straight again. She looked awkwardly at me, almost guiltily. I tried to ignore it and talk to her about something else, because I understood exactly why she did what she did. For many young girls and women who have grown up with seeing women with straightened hair, and who have always done so, it is hard to make the transition to curly hair. It does not help that there is almost no cultural representation of famous Dominican women wearing curly hair (Caldwell 2003: 24). Camila's self-image is very much connected to her hair, so changing it by making it curly and per extension a few centimetres shorter for example, or changing her looks made her feel weird or even less pretty. The fact that Camila's mom and grandmother (from her mother's side) had always been going to the salon to straighten their hair, thus growing up with this familial hair routine, certainly did not help her with getting more comfortable (Rice 2002: 157). Yoselin, Camila's mother and my political cousin (who is farther in age from me than her two daughters) told me that her mom, Isabella, also had always gone to the salon with her since she was little, so the women in three generations had the habit of doing so. Going to

the salon together, is what Murray and Ortiz call part of the “cultural menu” of Dominican women (Murray and Ortiz 2012: 13). What Camila and many women experience is that when women of the family, mothers, aunts, cousins and sisters wear their hair a certain way it also translates to a shared familial beauty idea, and it is quite hard to break that pattern (hooks 1989: 4).

Even though Yoselin was very supportive of her daughter trying to wear her hair curly, and even comforted her after she had gotten it styled by me, there still is some security she could not give her daughter, simply because she also never had done her hair different. Making her daughter feel as if her hair was not pretty if it was not like her mother’s. How could such a young girl could feel beautiful with her choice, if she does not feel supported, by the example of at least one other family member? Mothers especially serve as an aesthetic “inspiration” for their daughters, and the need to do things “like mother did” is important aspect of the “female right of passage” (Edmonds 2010: 225).

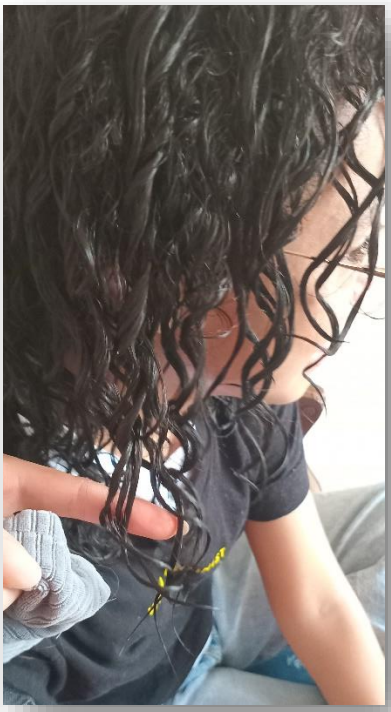


Figure 6 *Figure 7*

Figure 6 and 7 Camila’s hair after my curly styling routine. On the left picture, Camila smiles and looks at her mother who is cheering up her daughter. Her hair is still wet and I unfortunately never saw the dried result.

Source Author

I already mentioned a few times by now that I had gone to the curly hair convention in Santiago. On the minibus ride home from Santiago to Santo Domingo, I spoke to a young 15-year-old girl, Eimy, whom I sat next to in the minibus. She had beautiful black curls, glasses and had her one-year old baby niece sitting on her lap. She asked me from where I was, given my weird Spanish accent and I in return asked who the baby was she was holding. Our conversation flowed and, naturally, I could not avoid talking about hair, given that both her and I attended an Afro hair convention and me becoming obsessed with people's hair stories. Thus, I asked her when she had her 'big chop'. Eimy explained that her sister, who sat behind us in the bus and whose daughter she was holding, had gone curly two years ago. Her older sister convinced Eimy's mother to follow her suit and shortly after, Asimel's mom decided for her other younger daughter to do the same. Eimy was very confident about her hair, kind of being dragged into the curly hair family transition and getting escorted to a curly hair convention to the north of the island. "My sister just brought me with her.", were Eimy's words. Eimy's sister was asleep behind us, her husband sitting next to her, their two-year-old son nestled on dad's lap. Eimy's sister practically dragged half her family to Santiago. I thought it was a very sweet family activity.

So, what differentiates Eimy from Camila? Why are two girls who have a similar age, education and class, such conflicting self-perceptions about their natural hair? Eimy has the unconditional physical and emotional support by her family members. They give her confidence about her physique because they also believe that curly hair and wearing it curly is pretty. Whereas Camila, would be the first woman from her family to do it, and Eimy was not, not in the least. The family is often the first site for young people of colour to feel scrutinised or supported for their skin colour, hair texture and body (Burdick 1998: 144).

With this subchapter, I discussed the ambiguity of beauty ideals, especially regarding the beauty tradition of straight hair in the Dominican Republic. Meaning that indeed, hair-straightening practices for Black and coloured women dates back to the days of segregation and oppression, where these 'traditional' hairstyles were deemed 'unprofessional' or 'wild' and therefore not allowed for Black women to wear at school or many places of employment, especially in urban areas of the Americas (Craig 2006: 171). Thus, part of this beauty ideal is rooted in anti-Black and colonial idea of policing and controlling Black women's bodies, while positing white women as the "dominant beauty standard" (Craig 2006: 163).

Also, since the days of the terrible dictatorship under the general Rafael Trujillo, who ruled the country from 1930 until his assassination in 1961, the anti-Haiti campaign he started continues in this Dominican discourse of non-acceptance of their Blackness, since Haitians are known to claim their Blackness (Lyon 2020: 2122). However, calling the Dominican hair salon as a site for continuing this anti-Black or "whitening" (Murray and Ortiz: 2012: 224) hair practice is also too essentialising, as it would assume that Dominican women who go to the salon to straighten their hair do not accept their Blackness, or want to look whiter. Françoise's example shows the ambiguous position of a Dominican-Haitian woman who is "assuming" (Caldwell 2003: 25) her Blackness, by addressing her and my skin colour, and even openly talking about her Haitian father, but who also wears her hair straight and relaxes or blow dries hundreds of other Dominican women's hair yearly. Then there is also this aspect of family. Françoise complains about women in her family, or direct environment to make comments against her hair, telling her to "peñate" (= groom yourself). Which has a negative effect on her and other women's self-esteem, making them feel bad for their hair. This familial hair tradition is also a generational practice, affecting Camila, because hair straightening is both an embodied experience she is used and accustomed to e.g. going to the salon weekly with her mother and sister, and also a beauty ideal she has internalised since early childhood (Rice 2002: 153). Seeing her mother, grandmother and many other women of importance around her wearing their hair straight, makes it all the more difficult for her to wear it differently from them: "Am I not as pretty if I wear my hair natural?". Eimy's family on the other hand, makes her feel confident about breaking the social norm, as the women of her family are doing it along with her. Beauty ideals, therefore, are tied to many factors, and often feminist or race discourse does not cover the ambiguity of why people do what they do, and as Murray and Ortiz, the ethnographers who wrote the book *Good Hair Bad Hair, anthropological study of beauty salons in the Dominican Republic* state, academia is often too quick to judge the motivations for hair straightening practices (Murray and Ortiz 2012: 227).

2.3. “Your hair gives you away”

The body and social inequality

One Saturday morning, a French girl expat who I had met over Bumble friends and I went for a run in a Santo Domingo park called: Mirador Sur. This park equivalates to what someone online called “like Central park in New York”[7]. After our 4.5km run, we felt like eating brunch at a coffee shop. Close to the park, we found a café called Flor de Café, located in the wealthy neighbourhood of Mirador Sur. While we were chatting in French and munching away at our delicious breakfast bagels, I noticed that the clientele of the café had a quite specific look. Most of these were people of upper middle-class background, seeing by the attire they were wearing. Women wore pretty flowery dresses, or colourful pants and blouses: the vibe being “casual chique clothes to wear on a weekend outing”. Indeed, it is well-known that Caribbeans like to dress up and to dress well (Freeman 2000: 223). Some men even wore suit pants and a dress shirt. I remember being quite surprised at the women’s hair, because I had expected to see many women with straight hair, but in fact saw quite a few women with their curls out and about. I wondered then: why do I see so many curls here? And why do I see so many working-class women, like women working as cashiers at the supermarket or salon employees with straight hair? Is there a correlation between wearing your hair curly and straight that is connected to class? While Murray and Ortiz are criticised by both Lyon and Hassel for describing curly-haired women in the Republic as upper-middle class, with a “certain level of education and liberal socio-political ideas”, because they brush over the growing curly hair community (Murray and Ortiz 2012: 10). They still have a point regarding who is actually included with certain body practices and who is not. Hair is a window that reflects who you are. I know that sounds weird, because usually “the eyes are the window to the soul”. Well, I and other ethnographers argue, that the body, and per extension hair, can be a window to see class (Caldwell 2003: 21). Meaning that based on how your hair looks, people can and will make connections to race, self-care rituals and class.

In this subchapter then, I aim to lay out how the difficult relationship between Haiti and the Dominican Republic that is problematising the livelihoods of black and Haitian Dominicans. With the national identity of Dominicans being “mestizos”, mixedness perpetuates a national corporeal ideal that defines mixedness as its norm of beauty and sets Haitians and Haitian Dominicans and black

[7] Posted by user Esperanza on TripAdvisor: https://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g147289-d9806629-r462110911-Parque_Mirador_Sur-Santo_Domingo_Santo_Domingo_Province_Dominican_Republic.html

Dominicans outside of the norm, their features and identities are highly stigmatised (Edmonds 2007: 372). Indeed, there is a connection between “social inequality and the body”, that I noticed from my research, that I find interesting, because there exists quite little literature on the specific relationship between hair and perceptions of class, and in the Dominican Republic where beauty lies in people’s hair, it is also then a bodily signifier to social stratification (Mason 2013; Schenickert et al. 2020). The stark contrast between those who can participate in the beauty culture of the island and those who cannot, for locality or economic reasons, problematises why the poor have lesser rights to “be beautiful” (Edmonds 2010: 14).

Anti-Haitianism, the body and poverty

Figure 8 *Figure 9*

Figure 8 and 9 TikTok user posting a TikTok addressing the problematic conceptualisation of Haitians in the Dominican Republic. She refers to the popular discourse that tries to separate Haitians from Dominicans, especially referencing to language and race as differentiators. Dominicans claim that Haitians are blacker than them, often even going as far as denying them their Caribbean or Latin identity in the process.

Source imbigsowhat on TikTok

Why is blackness in the Dominican Republic, related to being Haitian? In “the elitist circles” (Sanders Gómez 2018: 107), there is a prejudice against Blackness, where being Black is associated to poverty. This is what Mason coins as “racialised wealth differentials”. People in authority or upper-class circles have a negative conceptualisation of Black or even mixed people and their features per the example of the former minister of education denying an Afro-headed woman a scholarship shows (Mason 2013: 690).

Even though the Dominican society is up to 60% Afro descendant, many upper-class individuals pride themselves on "whitening" their race, and though this sounds harsh there is definitely some truth in this. For example, in the Dominican Republic, or other afro descendent nations, there is this trend of "marrying up", which in colour terms translates to: marrying someone of a lighter skin tone, to whiten the family (Sanders-Gómez 2018; Rice 2002; Burdick 1998; Murray and Ortiz 2012). Thus, blackness is still seen by Dominicans of all classes, but especially reproduced within elites as something negative. It is not surprising that right-wing politicians, that currently govern the country, perpetuate this idea even more with the anti-Haitian campaign that has marked the country's politics since the days of dictator Trujillo.

In May 2024, Luis Abinader, has been re-elected for his second term as the president of the Dominican Republic. His party, called the Modern Revolutionary Party is a right-leaning nationalistic party, bent on dividing the island of 'La Hispañola' in two: Haiti and the Dominican Republic. In September 2013, the Dominican constitutional court ruled that any individuals born on Dominican soil between 1929 and 2010, and whom have one or two parents of Haitian descent, would lose their Dominican nationality. From one day to another, thousands of Dominicans of Haitian descent, turned into stateless persons (Amnesty International: 2023). The international community and countless human rights organisations have condemned the republic's constitutional court's decision for its overt bureaucratical racism against Haitians and Dominican Haitians. Until today, over 200.000 people are still affected by this denationalising law targeted toward Haitian Dominicans, leaving them stateless and vulnerable to expulsions, rendering them paperless and affecting their livelihoods. "The exclusion of Blacks of Haitian and Dominican descent is the result of discriminatory migrant politics, in particular against Haitian nationals" reads the article by France 24 (Peralta 2024). Abinader's government is currently investing in a large infrastructural project, building a 400km wall between the border of Haiti and the Dominican Republic. With these societal and political tensions in the air, it lays out well the premise of how Black individuals, be they of Haitian descent or not, are targeted by educational facilities, police and even everyday interactions. Haiti is also the poorest country of the Americas, with the majority of its population living in poverty and hunger (Bloomberg 2024)[8]. Haitians are perceived as black and poor, this image is spread through media, and right-wing politics, positing many black and Haitian people's bodies at the centre of this political discourse (Reischer and Koo 2004: 308).

[8] For more information on the Haiti situation, watch this short video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=audj3mdTUu0, accessed 21/06/2024

For example, people with afro hair get called ‘haitiana(o)’, as their hairstyle choice and texture is compared to Haitians. This ‘good hair bad hair’ concept is the leading line to understand the body-race-class problem at hand, as there is significant literature from Brazil and other Caribbean countries that relate hair texture to race and class distinctions that influence how individuals wear their hair and how others perceive and treat them (Caldwell 203: 21).

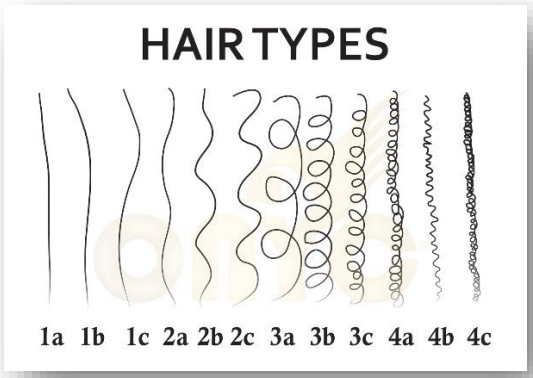


Figure 10 *Figure 11*

Figure 10 and 11 Curly hair charts and classification system

Source Reddit and Dummies.com

The above-depicted photos show how hair types can be classified and have been more and more used to describe people’s curl types. When I or authors describe ‘good hair’, we mean hair that can be classified between 1A-3C. Hair types 4B and 4C are coily/afro hair types that are typically described as ‘hard’ hair, or ‘pelo malo’, in a South American social context. As Murray and Ortiz describe in their ethnography, there is the evidence that people from lower classes also, generally, fall into the last two hair categories: 4B and 4C (Murray and Ortiz 2012: 140). I started to understand with Françoise’s comment, that skin colour and hair texture influence how familiars and people from the direct environment or complete strangers treat you, as she said: “If I do not take care of my hair, people will make comments like: “Arréglate ese pajón!” (“Get that nest (afro) checked!”). It is interesting, that the pressure to have ‘your hair checked’ is especially strongest toward kinky-haired people (Murray and Ortiz 2012: 140).

The price of hair

Continuing the discussion of the body as a site for assessing social standing, this section focuses on the individual's ability or inability to spend money on their body. Anthropologists have noticed how the amount of spending on body aesthetics can be reflective of the person's class (Edmonds 2007; Craig 2006). "Bad hair" is not just the hair one is born with, but the state of health and quality of products used for the hair (Lyon 2020: 2124). Chemical straightening hair procedures, where keratine relaxers are used to "alisar" (=straighten) or "desrizar" (=uncurl) curly hair, are used more at salons in poorer parts of the city, or countryside. These processers are especially used on very curly, afro hair, and can harm a person's bodily and or hair health (Murray and Ortiz 2012; Sanders-Gómez 2018). Now why those chemical relaxers are more frequently used at "lower-class salons" are for resource reasons. Indeed, most high-end salons do not use cheaper keratine relaxers anymore, or even fully refrain from straightening clients' hair with relaxers at all. Yoselin, my aunt's niece and her daughters, for example, go to one of the most expensive salons in Santo Domingo, where they only get their hair treated with the best products, and best tools, so that their hair does not get damaged. However, these relaxing products that are typically used at 'popular' salons affect how hair looks, as they damage the hair over time. Therefore, becoming an indicator to a person's class, as it reflects on the means they have to get their hair treated, and where.

When I talked about my research with Carmine, a participant-turned-friend, and told her that I was curious to see a hair salon in the 'barrio of Santo Domingo', to see and compare salons of all social layers, she immediately proposed to go on an outing with me. She contacted a university friend, who lived in the 'hood'[9] on the other side of the river Ozama. Many of the residences on the 'other side' started as illegal settlements by people who came to Santo Domingo. Either people from the Dominican countryside, who seek a job in the capital city and to ultimately climb the social latter, or even Haitians who flee from their country to find a safer livelihood in Santo Domingo, live in these settlements. La Cienaga, directly lies next to the river, with many of its residents living in settlements located around the riverbank[10]. Carmine my 24-year-old friend who was born and raised in Santo Domingo, went to this part of town maybe three times before our joined visit, and she made a very interesting comment after we had talked to Rossy, a woman who owned a small salon in the hood. Rossy had her hair-coloured red, but it looked overprocessed and heat-damaged, which you can

[9] I use hood to describe a poor neighbourhood of Santo Domingo. Hood is the literal translation of "barrio", the word Dominicans use when they refer to a poor neighbourhood. Hood is also the word my English-speaking Dominican friends used when we talked about the "barrio".

[10] For more information on informal settlements and infrastructure of poor neighbourhoods in Santo Domingo, read this: https://sites.utexas.edu/santodomingo-informality/the-place/

recognise by the way the hair stood up from her scalp, her hair strands looking dry and brittle. After we had left Rossy's salon, Carmine said: "She looks like she's from here." And it was partly a reference to the woman's features which were quite dark, and how her hair looked. It was not so much a degrading comment from Carmine, but rather a pointing out of an issue that is the result of using heating tools and products on naturally already very dry and sensitive afro hair. Many of the 'hood' salons use cheap products and tools that hurt the scalp, and hair follicles long-term (Murray and Ortiz 2012: 83). Rossy's hair, made an impression on Carmine, that associated her hair to her social standing, meaning her hair "gave her away" (Caldwell 2003: 21). Indeed, the difference between the salons I visited in La Cienaga and the higher-ended ones located in malls or middle-class neighbourhoods was quite exponential. While Rossy and Mileidy, the two hood salon owners, had old hair dryers, rusty chairs and naturally, cheaper prices for the same processes offered at costlier salons, the latter had better equipment, more expensive hair brands and a bigger locale. I asked an employee at the fancy salon, what she thinks the difference between this salon and a salon in a popular part of town was, to which she answered: "The quality and service is better." Compared to the salon Rossy owns, for example.

Thinking about the hair is money issue, while I first-hand experienced how hair is treated in a popular part of Santo Domingo, there is another aspect that one of my interlocutors also brought into the equation, and that is location resources. Poor women in the countryside have problems with the health and looks of their hair, because they do not have the money or knowledge to care for it. Erika and Perla, two participants who are both curly influencers and the latter a psychologist too, have an NGO project together called "SOS Textura". With this project, the two women manage to pull together clothes, hair products and toys with which they go to the countryside to give to poor children and mothers. They went to San Juan in June 2023 and set up a workshop. They washed, cut and styled children's hair for very cheap prices. The prices ranging from 150 DOP to 600 DOP (= 2,30€ - 9,50€). Perla told me that in the countryside, there are not many places people can go to for their hair. The few salons that exist are often too expensive to pay, and those that exist often do not offer any services for curly hair (Pandora 2023). Since the salon is such a normal, even expected "cultural practice" for Dominicans, those who cannot participate in the dominant culture, feel left out (Bourdieu 1984: 172). While this dominant culture enables women of all classes to go to the salon, especially those living in urban areas, it commodifies the salon-going tradition, which results in a very high number of Dominican women going to the salon to get their hair done there. The home is no longer a place to care for hair (Murray and Ortiz 2012: 108). So poor village people, who cannot physically access a salon, or are unable to pay for the salon, are faced with a hair care problem. Afro hair for example can easily dry out if it is not getting any nourishments. This hair needs the regular

use of creams, gels and hair masks to keep it hydrated and well nourished. The consequence of maltreatment is dry, knotted-up or even matted hair. Hair loss as well as loss of confidence are long-term effect of insufficient means. SOS Textura aims at empowering poor people, with little access to clothes and school materials, while at the same time addressing the hair problem many of those people struggle with. These struggles are related and connected with each other (Rhode 2010: 26). Living at the countryside in the Dominican Republic is to many not a positive predicament, public schools are bad, jobs are scarce and not well paid, there is little opportunity for upward mobility. Leaving many children and families with an array of problems, many of them affecting their mental health and self-confidence. Perla told me that she talks to children as well as mothers to build up their self-esteem. When Dominican beauty lies in hair, how can these women and children feel confident, if they cannot care for their hair? The lack of capital the village women can invest in their bodies, their hair not looking like it does compared to women from cities, makes them recognisable as poor and not beautiful, which both they and Dominicans at large internalise (Schneickert et al. 2020: 85). Additionally, the fact that they have their curly hair, which is already highly stigmatised and in rural communities where people are majorly Black and not as mixed as populations in cities, they are physically and figuratively "located in […] devalued positions" outside the beauty regimes on the island (Craig 2006: 164).

This is why Perla and Erika centre the workshop around empowerment. As these affected women can only do so much, with the little they have, their non-decisions on hair affecting their emotional well-being (Rhode 2014: 90). When Perla, Erika and their team of volunteers arrive in the village, they sit the children on chairs and style their hair with sponsored products and they show the mothers how they can do their kid's hair at home with the products from the workshop. The services include, styling of hair, hair-cutting and even a raffle. "We learn these mothers how to care for their hair, because they often don't know what to do and feel ashamed for their own and their child's hair. They feel ashamed for looking poor." "Looking poor" and relating it to hair is really interesting and anthropologically understudied. While there is a vast body of literature of body and the correlation with social inequality, especially focused on beauty and the consumerist value of investing in one's body, little academics have specifically written about hair as an identifier. I argue that there is significant correlation between hair and class. "We meet the world through our bodies" and the world perceives us through our bodies as well (Reischer and Koo 2004: 308). Thus, the body, and in these examples, hair are perceived by others and internalised, and affects especially Black women's self-esteem, as they are already deemed outside the beauty norms, and then adding them being poor, and transferring this to the outside world is a hurtful experience, one which women like Perla or Erika want to fight against (Reischer and Koo 2004: 301). Interestingly, Perla and Erika reproduce

what Edmonds calls the “market value of appearance” (Edmonds 2007: 371). Because the two women identify that these rural women and their children are socially and aesthetically excluded and want to defy this aesthetic rejection by offering low-cost hair treatments. Having beautiful hair is a right for these curly influencers, however that right is a right that comes at a cost, literally speaking. What anthropologists try to question with the 21st century commodification of beauty products and treatments for the masses, is how social upward mobility is defined and even to an extent, restricted to one’s ability to participate in the body market (Edmonds 2010; Reid 2013). Especially in developing and former colonies of western empires, the ability to spend money on beauty, cars, leisure activities is connected to a sense of empowerment, and an emancipation of the colonial past (idem.).

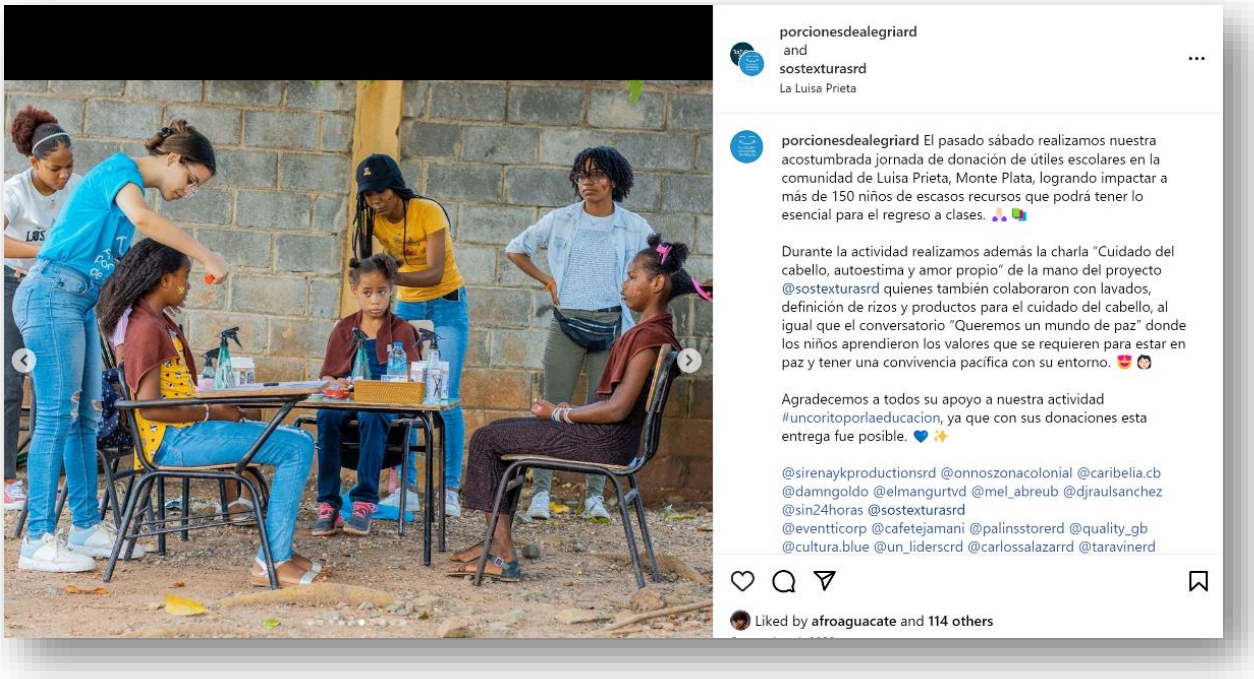


Figure 12

Young girls getting their hair styled by women volunteers working for SOS Textura.

Source SOS Texturard Instagram page

Going to the salon, a unifying practice

Mileidy

Mileidy is 31-year-old salon owner in the poor neighbourhood of La Cienaga. She has a daughter of 18 years, who occasionally helps her in her salon as well. She started jobbing as an eight-year-old child selling popcorn in the streets. With just 11 she started working as a nail artist, doing odd jobs around the salons of her neighbourhood. At 14 she could enter the cosmetology programme in a free academy next to her house. By 21, she had saved up enough money from helping around salons to finally open her own (which was her dream all along). She said that she did not like her natural hair. But her job is to empower women from the neighbourhood to feel pretty. "When I see a person who comes for the first time, saying: "I don't know, I have ugly hair" When I comb it, when I finish combing, when they leave, when I see them with a smile, that fills my heart, not for the money." She told us. While Carmine and I interviewed Mileidy, a client got her hair straightened by Mileidy's daughter. The woman mostly stayed quiet, either listening in on the interview or scrolling on her phone. At some point, when Mileidy elaborated on the beautifying aspect of her job, the woman interrupted: "I come here regularly." I asked: "Every week?" "No! I don't have the money for that. But whenever I can pay for it, I come. I feel really good after." When I asked Mileidy how many clients she receives on the weekend, she said that on a Sunday, she has had combed a minimum of 5 to a maximum of 28 women's hair.

I cannot mention the money-beauty commodification that is yes, excluding and deeply entrenched in inequality, without also addressing how at the same time, the salon is a unifying female experience for women in the Dominican Republic. Mileidy's example shows how the Dominican Republic has quite successfully commercialised "basic hygienic services" to all the classes (Murray and Ortiz 2012: 8). As mentioned in the section above, the history of going to the hairdresser and having access to basic hygienic facilities was reserved for the elite, back in the days of dictator Trujillo, only a few salons existed. Today, there are more than 55.000 functioning salons in the Dominican Republic[11], employing hundreds of thousands. While anthropologists have historically had problems to understand the Caribbean societies, because of their creole ancestry and often assuming Caribbeans as former colonial subjects, with little consciousness of their identity (Yelvington 2010: 108). This assumption is too easily made by scholars when they write about the Dominican hair-straightening

[11] See this article for more information: https://www.elcaribe.com.do/panorama/dinero/la-belleza-genera-negocio-y-muchos-empleos-en-la-rd/

practice. Women from all classes go to the salon to get their hair washed and straightened (or nowadays also curled), it is what Murray and Ortiz call a national "subculture of hair" (Murray and Ortiz 2012: 9; 277). Many women of colour, often emanating from a lower social standing even find opportunity for making a business out of the necessity and tradition of black women's hair grooming (Anthias and Mehta 2003; Greensword 2023; Craig 2006). So, even though I was quite critical of this straight hair ideal, discussing politics of respectability in the labour market, and explaining the anti-Black history of "good hair bad hair", or the consumerist attitudes of salon going. I cannot ignore how the hair salon has turned into a lucrative business on the island, from Mileidy's client in the hood, to women living in the National District, they are all connected through the "habitus" of going to the salon (Bourdieu 1984: 171). What connects these women, is that they are all part and defined by the hair culture on the island.

This first chapter discusses how employment, class, race and anti-Haitianism pressure some individuals to change their bodies, due to scrutiny. At work, curly hair is not professional, yet Dominican women fought hard to get their hair rights. This does not negate the fact that many women still feel the pressure or personal need to wear their hair straight. Natural hair is wild, wet-looking, but that idea is slowly changing. The dominating beauty standard does not only affect poorer people, like Mileidy, but also women like Yoselin and her daughters. So as Murray and Ortiz state in their ethnography, the straight hair ideal affects women of all classes, races in the Dominican Republic (2012: 275). Yet, Yoselin can afford services to make her and her daughter's hair straight, without damaging the hair to the amount women in the countryside or La Cienaga experience. Indeed, hair is a bodily signifier to class, but not only. It is also a signifier to a national identity and beauty ideal. This beauty ideal permeates through all layers of society, from Mileidy in La Cienaga to the re-elected mayor of the central district of Santo Domingo, Carolina Mejía, and give away how these women perceive their beauty. The mayor, just like the women from the hood all wear their hair straight, although they come from very different places in life, with different education and life opportunities, they still go to the salon regularly. In the next chapter, I will address the women who are breaking this beauty ideal of straight hair, and how the movement has developed and how it relates to race and identity and the re-evaluation of beauty norms, especially regarding women of colour and their hair.

Chapter 3: I love my pajón

In this chapter, I will discuss the growing curly hair community in the Dominican Republic, and how it relates to first of all: the historically painful story of the construction of black women's bodies being defined as 'other' by white colonial thought. I use the example of the "Hottentot Venus", Saartje Bartmann, a woman who was paraded through western Europe at the beginning of the 19th Century and displayed as this 'racial subject' for the white audiences to gape at (Fausto-Sterling 1995). This offers the reader the opportunity to understand why mass media, and the growing access to phones and subsequently social media, grants people of colour to propagate and consume trends to represent themselves. Thus, defying racial structural discrimination, through BLM and redefine beauty standards, through the curly girl trend. Both online trends empowering and dismantling black people's bodily and legislative discrimination. And while both trends have had a very positive effect on the careers, and confidence of many of my participants, I also need to address how consumer culture, like the growing curly-hair product market, is also just another consumable beauty trend, which puts at odds the actual body and/or capitalist liberation women fight for. Because, especially in a developing country like the Dominican Republic, with a fast-growing economy and a booming middle-class population, the curly hair ideal feeds into the consumption-lifestyle problem (Edmonds 2010: 110). This is problem because it excludes many who cannot afford this curly lifestyle the women online promote.

This leads me to my second sub-chapter, where I question whether the curly hair movement is actually making any big structural changes for women of colour or black women in the Dominican Republic. Therefore, I refer myself to the duality of the hair beauty ideal on the island, both by addressing the rigidity of both the straight and curly hair standard, with both putting women in a position of choosing one or the other, questioning how liberating 'natural' hair actually is. Then I also delve into labour dynamics that the curly hair salon, for one does not dismantle, meaning that the salonists I talked to are still over-worked and their employees underpaid and both employer and employee continuously from lower-class backgrounds, working hard to maintain their livelihoods and find time for their families (Roy 2010: 548).

3.1. The construction of the black female body

“Rizada. Inteligente. Hermosa.” “Curly. Intelligent. Beautiful.” These were the words written on a t-shirt I was gifted when I signed up for a curly/afro hair festival in Santiago de los Caballeros, a city located in the north, two hours away from Santo Domingo. These three words aligned stand as defiance to a long-standing prejudice against women with kinky and curly hair. A way to introduce the curly hair community in the Dominican Republic, is by understanding that the straight hair beauty ideal is rooted in colonial thought. Countless articles discuss this bodily dichotomy, and why beauty ideals are reproducing this hegemonic white body standard (Fausto-Sterling 1995: 30). The pain, both emotional and physical women of colour are faced with, since the days of colonial rule, regarding their bodies being both ‘disgusting’ and sexual, desirable and underserving of love, need to be analysed, to understand why the curly-haired Dominican women think the way they do. The three words on the t-shirt, painfully reminding us how history has repeatedly conditioned Black women that their features are ugly, relating their ‘differentness’ from the white female body as a signifier to savagery, stupidity even (Fausto-Sterling 1995: 33). And even worse, these colourist systems of classification, continue to haunt the lives of women in societies, where most people are not even white.

Figure 13

T-shirt gifted to me in a goodie bag by Afro Love, a Dominican curly hair salon and product company based in Santo Domingo.

Source Author

In her historical-anthropological article, Anne Fausto-Sterling analyses the “Hottentot woman”, Saartje Bartmann a woman originating from South Africa, who in the beginning of the 19th Century was ‘willingly’ travelled through Britain and eventually France, to be observed by white onlookers at galleries or museums. She was this African lady, a “racial subject” with big buttocks, “woolly hair” (Fausto-Sterling 1995: 39). Her biggest admirer and keeper, Cuvier, was obsessed with trying to prove how black women, although to him barely qualifying as part of the human race, are the closest link to apes there is. This he was convinced, was due to Saartje’s body, which he unashamedly compared to the physiognomy of Orangutans, especially focusing on Saartje’s genitalia as his strongest comparable argument. Saartje Bartman died in 1815, more than 200 years ago, but that does not mean that her legacy does not live on in the lives of countless Black and African descendent women today. Indeed, the history of Black women’s bodies discrimination goes way back, from the shaving of their curly heads in times of chattel slavery, to being sexualised and eroticised for their skin colour by white men and colonisers for their breasts, behinds, they have always been placed as ‘other’, as the antithesis to the white body (Fausto-Sterling 1995; Hassel 2022; Rice 2002). The white is seen as the norm, even the likes of Cuvier already thought so at the beginning of the 19th Century, thus making so many women feel bad who are distanced from that beauty ideal: light skin, long flowy hair, slim facial features. This is why so many Black and coloured women feel the further they stray away from that ideal, the more shame they feel. On the other hand, the closer they feel, the better they may perceive themselves. In societies such as the former American colonies, North- or South America, the Caribbean, these countries even though independent from their former European colonisers, are still influenced by what Bähre calls the “colonial and apartheid past” (Bähre 2020: 174). Even though Bähre discusses insurance schemes in South African townships, and how racial inequalities continue to exist within those systems, it is a relatable argument for hair politics as well. The problem here is the aesthetic discrimination that haunts so many coloured and dark people across post-colonised countries, especially where there are descendants of formerly enslaved Africans. Thus, for this chapter, it is crucial to understand that even the “racial democracy” as Burdick coins Brazilian society, kinky and curly hair continues to be considered ‘bad’ or ‘ugly’ (Burdick 1998: 144). The ‘blacker’ the person, the more scrutinised, by institutions and beauty standards they are. The construction of the civilised white, and the ‘savage’ black, for example, reflects itself in what I discuss in my first chapter, with looking respectable and professional for the workplace and excluding black women for their natural features in those places, thus making them by proxi adopt respectable styles to adhere to (Ryle 2020; Freeman 2000).

It is no secret, that people with straightened hair, get accepted more easily by employers, by romantic partners, even by family. “My sister was prettier than me, because she had soft, straight hair, she was lighter. I was the ugly one: I had hard hair, I was dark. Sometimes I would go to my room and cry.” (Burdick 1998: 143). Such are the words uttered by one of Burdick’s informants, where in the heart of her home, she felt inferior to her own sister, who had softer hair and lighter skin. Her family reinforcing this beauty ideal by openly treating her and her sister differently. This is why the “Hottentot Venus” example is not a far-fetched, extremely racist story from a part of history humanity has overcome. Many black people, for this thesis: women have felt looked at, judged, by a dominant beauty and societal discourse that they are not beautiful, that their features are not as good, because they derive from ‘the norm’ (Liebelt 2016: 16). But the norm is also just a construction, an ideal created in the minds of white men, trying to prove their superiority to the rest of the world. Not only is Saartje Bartman an African, she is also a woman, making her the subject of Cuvier’s perverse obsession with comparing her to an ape. Cuvier, who had very little regard for women at all, tried to convince himself and his science peers that the black woman he was studying from a cage, and later from his autopsy table was barely human, and because he could not prove this by comparing cranium sizes, or the fact that she spoke more languages than he ever did, would state (deliriously) that her breasts were ‘flappy’ or her nose bridge ‘flat’, and concluding that is why Saartje was almost an ape (Fausto-Sterling 1995: 40). The white woman in return, for having other body physiognomy like, narrow nose bridge or even a smaller buttock, or smaller vaginal flaps, was in return constructed as the ‘normal’, ‘civilised’ subject (Fausto-Sterling 1995: 35). This brief example of how dehumanised the black female body was described and inscribed into western dominating beauty regimes, shows us why in today’s age and time, with the internet as a resource, black beauty ideals are rewritten and quite literally posted to push forward a different narrative. From the curly hair movement to black liberation, people of colour are empowering themselves, because representation matters! Therefore, media, Idols, influencers, random curly heads on Instagram timelines, black Disney princesses, they all can make a change to broaden the category of ‘what is beautiful’ (Caldwell 2003: 24). That is why in the next subchapter, I will look at the curly hair movement, which can be considered an “anti-beauty ideal” (Rice 2002: 168), where women of colour are claiming their features. This anti-ideal is a conscious beauty choice, deriving from the popular one.

To reiterate to the t-shirt, I was handed out for my attendance at the afro hair festival, the three words written on the fabric, address the feeling and experience of black women have experienced and continue to experience to this day, the blacker both in colour and texture their hair, the less intelligent, less pretty they were made to feel. Thus, the t-shirt stands as a protest, and affirming that curly or kinky hair is indeed: beautiful, feminine, and intelligent, in sum: a prideful body part, instead one of shame.

3.2. Instagram, TikTok and the curly hair boom

The question I try to answer in this sub section is: How has media helped the curly hair movement in the Dominican Republic to progress over time? Well, in the past ten years, the curly hair movement has become louder on the island, as mentioned in the chapter before this one, discriminatory policies against having natural hair at work became heavily criticised by Dominican women. The latter who were claiming that these hair rules, disguised under the premise of "looking professional", were actually racist and oppressive against those who choose to wear their natural hair (Hassel 2022: 167). Wearing curly hair started with a rather small group of women, many of these 'founders' doing their 'transition' (= meaning curly hair transition) in the early 2010s, coinciding with the big change of policies in the public domain. I had the honour to talk to one such founder at the curly hair festival in Santiago. She worked as a part-time hairdresser for "Afro Love", the brand from which I received the black t-shirt. I went to the Afro Love stand because they offered cheap haircuts and a styling, and my hair looked particularly frizzy that day. So, I decided to partake as a visitor of the festival and sat myself in the waiting line to get my hair cut. Once my turn, I told the woman about my research and asked her if she could tell me about her hair story. "I had to buy my products via Amazon, there were no products available for treating curls in the supermarkets.", she explained. Back in 2011, when she had her 'big chop', little to no products for curly hair existed. Since then, things have changed. Because now, she was trying to sell me products from the brand she was working for, even pursing her lip when I told her that I had used curly hair products from another famous Dominican hair brand. Ryle explains that the transition from this market 'hole' the woman described to me, meaning that a little more than a decade ago, almost no curly hair products were available, has over time been filled by the 'process of commodification' (Ryle 2020: 830).

From practically nothing to ginormous curly hair sections at supermarkets, to curly hair salons spraying up in the capital city, there is a growing curly hair business, thanks to the internet (Lyon 2020; Hassel 2022). Lyon, even going so far as to say that today, curly hair products are gaining just as much commercial value as other hair products. Thus, the transition from 2011 to 2024 is quite brutal, to say the least.

It is important to note that after all, many Dominicans are of African descendance, meaning people have textured hair and would need to artificially change it to make it look straight. Making it almost sound absurd, that not so long ago there were not even products available to those who do want to wear their hair 'au naturel'. Straight hair was, and continues to be, the beauty norm for many of the island-nation inhabitants. In 2008, 'only' sixteen years ago, the documentary *Pelo Bueno Pelo Malo* by director Miguel Parra, documents the 'good hair, bad hair' ideal, by interviewing owners and customers of hair salons or barber shops, to identify what hair means to them. Parra films a young man getting his hair done at a Santo Domingan barber shop. The man states that: "I would go out with 3-week-worn pants, but with bad hair, I will not go outside!". With bad hair, the man referred to his unstyled hair, if you were wondering. He was getting a fancy shave, in the fashion of the 2000s. This is a funny anecdote but describes also how important the beauty ideal of 'good hair' is for both men and women in the Dominican Republic. Prior to the pandemic and the subsequent curly girl boom, curly-headed women mostly attained attention through outrageous posts. Such as the young lady getting her scholarship refused by the Dominican ministry of education in 2016 due to her afro. Her subsequent Facebook post reaching thousands of angry Dominican girls and mothers (Lyon 2020: 2122). In 2019, a bill introduced by African American California senatress Holly Mitchell called the CROWN act (Create a Respectful and Open World for Natural hair) was voted into legislature for fifteen US States (Hassel 2022: 181). This act did not come from nowhere, rather it was a much-anticipated culmination of yearlong discriminations against black hairstyles being discriminated at schools, jobs across the United States. These examples, from my literature lay out the foundational hair work that has been propagated prior to Covid, but I believe that Covid as a groundbreaking event needs to be studied on its own. Because prior to Covid 19, some curly hair salons existed, but they were rather rarities than normal happenstances (Hassel 2022: 183).

Covid-19's impact…

An important turning point then, in recent history, and which has propelled the curly hair acceptance movement to other dimensions, has been the internet. Who knew that a rapid-spreading disease, emanating from China, could ever affect curly-haired people in the world? Remember the young man from the 2008 documentary explaining how he would never step outside on the streets if he had a bad hair day? Well…

… on curly heads

All of a sudden, the problem the young man addressed of not stepping outside the house, due to hair problems, no longer was an issue. Because the place where most of the hair straightening takes place, namingly the salons or barbershops, closed due to the rules of confinement. On the 19th of March 2020, the "Dominican government declared a state of emergency and introduced a nationwide lockdown and quarantine." (Exemplars 2022). And 'going outside' with the Covid virus spreading drastically, the implicated hard lockdown in March of 2020, annulling the need the man brought up which was to even go outside. Especially places where close physical contact between humans is the norm, such as the gym, the salon, the school and the office, got closed to prevent the further spread of the disease. Meaning that worldwide, many people could not do things and activities they would usually do. So, then what did people do during the pandemic, now that they spent 24 consecutive hours in their homes? Well, many of us doom scrolled the internet, filling those endless hours of boredom with daily screen times longer than the running time of the entire Lord of The Rings *extended version* movies (equalling to 12hours and 6minutes long). We juggled our work, or student life with spending time on the interwebs. How did this however, affect the curly hair movement, and the black liberation movement? And how does it affect the curly community in the Dominican Republic, but beyond that, the world?

For Margarette, one of my respondents, the increase of internet usage and women being confined to their homes and not being able to go to the salons, made a huge, even unprecedented impact on her curly hair product business. "La pandemia fue una bendición" (= the pandemic was a blessing), she said. Prior to the first lockdown in March 2020, Margarette had signed up for a beauty fair in the big and very popular Santo Domingan mall called 'Zambil'. Due to the impromptu March confinement, the fair was cancelled. Margarette got very worried, because she had spent most of her savings on the production of shampoos that she planned on selling at the fair. Back in 2020, her business was

still very small. It did not help that her husband had lost his job, because of the countless pandemic layoffs. “I had all these shampoos that I produced for this fair and because of Covid, the fair was cancelled.” “I got worried, what to do with these products now?” “My husband told me: calm down we will find a solution.” Spoiler, she did. “I’m very active, so when I started my Instagram page and it exploded with messages, I went from five daily deliveries to thirty daily deliveries.” I was astounded. Margarette repeated: “For us it was a blessing. I was looking for two ‘muchachas’ (= girls), and two telephones to cover for all the requests we were getting daily.” Margarette’s business boomed during the pandemic, as her Instagram posts about her curly hair products received an unforeseeable viewership, the algorithm serving countless Dominican women content for hair care. Her business went from small-scale product selling to hundreds of product requests and hair tips, overnight. Prompting her to find employees and ‘mensajeros’ (= couriers). She even opened her afro hair salon in the middle of Covid-19 because she had saved up enough money from the previous year, to find a locale and rent it out. “I opened my salon during the pandemic”, she said. “What year?” I asked “In ‘21”, she replied. It was at this crucial moment that I made the ethnographic discovery that I was not the only one who, all of a sudden, started caring for my curly hair during the pandemic. The videos I saw and content I consumed, prompting me to spend time on my curly hair care, were a phenomenon shared with many others globally (Hassel 2022: 190).

I said to Margarette: “It was during the pandemic that I started looking after my hair.” “Yes, many women couldn’t go to the salon anymore to straighten their hair. I know many who, during the pandemic, were left with their curly hair.”, she acquiesced. In a newspaper article I found online, published in 2020, other curly-haired women shared a similar experience. “About two weeks into the quarantine, I realized how much more free time I had. […] Having the extra time really allowed me to invest in my curls without feeling like I had to resort to heat or styling because I was in a hurry or because I wanted to achieve a certain look.” (Diaz 2020) says Carmen Sivakumaren, who was interviewed for a newspaper article.

Time is an important aspect to understand the curly hair boom of the pandemic. From one day to the next, all we had was time: time to spend online, time to start at-home hobbies, time to care for ourselves and slow down. Time gave many ‘curlies’ a moment to take a breath and experiment with their hair. I too realised that the rudimentary routine, if you can even call it that, that I had during my pre-Covid days, which restricted itself to a hair cream I would apply after washing my hair, was not enough to maintain or define the curls I had on my scalp. The more videos of curly hair influencers showing off their beautiful manes of hair I consumed, the more I felt compelled to try it out. Maybe, one day, my hair could look just like theirs. In her article on Indonesian social media activism, Merlyna Lym describes this feeling I and many other home-bound curly headed people felt of

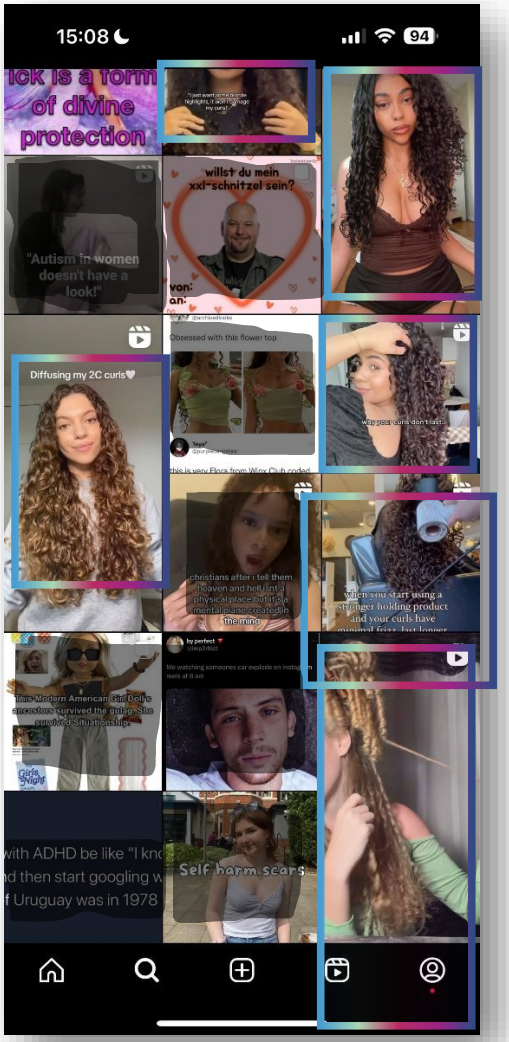
needing to participate in the curly hair trend, as “participatory culture” (Lym 2013: 640). With participatory culture she refers to the social media culture of consuming online content by independent “grassroots” users and influencers that are just like you and me, and engaging with that content by reposting, liking or even taking action as a response (Lym 2013: 638-640). This is what the online curly beauty trends is: it is another beauty trend, largely perpetrated by coloured people, with textured hair, creating a visibility, and need for other people to participate as well (Edmonds 2010: 113). Margarette, being one such grassroots curly influencer, shows the other side of the coin, her experience of the Pandemic flourishing her curly hair business. Today, Margarette has seven employees, a salon and a full-range curly hair product line, called Natural Diosa.

The effect of the pandemic also changed Erika’s life. Erika worked in restauration and lost her job at the beginning of the pandemic. She promptly started posting online tutorials for curly hair care, partly out of the sudden free time she had on her hands. Just like Margarette, her DMs (Direct Messages) filled up with women asking her for advice. “What products should I use?” “What comb do I need?” “Can I use this product?” “Are the ingredients in this shampoo good for my hair?” The sudden surge in viewers and followers made Erika realise that she could make a career out of this influencer hobby of hers (Kneese et al. 2020: 4). I visited Erika in her curly hair salon called ‘Molt Maca Salón’, which she had opened just over a year ago, this salon being the culmination of her online work and presence. Both Erika and Margarette felt compelled to expand their online presence to a physical salon, in order to directly help the women who asked them for advice or bought products from. Their story coinciding with another Dominican lady, Carolina Contreras, the founder of ‘Miss Rizos’ salon. She like my interlocutors, started a salon in 2016, and invented her own hashtag #yoamomipajón, (#ilovemyfro), which propelled thousands of women posting their natural hair under the hashtag (Lyon 2020; Hassel 2022; Sanders Gómez 2018). The internet really is a tool to “show off, with pride, natural hair” (Sanders Gómez 2018: 109). Hine in her ethnography of the internet, describes how as a researcher, it is important to relate to one’s participants, especially if they have a special relationship to social media. As I was interviewing some of these curly influencers, I sometimes asked them to show me their respective social media to understand how important the internet was for their business (Cardella et al. 2020: 8). Whenever I mentioned that I had my own TikTok account with a considerable following, I got insights I would not have received otherwise. As we seemed ‘mutuals’ on that terrain, and no extra explanations were needed from their part, as I understood exactly what it means to have a social media presence and follower community, and the impact it can make on career prospects. (I already got invited to some events in Luxembourg due to my social media presence).

Margarette showed me her salon's TikTok account, where she has 21k followers. Some of her videos reaching the 'viral status', getting over half a million views and over 50k likes. With Erika, we compared our Instagram discovery pages and had quite a laugh, because our Instagrams were flooded with curly girl content, showing that we share common interests, and those influence what we consume on social media (Helfrich et al. 2022: 29). Margarette even went so far as to tell me that most of her clients come from 'the internet'. Erika's salon operates even on appointment-to-appointment basis, meaning that all of her clients organise an appointment with her in advance, usually over Instagram or WhatsApp. Both Margarette and Erika are curly influencers that post content that generates them income. Kneese et al. coin this sort of digital craftmanship as 'listing labour', where with laborious "taste-makings", these online labourers in a way aestheticize their job to the viewer, the latter in turn is prompted to buy or engage with what they are so skilfully selling (Kneese et al. 2020: 2).

Margarette skilfully posts 'wholesome' or 'pleasurable' videos where she is styling her or her client's hair. While this content can be very satisfying to look at, the viewer at the same time is exposed to her brand's products, which she uses in all her videos. Erika too, posts herself in her Instagram stories, styling her curls with some sponsored product, for which she has a reduction code, from which her followers can generate a discount after checkout (Kneese et al. 2020: 3). It seemed crucial to understand the importance of social media to relate to my research participants, and the impact the internet has on their social selves (Hine 2015: 20). However, the internet is also algorithmically unstable, full of everchanging fleeting beauty, fashion and lifestyle trends (Lim 2013: 644). Consequently, there is a risk with having a "platform", as the pressure to continue posting, so as to generate customers in order to make appointments or income, is very high. Thus, as quickly as a viral video may come, it can go just as fast. Staying relevant for an online labourer, meaning staying on top of their social media, is very taxing long-term, especially since staying 'viral' is difficult, and people have short memories (Kneese et al. 2020: 8). Margarette even has an employee, who's single job is to film and photograph customers and post these moments on the salon's social media accounts. When most of their business is online, the curly influencers turned entrepreneurs, can both thrive from the clicks they get, but at the same time, these clicks do not always stick (Lim 2013: 646). Still, the impact the curly girl influencers have on a global and local scale, are immense. Many of us owe their thanks to these women posting their hair care habits online. I need to address that there is a significant literature and research gap concerning the effects of the 2020 pandemic on the lived realities of people. While critics like Lim believe that social media activism is 'thin', so as to ultimately generating little real-life impact into people's social reality. She doubts how fleeting internet trends can be and how quickly people get desensitised by what they consume.

Since something new will show up on their timeline just a day later (Lim 2013: 646). But the findings I made during my research in Santo Domingo seem to point to another direction. True social media need to be critiqued for their ultimately consumerist nature, where both creator and viewer are constantly faced with the ever-fleeting online currents (Ryle 2020: 830). Then again, not only did Erika and Margarette make their livelihoods through their online labour, but also confirmed that Covid has made an unprecedented impact on the curly hair community in the Dominican Republic. With salons closing all over the country, people did not have much of a choice but to look after their hair themselves. And while Françoise told me that many went back to normal hair straightening after the pandemic, many others as Erika, Perla, and other afro and curly hair salonists confirmed, did not. Thus, I want to continue this discussion with another pandemic-related movement, BLM, and its impact on the curly headed community, and their ideology in the next section. I hope to get some clarity of the social impact vs. consumer critique anthropologists seem so fascinated by.



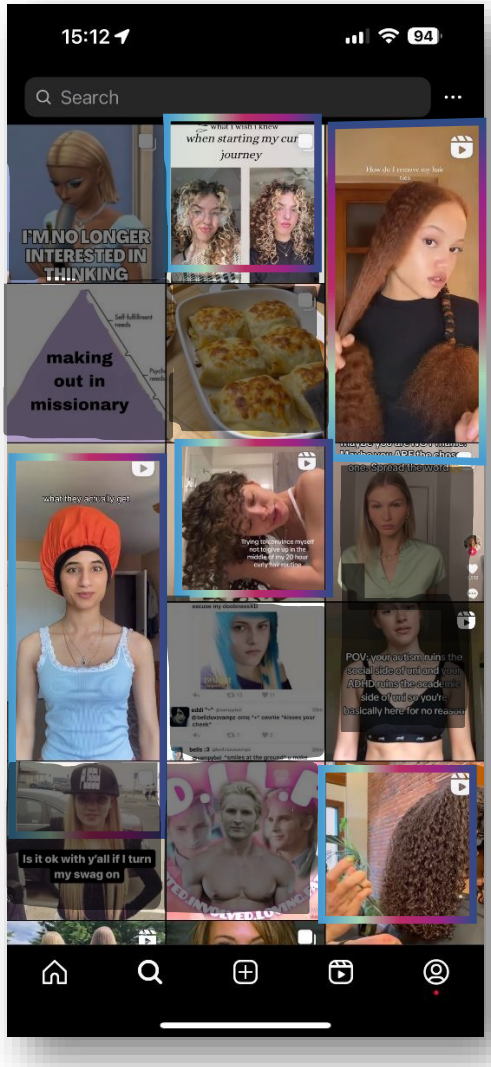


Figure 14

Figure 15

Figure 14 and 15: Personal Instagram discovery page. Full of curly hair styling or curly girl content. My discovery page looks similar to those of my interlocutors and a funny way of conducting research regarding the importance of the curly algorithm. Many of those videos inspired me to start my curly hair journey, just like so many other women like me across the globe.

Source Screenshot from Author's phone, Instagram discovery page (June 2024)

… on curly head theory

Another pandemic-related movement that took the internet by storm, is the infamous BLM movement. In 2020, the brutal murder of George Floyd, an African American Minnesota man, by the hands of then police officer David Chauvin, blew up the internet. Floyd was choked by the policeman, he cried out the words that would haunt a generation: "I can't breathe!", yet Chauvin never let loose, practically suffocating the other man to death (Hill et al. 2020). The entire act was filmed by passers-by and posted online, the video got shared on every social media platform, received millions of views, comments and shares. By the 28th of May, two days after the fact, everyone on the internet had seen something about George Floyd. What followed this racist killing of an innocent man by a white policeman, was the outrage by millions of Black people in the Americas, but also young Gen-Zers who have had enough of police brutality and discrimination of Black and coloured people (Burdick 1998: 137). The Black Lives Matter movement born out of this outrage, started addressing the cultural racism existing in many western nations, especially the structural discrimination people of colour experienced through the hands of police, government and other institutions (Hine 2015: 52). This movement is not the first black liberation movement to address the inequal treatments black citizens experience, the Civil Rights movement of the 60s for one. Both movements not only made a huge impact on a rights-based arena, but also offered opportunities for the change of body ideals (Rice 2002: 181).

Especially black women or women of colour, who most feel the impact of the 'body beautiful', making them feel bad for their racial features, such as hair, skin colour, facial traits, have the ability to actively rebel against the norm of white body standards (idem.). What both the curly hair and BLM movement have in common, is that they took the internet by storm, mobilising people around the world to change something. The curly girls inspired thousands of women to start accepting their hair and experience with their body, making them feel more beautiful, when the have internalised their hair as 'different' (Rice 2002: 170). Whereas the BLM trend, mobilised millions of people from all shapes and colours to go out on the streets and protest the death and continuous racism against coloured people in our societies. I believe the power of the internet, especially platforms like TikTok or Instagram are paramount to include in this section, as they are principal tools of education and diffusion of knowledge for many of the women from my research. It is no secret, that social media generate a certain level of political knowledge among users, which is exactly what the Black Lives Matter movement was about (Helfrich et al. 2022: 31). BLM informed the online community of the racist killings of young Black Americans, overtly addressed white privilege, and critiqued right-wing politics. Resulting in large scale political participation among people, the 2020 US presidential

elections for example. Black voter conscription rose considerably, as African Americans mobilised themselves to kick Trump out of office (Quinlan 2024). Current president Joe Biden won the elections due to months and months of online activism of the pandemic.

Although none of the curly-haired women I talked to overtly spoke about politics, they spoke about something else: black pride, to "celebrate afro descendance" as one of my participants said. Curly hair is not only about a beauty discussion, or about Instagram videos, it goes to people's essence, where they come from and accepting one's "raíces" (= roots). In his ethnography about female beauty surgeries in Brazil's urban populations Edmonds describes this trend as "resurgent black culture" (Edmonds 2010: 112). By this he means that nowadays more people, especially historically poorer black folks, have access to 'mass media' by which they can represent themselves more now than ever. This leads to then a growing trend of black and coloured people participating in beauty trends like the curly hair trend, or liberating movements, connected with a steadily growing black middle class. Edmonds interprets that across third and developing nation countries, media give opportunities to participate in global consumer trends (Edmonds 2010: 113). Especially the curly haired women I talked to, used social media as a leeway to find and create a community for other curly-haired women, or women thinking about transitioning. These mediums offer a 'place' of companionship and relatability for women of colour to come together and form a connection through their bodies (Rice 2002: 177). Indeed, I need to reiterate why racial pride, expressed through Africanness is so interesting to study in context with social media and black liberation. In a country like the Dominican Republic, or many of literature about Brazil, there is a historical "let's not talk about Africa" rule. In these highly mixed countries, the dominant idea of national identity is based on "mestizaje" (=mixedness) (Lyon 2020: 2127). Colouring this bright line of a mixed society, where everyone is part white, part Black and even part indigenous. Dominicans are extremely proud of their white or indigenous ancestry, but systematically exclude their African ancestry out of the conversation. Sanders-Gómez even goes so far as to state that Blackness is a "hidden history" in Dominican history books, with the painful chapter of slavery being brushed over with the more fun chapter of Dominican independence (Sanders-Gómez 2018: 110).

Why is this African ancestor systemically excluded from national identity discourse? The answer is quite simple: slavery. It is the painful past, that of domination, exploitation that past filled with shame and hurt. It is easier to talk about the indigenous roots, the Spanish ancestors. At the same time, Blackness is also synonymised with Haiti. Dominicans are extremely proud of their independence which they have gained from Haiti in 1844, and to this day this deeply characterises the relationship between the Dominican Republic and Haiti. Even though Haiti was the first African nation to gain independence from their coloniser, in Haiti's case: France, Dominicans feel that Haiti's

domination over their part of the island was a dark chapter of their history (Sanders-Gómez 2018: 106). Ironically, Haiti's identitarian pride: being the first black independent country, is the symbol of shame for the Dominican Republic. The Spanish side of the island has meticulously constructed its identity at opposites to the French side (idem.). It seems paradoxical, since both sides of the island, share common Black ancestry, and are in fact genetically more similar than Dominicans care to admit. When I visited the anthropological "Museo del hombre dominicano" (= museum of the Dominican man) in Santo Domingo, I noticed what another Dominican artist and activist also stated about another Dominican museum in Santiago: "Spanish and Taino reminiscence is very exposed, on the other hand, Africanness was provokingly absent" (Sanders-Gómez 2018: 112). When I walked through the exposition at the anthropological museum, the only history addressed was an elaborate exposure of the indigenous populations prior to the arrival of Spain or France. Prior to the arrival of slavery. I saw Taino art, Taino gods, Taino sports, yet no mention of African ancestors, African gods, or African foods. The absence of Africa at the museum that should represent the essence of the Dominican 'human', is striking.

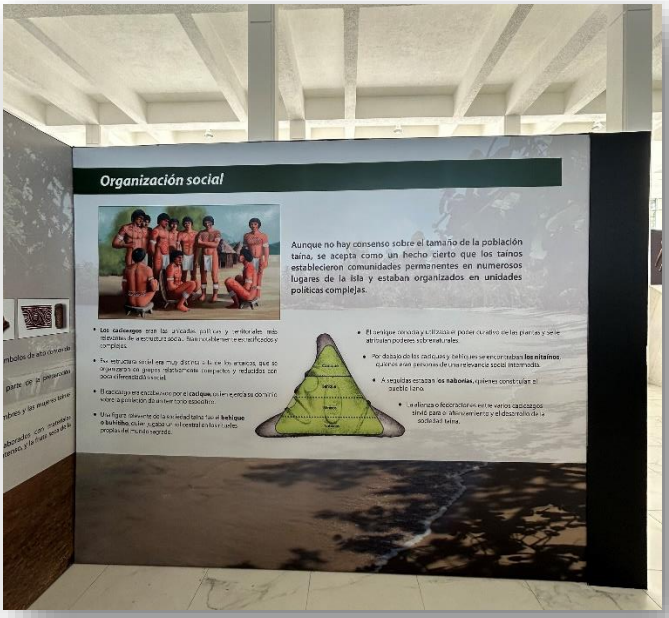


Figure 16 *Figure 17*

Figure 16 and 17 Social hierarchy system of the Tainos (left), list of words in Dominican Spanish that are of Taino origin (right). These are exposed at the Museo del Hombre Dominicano in Santo Domingo.

Source Author (February 2024)

It comes with no surprise that the natural hair movement in the Dominican Republic is also a Black acceptance movement. Part of the hair discourse addresses this Black 'void' that dominates Dominican identity politics (Lyon 2020: 2122). Curly, frizzy, afro hair is in essence, afro-descendant hair, thus a reflection of the 'hidden' Black ethnicity. Lyon calls the assumption of black hairstyles as "the only available site of representation" (Lyon 2020: 2124). An "in your face" kind of Black self-presentation, where the body in itself is used as signifier of a protest. Hair can be empowering, a political statement that does not need words, but clearly states: I am afro descendent, and I have my ancestors' hair which I wear with pride.

When I was at the ‘Cibao Rizado’, the curly hair fair in Santiago, I noticed Perla, who was selling hair accessories at a little stand. I looked at the hair ties and bonnets that were lying on the table and I recognised that some of the garments had a distinct African flair. The patterns of the bonnets looked exactly like traditional west African patterns. Perla herself was wearing a green dress in typical African fashion. I remember that I was quite surprised, because it was one of the first times in my time on the island, that I saw anyone wearing clothes in that fashion.

Figure 18

Perla (in green) selling hair bands and other regalia with African patterns at her stand in Santiago. The woman in black is Betania, another participant that I met at the same event. She is about to buy the headband that she is wearing in the picture. (March 2024)

Source Author

Perla is very vocal about her African ancestry and regularly shares this with her 130k followers on Instagram. For example, she is the host of a workshop called “Afropicnic”. Her followers can sign up via a link in Perla’s bio. The next workshop will take place on the 21st of July 2024, which is also the Latin-American day of the afro descendent woman. During this picnic, Perla will talk about hair, roots, emotional wellbeing. She tries to actively build up women’s confidence through accepting themselves and their blackness. The dress code for the event: African garbs. The African pattern and clothes stand as an active embracing of Perla’s ancestry, a nod to her past. In a society that does not address or reflect on its African roots, Perla stands tall with her green dress, African patterns as a symbol of a woman that defies the idea that having African ancestry is “undesirable”. From her coily head to her toes, she stands as an Afro-Caribbean woman (Caldwell 2003: 22).

Indeed, Perla’s activism is part of the curly beauty worker’s agenda. Almost all of the curly hair influencers and curly salonists told me that part of their job is to offer advice for women thinking about going ‘natural’. As transitioning is not an easy decision for many because it is related to a wide array of different insecurities women face, from feeling societal pressure to conform to a beauty standard, to the reaction of friends and family, or even strangers (Burdick 1998: 144). For example, Perla told me: “I had a woman text me, telling me that her boyfriend broke up with her after she chopped all her hair off, in order to transition to her curly hair.” These are real-life problems women face, because they defy the norm of straight hair that exists on the island. This follower lost her boyfriend because of it. As bad as this sounds, the reason why Perla is so important in her community and on the island, is just because she is a place of recourse for these women. A friendly ear to listen, a trusted online friend to confide in. Perla most probably inspired this lady to transition, and even though the later lost her boyfriend to it, she managed to do something for herself, to empower herself by taking an agentic decision, such as chopping off her damaged, straightened hair (Craig 2006: 173). Social media then, for this woman, is a motivator, a hope-bringing place where she can share her story. I follow Perla’s Instagram daily and the comments she is getting beneath her posts are filled with women reacting to what she is posting. Clearly the work she is doing which is giving visibility to a defying beauty principle: being an open black woman with curly hair. Perla regularly stays in touch with her community by content with which she emanates a feeling of relatability. Last week she published an Instagram reel where she tries a ‘viral hair styling brush’ for curly to afro hair, or she reacts to other curly influencer videos.

Sometimes, she posts humorous reels addressing the difficulties women like her face or have faced. “Hi, I’m Perla and I survived when they put VINEGAR in my hair to cure the straightening burns, the horse shampoo and when they groomed my hair with fig and egg oil”, women in the comments react: “Horse shampoo is a classic” or “Spot on, I hated the vinegar”, “Hi Perla, I used all of those, I

was a victim". Perla's sympathetic posts help other women feel heard and not alone in their experiences.

Here, Perla reminds people that horse shampoo and vinegar were applied to her hair at salons, to comb it. Many women with very textured and curly hair have experienced some sort of abuse when going to salons, from burned ears and hot combs burning the scalp to the use of obscure products that had some pseudo hair-straightening attribute which would supposedly keep the hair in shape (hooks 1989: 3). These experiences are often brushed over with the dominant hair straightening culture, but they are reasons so many natural haired women in the Dominican Republic, and beyond feel the need to make a change about how they care for their hair. Many of the curly hair salonists I spoke to aspire to create a "black beauty" ideal, with distinct African features being accepted into the beauty discourse of the island (Edmonds 2010: 173). Their overt social media presence, hair and even clothing styles defy the historicised notion of the black female body as "ugly" and instead transform it into beauty ideal (Rice 2002: 160). "Self-esteem" and the diffusion of black media across online platforms change these global and local beauty regimes, and dispute what is beautiful (Edmonds 2010: 169). The natural hair trend, the growing presence of Black media, and liberation movements are paramount to dismount beauty ideals, structural discriminations that black people across the West, the African diaspora and across the globe experience. Especially in this section, online and hashtag activism, online beauty trends, have an effect on people's lives (Helfrich et al. 2022: 35).

Black natural beauty workers have been especially in focus for this subchapter, as they generate content, redefine beauty values and offer group support and relatability through their work (Rice 2002: 177). They empower and encourage others to follow into their footsteps, to make the big leap, aka. The big chop to go 'natural'. They offer beautifying, styling and consulting sessions at their salons, thus caring for Dominican women's hair generating self-esteem for black and coloured women (Liebelt 2022: 109). While social media, and online beauty work are important for community-generating and black beauty representation, in the next section I will address the more critical side of this curly hair beauty ideal, shifting from empowering to the disempowering aspects. I will look at labour and class problems, that are not resolved or even fortified with the curly hair beauty industry, addressing labour practices at salons and the growing consumerism that becomes attached to curly hair care. Also, the agentic decision of hair care, which poses black and coloured women at a black and white decision: go natural or go straight-haired. Thus, I will analyse how curly hair is not empowering to every woman, and that sometimes these hair choices have little to do with race, and more with life and personal choice-makings. Basically, having straight hair is not always skin-deep, sometimes it is just not that deep.

3.3. Curly hair, a true liberation for black women?

Beauty labour

While I laid out how the curly hair movement is a Black body liberation movement in the first section of this chapter, I want to also address who exactly is liberated, and who is 'liberating' black women? There is a class and labour dilemma that I read in the various literatures, and coming back from Santo Domingo, I realised that my participants, especially the curly hair influencers I worked with, are pressured and pressuring beauty labour practices that reinforce class and gender dynamics. First, I want to address the salon as a laborious project, taking up precious time and resources for female entrepreneurs. Then, both the traditional and the curly hair salon continue the employer-employee power imbalance which is the same for both the traditional and the curly hair salon.

When I mentioned the successful stories of Margarette, Perla and Erika in the previous section, I emphasised on social media's positive impact on their career. They built their curly hair salons from the success of their curly influencer presence and managed to make a living out of it (Kneese et al. 2020: 3). However, in their article, Kneese et al. bring up another side to "listing labour" practices. Ranging from social media posting pressure to keep in touch with followers and/ or other potential clients, the vintage retailers in their ethnography, or beauty entrepreneurs in my case, to being overworked and working at times when their shop or salon is not even open. Here, gender and family play key factors in the experiences of beauty entrepreneurs. The problem with some of my participants is the sheer amount of work and time they put into their careers, yet with some still struggling to make their business grow monetarily (Cardella et al. 2020: 2). Women's empowerment through entrepreneurship is largely discussed and critiqued in anthropology, because some systematic problems women face do not disappear through their business endeavours. This "self-sacrificing" woman (Ging-Dwan 2016: 149) that juggles 7-workday-weeks, does important community work and juggles an entire family and marriage at the same time is taxing work (Anthias and Mehta 2003: 107). And while there might be some emotional revenue, money issues and long hours of labour are the unwanted consequences of a small business such as a salon. Margarette, for example, who has her curly hair salon since 2021 faces many obstacles that put stressors in her life as a caregiver for her children or as a wife to her husband. "There was no afro hair salon in this zone. We are the first. We are the first one here.", Margarette explained to me. Indeed, the interest for her salon grew exponentially in her local community: "The people got so interested that the small, downstairs local we started in was not big enough. After like a year, we had to move upstairs because

things got out of hand. The business grew quickly. That's why the salon exists now." Margarette felt almost overwhelmed with the sudden surge of clientele for her salon, as she was not only the first curly salon in her area, but also someone who responded to people's needs before her own (Tronto and Fisher 1990: 43). Because there existed no market for curly hair before Margarette came, the sudden success was a blessing but also a curse. Meaning that as a caregiver, e.g. a curly hair salon owner, a curly hair influencer, she regularly neglects other parts of her life that she cares about, such as her children. "At times, it's hard to own a salon and to also have time for the family. It's very hard. Sometimes I stay here and I don't go home. As a boss I don't have a lot of time for myself because… it's difficult to find the time." As a now middle-class woman, coming from a poor background, Margarette experienced tremendous growth of her business, from producing hair oils out of her kitchen, to owning a hair salon and an entire curly hair brand, she is a real success story. Still, Margarette is an Afro-Caribbean woman, a mother of three children that are all below the age of eight, and she is working more than 40-hour weeks, often going to the salon seven times a week, even though she is only supposed to work 6 days (Cardella et al 2020: 3). The best-case scenario that is so often desired, which is that entrepreneurship actually offers more time for a woman to balance work and family, through self-designed working hours, is so often just that: a dream that never actually materialises (idem.).

Even though Margarette has seven full-time employees in her service, she still feels responsible to go to the salon herself, this behaviour of the Dominican salonist reflects how she feels that there is "no guarantee that any of those who take over her work will care about it in the same way she does" (Tronto and Fisher 1990: 47). So, she feels that the only one who actually cares for her business as much as she does, is herself. As a caring salon owner, she feels responsible for everything that goes on, and she sacrifices precious time with her children and husband for that. In Margarette's case, she cares more than what she can sometimes handle. She is lucky that her husband joined her as full-time partner in her business, thus both can share the burden of running a salon and product brand together. His support makes things easier for Margarette, as he can pick up the children from school or dance class, when she is unable to (Browne 2001: 336). Her husband is also responsible for the transportation and organising the couriers of their hair care products through all of Santo Domingo. With her husband's full support, Margarette is at odds with another woman I talked to, who is also the sole owner of her own hair care brand. Rosa, for example, is a single mother and sole provider to her son. She has struggled countless times with making ends meet, due to the lack of a partner's monetary presence. Her son's father has never taken interest in helping her raise their son, not with money or childcare. Rosa has then double the amount of stress that Margarette is already dealing with, given that the latter has a supportive and rather progressive-thinking husband (Browne

2001:336). Still, traditional domestic gender roles continue pressuring Margarette, because although they have found a nanny to take care of their children, the burden of cooking food remains the mother's job (Browne 2001: 337). So, Margarette usually cooks her children's lunch early in the morning before going to work, or late at night when she comes back from work, thus never really escaping household-related gender norms.

For Margarette, her career is both empowering and disempowering, while the work she does for the curly hair community in her neighbourhood, and online is substantial, making women feel beautiful about their hair every day, she is also presented with the gendered and economic pressures that are quite typical for middle class women in the Caribbean. In a society where Christian values are still very present, and women are considered providers and caretakers for their families, Margarette is faced with dilemmic choices: care for her business and work hard because that is the common work ethos professional Caribbean women are faced with, while also juggling her role as mother and wife (Tronto and Fisher 1990; Freeman 2000). Freeman in her ethnography on Barbadian pink-collar data workers describes this gendered and work ethic so many middle- or working-class Caribbean experience "not as truly independent, […] but as Afro-Barbadian women who continue to bear the burden of a double (if not triple) day." (Freeman 2000: 139). The Caribbean woman labourer is both pressured by her matriarchal duties to manage her household while also aspired and expected to be an ambitious hard worker (Freeman 2000: 111). In that regard, curly hair labour as I would call it, is not much different from traditional hair labour. The natural hair movement, though liberating black women from aesthetic discrimination at working institutions, does not systemically deconstruct other laborious oppression Caribbean women experience, due to their gender and class. Women entrepreneurs as Margarette almost have an overload of care: care for their clients, care for their business and care for their family. Women like Margarette can thus feel like she is failing either of their "babies" (baby stands here as a double allegory to Margarette's babies, her children and her business, the salon) (Anthias and Mehta 2003: 111). She never really gets a break from her work and her motherly duties.

Another aspect of beauty labour, that is also continued at the curly hair salon, is the division of labour, and the type of employee working in these spaces. There are of course different types of salons on the island, from the hood salon with one proprietor and maybe one other employee, to a small to medium salon with a few employees to large industrial-like salons with two dozen or more employees (Murray and Ortiz 2012: 157-158). And while I visited employers and employees at salons of "different economic levels", both at traditional and curly haired salons, some labour practices stay

the same and thus show the 'sameness' of salon culture, regardless of the services provided at these salons. While curly hair salons are generally a newer trend in the Dominican Republic, the class difference between salon owner and employee, often times reflected in task division at salons, are quite striking. First, I want to discuss who some of these middle-class employers are and what their job is at the salon. As Murray and Ortiz describe in their ethnography on Dominican hair salons, most employees both at small- or large-scale salons come from working-to-lower class backgrounds (Murray and Ortiz 2012: 141). At Margarette's afro salon, I noted to her that I thought her employees looked very young. She agreed and said that this was on purpose, because as most of the seven girls she has working for her were barely eighteen. She said she had no money to spare, therefore these learning youngsters who do not need to get paid as much as say, a 30-year-old woman with children, were perfect for her. Indeed, these young girls who are mostly apprentices, are single, have no family and are at the beginning of their career. Many employees at hair salons are quite young, because often, they strive to work their way up from an employee to becoming a salon owner themselves, one day (Murray and Ortiz 2012: 155). This is what both anthropologists call a "microentrepreneurial orientation in the Dominican population" (idem.). While Margarette, for example, has a storyline similar to the young employees at her salon, and sets herself apart from other middle-class salon owners, because she is an owner and still a stylist, labour division is still a real custom at salons (Murray and Ortiz 2012: 199). Rossaly, another one of my respondents for example, falls more into the category of a salon "administrator". Rossaly and her two sisters own an afro hair salon in Santiago de los Caballeros, all three women have a master's degree from university. When I asked Rossaly if she would also style or cut clients' hair she answered with a negative, neither do her two sisters (idem.). That is the job of their employees, while the sisters' roles are mostly divided in administrative work. Rossaly and her sisters are also the main organisers of the afro hair festival I have mentioned throughout this entire thesis. Although Murray and Ortiz' labour division refers to the traditional salon, I want to argue here that the curly hair salon is empowering black women only to an extent. Meaning that although the curly hair movement is an empowering and liberating body movement, what Batliwala would call deconstructing "institutions that reinforce and sustain existing power structures" (Batliwala 2007: 560), meaning the media, or family or education, by proliferating a black body ideal that has been repressed in Dominican beauty discourse. However, the curly hair movement is still reinforcing other inequalities like hair, race and class inequalities that have existed prior to the black body liberation (idem.). Rossaly's and Margarette's examples demonstrate how entry-level low-wage employees continue to work at both type of salons, these women mostly are darker-skinned individuals, living in precarious situations and making their living off of caring for salon goers' hair, often working for middle-class or large-branded salons in Santo Domingo (Mears

2014: 1337). Mears coins this salon labour “aesthetic labour”, where employers profit from their female employees’ vulnerabilities and working-class aspirations, such as accepting long work hours with little pay, in hopes to one day also attain the dream of becoming independent and/or middle-class individuals themselves. Now that I already laid out part of the class and race labour practices, I want to delve into the consumerist critique regarding beauty trends, which the afro hair community is also deeply entrenched with, and specifically connect it to the Caribbean middle-class dream that is so closely tied to consumerism (Liebelt 2016: 13).

Curly hair, a consumer dream?

My question is: for whom is curly hair accessible? Who is targeted with the hair liberation? These are questions that are very relevant and tie into the critique of the curly hair movement in the Dominican Republic. A trend that is not only reserved to the Caribbean island but can be overall observed throughout the African diaspora and the African continent is a growing beauty market, that is increasingly more representative of people from all shapes and colours (Edmonds 2010: 18). The phrase “black is beautiful” for example, has been popularised in the 1970s and brought along the first wave of black body liberation, through wearing afros (Craig 2006: 173). Edmonds describes the interesting connection between a growing Black middle class and the dreams, or aspirations for consumerism that come along with it (Edmonds 2010: 110). This he explains, relates to black people who have historically been poor, discriminated and put outside of market practices. These market practices are: being able to buy non-essential goods, and being represented as marketable people (Edmonds 2010: 112). Therefore, many people of colour or Black people in Brazil, or in my case the Caribbean, aspire to what he calls a ‘consumer dream’. Consuming equals wealth equals a good and prideful lifestyle. This consumer dream, I for example, noticed through the sheer number of megamalls popping up throughout the entire city of Santo Domingo, where many youth spend much their time strolling through shops, going to the cinema (cinemas are exclusively located in malls), or eating at food courts. Going to the mall is related to being able to buy at the mall, it becomes increasingly a place of sociability and a prideful aspect for people’s personhood (Fogarty-Valenzuela 2022: 310). And while I have described how important black representation and the empowerment of women of colour in beauty is, it is also crucial to understand that this marketisation of black features also excludes many black people from participating in it. Liebelt even goes so far as to say that heterogenous beauty ideals do not stop racial inequalities, but rather profits off of new

consumers, like black people, through “economies of colour” (Liebelt 2016: 13). You may ask: Marie how does this statement make any sense? Let me explain. Lyon argues that curly hair salons, that are generally located in middle-class neighbourhoods, are not accessible to women from working or lower-class sectors, as they cannot pay for the services at these salons (Lyon 2020: 2135). More than that, I would argue that the curly hair salon, and the curly hair culture in the Dominican Republic as still quite unaffordable. When I talked to a woman in the local park that was next to my residential in Santo Domingo, I asked her which products she uses for her curly hair, her answer: “I often use avocados that are inedible to make a hair mask. I mix eggs, avocado, mayonnaise mostly. I use what I have at home. Hair products easily cost you 200 to 300 pesos. No one wants to spend that money! At least not me.” Not everyone can afford hair products. When I went to the hair product shop at a close-by mall to my home, I was quite shocked that I paid the equivalent of 50€ worth of hair care. I bought a shampoo, conditioner, leave-in and gel. I wanted to try a Dominican curly hair brand called ‘Ginger Milk’. The company started small, just like Margarette’s brand, but due to its growing popularity among Dominican women, the brand grew exponentially. Now Ginger Milk exports to all Latin America, the US and some European countries. The popularity for curly hair products is a sort of “beauty capital” (Liebelt 2016: 19), from which entrepreneurial women such as Rossaly or Margarette make their living off of, but puts this idea out there that natural hair, is just a replacing beauty standard, rather than a liberating one (Reischer et al. 2004; Liebelt 2016; Rice 2002). Thus, the natural hair movement is still entangled in larger beauty and body politics, where women feel the need to invest monetarily into their bodies in order to seem beautiful. Natural hair, although called natural, needs many products for it to be healthy: one needs at least two shampoos, one nourishing one protein-based for clarifying, a mask or conditioner. After the shower, depending on hair texture, one applies a hair styling mask (usually used on afro and kinky hair) or a leave in (usually used on wavy, curly hair), then a strong-hold or loose-hold gel and/or a mousse. This is no joke, from personal experience, this is the basics that people with naturally curly or afro hair need, and it costs you!

At the ‘Cibao Rizado’, the curly hair fair in Santiago, I witnessed first-hand, how capitalistic market tendencies were present at the event. The aim of the fair was to bring confidence to curly-and afro-haired women across the island. The natural hair community is still rather small, with most salon women and/ or curly influencers knowing each other personally or by name, at the very least. Many of those women are not poor, nor were they ever. These curly advocates are well-educated women, with middle or even upper-class background, walking around the festival taking pictures and buying products.

This no judgement, rather a presentation of a problem: who is actually part of the natural hair community on the island? Are the women and visitors present, representative for the class-related issue of how accessible curly hair actually is? The visitors, who mostly came to the event by car, with just the group from Santo Domingo, the one I was part of, coming by bus. Many of the women sitting in that bus were employees that worked at the festival doing people's hair or selling products, looking at their t-shirts, I deducted that they worked for Afro Love and Curly Love (two Dominican curly hair care brands). Apart from this class and labour difference that was perceptible at the fair, the brands represented were yes, many of them Dominican, but some like L'Oréal or Cantu, were also present. I remember that I was slightly bothered when I saw those two brands and their humongous stalls. I thought: "Shouldn't there be more small brands represented?". I found out later while talking to Rossaly, the co-organiser of Cibao Rizado, that those big international hair brands were the principal sponsors of the fair. This example from the fair confirms what Edmonds calls the transformation of racial identities to "consumer culture", where these "multinational corporations" have cleverly developed strategies to glamourise its black clientele and involve them in the profitable consumer market (Edmonds 2010: 27). Thankfully, local micro-to-medium curly hair brands were also represented at the fair, but the overall vibe was to buy products, either from a big or small brand, and the pressure to spend money was very high.

To buy a curly hair product, was equalled to empowering oneself and caring for one's natural hair (Ryle 2020: 830). Bourdieu believes that the body, is a capitalizable object, from which "social cleavages such as race, gender, class and age" (Mears 2014: 1331) are reproduced, which is also the issue with the curly hair market in the Dominican Republic. So, the curly and racial hair liberation is certainly not a universal and straight-lined process. While on the one hand beauty capital is necessary for women in the curly business to profit from, with their salons or hair care product lines, in order to normalise black beauty by "belonging through unbelonging" (Hassel 2022: 193). There is also the well-known beauty-consumer dilemma at hand, where natural hair is in fact just another beauty trend, making those who are unable to participate in it, by not being able to go to the salon, or not having sufficient funds to fully care for their natural hair to feel excluded from feeling beautiful.

Sometimes it is not that deep…

A mistake some scholars make when they look at the Dominican hair salon, and hair-straightening culture, they tend to assume that it is a whitening practice. They are colouring a bright line, connecting hair straightening to anti-Black sentiment, thinking that there is a correlation between a white beautifying practice and racism toward Black or mixed hair (Murray and Ortiz 2012: 226). This explanation is too easy, in a way even overlooking black and coloured women's agencies toward making bodily choices for themselves. It is outright problematic, because it just is not accurate or fair to the traditional salonists and women who straighten or relax their hair by painting them as wanting to look white. In the Dominican Republic for example, whitening creams have never really been sold much or popularised, not one woman I talked to ever mentioned this to me, whereas this practice was and still is very popular in Brazil (Murray and Ortiz 2012; Ryle 2020; Liebelt 2022). We scholars need to be careful to not throw people into a third-world box, where we easily assume that those we study are powerless victims of a colonial or neoliberal ideology, and thus cannot or are unable to make decisions for themselves (Kabeer 1999: 455). In this case, it would be the assumption that the western beauty system, would make women of colour feel ugly for their features, almost forcing them to 'whiten' themselves by going to the salon to get their hair straightened. But what about these women's agencies? Can they not think for themselves, are they really this influenced by a supposed Eurocentric beauty regime (Craig 2006: 159)? The answer is: it is complicated.

In the first chapter, I discussed the pelo bueno, pelo malo (good hair, bad hair) concept and how it translates to an anti-Black sentiment for the island nation. While that is true, it mostly is a reference to the pure Black typology, that is usually associated as purely African, or Haitian individuals (Murray and Ortiz 2012; Hassel 2022; Lyon 2020; Sanders-Gómez 2018). Dominicans are generally classified and self-identify as "creole", or mixed, due to their European, African and very small Indigenous ancestry (Murray and Ortiz 2012: 266). While there is a certain discrimination against darker-skinned people, that affects Blacks, Haitians and Haitian-Dominicans lives, in negative ways and which certainly places Dominicans into a racist lens, it would not be right to the people I worked with, to paint Dominicans as anti-Black. The good hair, bad hair subject is very complicated, and though I discussed the racism behind it, there is also a 'not so deep' aspect to it. Meaning that not everyone thinks of race and skin colour when they refer or talk about good hair or bad hair, often it is just an explanation for hair manageability.

Mixed and Black hair is different from straight European hair, as it needs more care than a quick wash and brush-through, it takes longer to style and a certain level of skill too. That is why so many

Dominicans do not wash their hair at home, or rarely so, and go to the salon to do it. Up until ten years ago, that would mean getting a blow-out or a relaxer, nowadays it can also be a curling session at a local curly hair salon (Murray and Ortiz 2012: 223). So bad hair can also just mean: hard-to-manage-can't-be-bothered-hair, and not a rejection of one's own racial identity. It is easy to forget, that most Dominicans are mixed, or "indio" as they like to call it. Indeed, even though most Tainos got killed by the Spanish arrival on the island, and very little contact between the African and Indigenous populations are historically documented, many Dominicans call their mixed-looking skin as 'Indian', showing a keen pride and almost mythical interest for the native population of the island (Lyon 2020: 2125). This notion of mixedness or 'mestizaje', is certainly also overused and undervalues the apparent Blackness in Dominican society, and in general: Dominicans are known in and around their neighbouring countries to have more problems to address their Black ancestry, especially comparing to their Haitian or Jamaican counterparts (Hassel 2022; Murray Ortiz 2012). Still, painting Dominican women as anti-black, because they straighten their hair would be unethical and unprofessional for anthropologists like me, because we try to understand people and their decisions by looking at many aspects, and racism simply does not cover it.

Feminist critique on beauty practices often portrays women who partake in beauty trends, or bodily modification as "oppressed" and subjects of racial and patriarchal beauty norms (Liebelt 2022: 210). However, making decisions on one's body is also an agentic choice women make to make themselves feel better, it thus can even feel empowering. That is why achieving a feeling of pretty femininity, through the process of straightening hair is valid. As the person who makes this hairy choice, feels empowered through it (Reischer et al. 2004: 306). It is not always skin- or hair- deep. It is also difficult to draw the line of good or bad beauty especially regarding Dominican women's hair practices, one the one side there is the curly hair movement that almost antagonises hair straightening, while hair straightening also continues to be the specialty of Dominican hair salons. At the end of the day, "we are all affected by the forceful images of beauty" (Liebelt 2022: 211), and we must be careful, both scholars and natural hair enthusiasts, to not draw a black-and-white line, by making black and women of colour feel like they must make a choice for one or the other beauty ideal, because even natural hair is a rigid beauty ideal (Rice 2002: 169). Anthropology offers to see the in-betweenness of things, the real stories that do not fit either picture. This is why, yet again, I want to bring Françoise's salon into the picture. This Haitian-Dominican salonist straightens and relaxes dozens of women's hair every single day. And I follow her social media on a daily basis, partly for thesis-writing purposes, partly because I genuinely enjoy her content. Françoise is sort-of doing my job, she always asks her clients why they come to her, how they found her salon, and why they decide to do the treatment they chose.

Lately, she is posting a lot of curly and afro-headed women on her stories. These women's' stories highlight the in-betweenness of hair choices, that directly debunk the racist or feminist critique. A few days ago she asked this woman, who has a full-on afro: "Tell me dear, since when do you have your natural hair?", the woman answers: "Eight years ago, I've had my big chop.". Françoise caresses the woman's hair, playing with her curls. "So why did you decide to relax your hair today?" to which the other replies: "It's a lot of work. It takes too much time." This woman, who for almost a decade wore her hair natural, decided from one day to another to relax it. She did not say: "Oh because my hair is bad." Or "Because I don't like how my hair looks." No, she just did it for practical reasons. I would argue that she even felt relieved and liberated from the burden of caring for her natural hair. This woman made the conscious choice of permanently straightening her hair, because she grew tired of her afro. Is it right for us to judge Françoise's work, when she makes so many women feel better about themselves, empowering them by doing something so many deem 'disempowering' (Liebelt 2016: 19)? Beauty is a paradox, it is complicated and certainly not explicable through black and white talk, literally and figuratively speaking. Women's "bodies are eroticized, visualized, and commodified […] at the same time as women become subjects asserting sexual rights and control over reproduction" (Edmonds 2010: 33).

Another thing: are norms of beauty still that white? Did I not mention "economies of colour" in a previous section? Indeed, I did. We need to understand that western beauty ideals, of light skin, a slim figure, and straight hair are certainly an important and highly represented ideal of beauty, but certainly not the only one (Liebelt 2016: 13). Local beauty standards continue to exist alongside global ones, and these once niche, unwished-for ideals, such as typical black body features, may become an ideal for others (Edmonds 2010: 26). Think of Kim Kardashian, who is so known for her body. She has big hips, a big bottom, and an overall voluptuous body, which are usually associated to black female bodies (Ryle 2020: 526). Back in 1815, when Saartje Bartmann lay on Doctor Cuvier's dissecting table, her behind was compared to "the genital swellings of female mandrils and baboons, which grow to monstruous proportions" (Fausto-Sterling 1995: 38). Comparing this to today where women pay large sums of money to surgically get a "Brazilian Butt Lift" (= BBL), aka. A bigger behind (Kim Kardashian until today outright denies any claims of getting a BBL). Edmonds, in his ethnography about beauty in Brazil, even discusses how Brazil's "mulata", becomes a selling point for tourists and global beauty trends, where the Brazilian brown female body is an attraction and aspiration for others (Edmonds 2010: 24). Today, many white European girls go to the gym and extensively train their butts in order to get bigger behinds. Beauty is also an aspiration, an obsession with wanting something of the 'other'. For example, Françoise, specialises in 'Chinese hair'.

She explained to me that she has finessed a technique to straighten coarse hair and make it paper thin, with as little frizz and volume as possible. “Chinese people have beautiful long, shiny hair.” When she told me this, I remembered something I saw on TikTok. I picked out my phone, opened the YouTube app and showed her a video of an emerging Chinese beauty trend that is taking over the internet. The people she admired so for their hair, getting an afro perm. Meaning that they pay to get a hairdo that Françoise has by nature. We all had a good laugh because one employee said that the afro perm looked terrible on Chinese people. So, for Françoise, she does not even correlate straight hair with Europeanness, something many scholars would assume, instead she refers to Asian hair types. On the other side, people in China pay large amounts of money to curl their hair, trying to imitate black people’s hair, the hair that in turn Françoise uncurls. Beauty is truly a beautiful paradox. Reischer calls the dilemma anthropologists face, and that I have described in length here in how far the body is a “symbol” and how far is it “agent”? Meaning that it is difficult to measure how much beauty work is impressed on women, and how much is it an empowering, agentic choice (Reischer et al. 2004: 297)?

To conclude this chapter, I intended to introduce the reader to the historical construction of the black female body by the European and colonial biomedical scientists. Black women were juxtaposed to white women, “the African body was "porous, dirty, and damp, one that gave off contagion and odor to those with whom it came into contact” (Reischer et al. 2004). White women then were the sanitised, clean and civilised, and because women in general are defined through their bodies, it is crucial to understand where beauty ideals come from, and how they impact women’s opinions and decisions on their own bodies. From the historical analysis comes the natural hair liberation movement, propelled through market and internet trends. Black women increasingly fight against their bodily discrimination, and especially in the Dominican Republic, where hair pressing is a long-standing tradition and norm, the curly-headed advocates fight for their rights to be recognised as beautiful too. Natural hair is then an “oppositional ideal” in the current beauty culture of the island (Rice 2004: 168). The last section then discusses how far natural hair is actually representative for black body liberation by addressing class and consumer tendencies within the curly hair industry, but also discussing how hair straightening is not always about race. And that for some women, feeling liberated or beautiful in their bodies is also tied to practicality or simply an unpolitical aesthetic choice.

4. Conclusion: Hairy entanglements

This thesis aims to illustrate the hairy tensions that currently exist in the Dominican Republic. Hair is the lifeline of the thesis, the source of conflict, empowerment, feeling of beauty, of ugliness, of feeling proud and ashamed. The few theoretical texts that I read on Dominican hair practices and salons were extremely critical of the *Dominican blowout*, almost juxtaposing it to the natural hair movement, as if both practices were mortal enemies. I argue for a more fluid perception of hair and its politics, because there are more stories to tell than just one. In my research question: How do hair politics and existing hair ideals reflect on the racial and gendered realities that exist for women in the Dominican Republic? I question what are the current hair realities affecting women on the island.

In the second chapter I discuss the straight hair beauty ideal and norm that has existed and persists to exist for women of all kinds on the island. First, I address the top-down structural hair norm, that dress-coded women's hairstyles, that forbade Dominican women to wear their natural curly hair at work. But from my own findings and observations I noticed that there is a considerable change taking place, with many women starting to wear their natural hair at work. Dominican women renegotiate what is professional. Since hair discrimination is nation-wide forbidden, at least in bureaucratic terms, the hair ideal stays mostly as a social force. This we could see with Laura, she knew she was legally allowed to wear her natural hair, but mostly feared the reaction of the other women at her job who were going make comments at her (Freeman 2000: 219).

Indeed, the social beauty ideal of straight hair needs to be understood beyond the norm of erasing black features, it has become a national body 'habitus', related to salon-going and beyond that: hair grooming is also a distinctly feminine experience for women with African hair (hooks 1989; Rice 2002). So, many Dominican women have practiced hair-straightening as a way of taking care of themselves and have internalised that their natural hair is in need of being groomed. Hassel (2022), Lyon (2020) and Sanders-Gómez (2018) address how blackness in a Dominican context, is also correlated with Haitianness. So, Françoise is posited in between, she is half Haitian, has been called out for having afro hair, still she is a salon owner and straightens women's hair on a daily basis, thereby reproducing the ideal. However, she never uses degrading words when treating women with natural hair and showed me a deep sense of reflection regarding her career and body choices. Body, class and race are paradoxically mixed, and it is hard to make a general statement of why women straighten their hair, and who is affected by the hair straightening.

In the last section, the body as signifier to class, through the lens of hair is a subject I would love to develop further, as it is understudied as an anthropological concept, and I would need to return to the republic for a more in-depth analysis of who is affected by hair discrimination. Still, people with less resources to spend on their hair, feel poor, and per extension uglier because they cannot care for their hair (Reischer and Koo 2004: 308). There is also significant correlation between pressure of hair straightening and class dynamics, Mileidy called her hair 'ugly', and uses hair straightening as an opportunity to make herself and others feel better about it, especially as darker-skinned people have lesser opportunities in the country, often feeling like they need to straighten their hair, for assimilation purposes (Sanders-Gómez 2018: 108). Thus, why people straighten their hair, is part of the Dominican cultural menu, but it is the anthropologist's ability to see the nuanced reality.

Which leads me to conclude my third chapter, where I discuss the growing hair acceptance movement as a reaction to the bodily discrimination black women feel, and where the culture of hair straightening originates from. The black female body has historically been policed (as the first chapter demonstrates) and posited outside of beauty norms (Burdick 1998: 144). The example of the 'Hottentot Venus', exemplifies how the origins of colonial thought, impact black women until this very day. This is partly why, the straight hair ideal is so prevalent on the island. The curly hair movement, however, has made a significant impact on the perception of curly hair on the island. Every day, more and more women are starting to go 'natural'. Through the use of social media, curly hair has become a new ideal, an opposing one (*Rice 2002: 168)*. Black people reappropriate the internet, making their voices heard. One can see how in the Dominican Republic, a country that still negates or 'forgets' about its African ancestry, the reappropriation of Africanness is a recent shift that will, in time, make a societal change and hopefully make its way into the Dominican conscious. That is the hope of the curly-haired women I spoke to.

Not only women of the African diaspora, but also women from Asia and all over Europe start to appreciate their curls. However, the subject of systems of labour, the social pressure to spend money on one's body and the overall commodification of beauty, is also present in this third chapter. So, the entanglement of work, the body, and beauty are recurring, and problematise the positivist feelings the natural hair movement expresses itself by. Both chapters connect hair practices to socio-cultural issues of labour, beauty, race and class. Indeed, curly hair is also full of pressures, and the need to spend considerable time on one's hair, remains in both curly and straight hair discourse (Mears 2014: 1332).

To conclude, I position myself and my research between the black and white discourse that is fairly prominent in feminist, race and beauty academia. Dominican mestizo and black women do not fit into one category, they are neither fully black, nor fully white, and this creole lifestyle is reflected in their daily lives (Yelvington 2010: 109). Latin American afro descendants are academically understudied and misunderstood. Their hair culture is the perfect example. I want to fill this gap that Caribbean scholars also noticed, by drawing an ethnographic story, by which I tell stories of hair to represent the lives reality of the women living in the Dominican Republic.

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