

From the kitchen to the parlor: Language and becoming in African American women's hair care. Lanita Jacobs-Huey (2006)

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Reviewed by Jennifer Roth-Gordon

In *From the Kitchen to the Parlor*, Lanita Jacobs-Huey wants you to learn from her mistakes. For example, hair stylists are not hairdressers. They do not 'dress' the hair; they cultivate it. And in a professional salon, the hair is shampooed, not washed, the latter action being reserved for dogs. These linguistic 'breaches' serve to introduce a study of African American women's hair care and the identity construction of African American clients, stylists, and other hair professionals. In this multisited ethnographic study, Jacobs-Huey travels to beauty salons, hair educational seminars, stylists' Bible study meetings, hair fashion shows, cosmetology schools, comedy clubs, and the Internet to investigate the relationship between hair and language. Her research probes the role of hair in black women's identities, communities, and the workplace, to ask when 'Hair is just hair' and when it takes on political meanings that suggest that 'Hair is not just hair' (4). As a participant-observer, she shares the ways in which she is socialized into appropriate language use around hair care, ending (in Chapter 7) with a theoretical discussion of conducting 'native' anthropology. Along the way, she brings discourse analysis to the study of language socialization, identity construction, and gendered political economy.

As Jacobs-Huey illustrates, African American hair stylists and salon owners face particular kinds of challenges to their professional identity construction. The 'kitchen' in her title is double-voiced and steeped in African American

Affiliation

Department of Anthropology, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ 85721-0030, USA
email: jenrothg@email.arizona.edu

cultural and linguistic traditions, as it refers both to the hair above the neck (which has the thickest texture) and the place where most African American women learn about hair care. Professional stylists find themselves constantly working against the historical tradition of 'kitchen beauticians,' who acquire lots of hair-care experience and knowledge from years of doing family members and friends' hair, in addition to their own. In the struggle to attract and retain clients, stylists need to convince African American women to pay for a service that is frequently performed at home. Language thus becomes an important part of the socialization into, and professionalization of, hair salons. In Chapter 1, the author uses discourse analysis to unpack the talk around one particular haircut in a salon. In this encounter, the client and the stylist (who is, incidentally, Jacobs-Huey's mother) negotiate expert and novice identities through linguistic strategies such as indirectness to blur the boundaries between their assigned roles and acknowledge the opinions and expertise they both bring to the encounter. Her main point, that language is central to their construction of themselves as hair experts, carries over into Chapters 2 and 3, which investigate talk in hair-care seminars, cosmetology schools, and Bible study meetings. In these contexts, hair-care students are socialized into professional linguistic behavior that draws on religious and scientific discourses to endow them with status and authority.

If hair is central to the identity construction of African American women at home and in the salon, it is also crucial in the deceptively 'disembodied' and anonymous space of online discourse. Taking a heated discussion on the AFROAM-L listserv as her topic in Chapter 5, Jacobs-Huey finds that race and gender performances take on new significance, as participants must work to demonstrate appropriate cultural and linguistic knowledge. This comes through most clearly in a challenge the author receives from the listserv owner, who asks in an example of strategic indirectness, 'BTW: How do you wear your hair?' before granting access to the listserv archives. This chapter provides an excellent illustration of how to conduct discourse analysis on electronic speech communities and Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) – an increasingly important topic as their numbers and influence rapidly proliferate. Jacobs-Huey's discussion of how discourse styles and conventions are employed through graphic means in online posts (using punctuation, capitalization, electronic signatures, etc.) is especially useful to students investigating 'virtual' discourse for class papers and projects. Despite the computer-mediated form of communication, there is a visceral reality to (and nothing virtual about) the discussion analyzed here. As participants debate various African American hairstyles, their conversation juxtaposes the visibility of African American women (in particular), who are forced to represent blackness everywhere they go, with the normality and individuality of white women. Even as they fight

for their own empowerment through hairstyle choices (and silence individual white women involved in the debate), the voices of African American women reveal the power of whiteness to set the very terms of debate.

This discussion leads into one of the most insightful chapters of the book. In Chapter 6, Jacobs-Huey opens her investigation of cross-cultural (and cross-racial) hair testimonies with the Ruth Sherman Nappy Hair controversy, in which a white teacher was forced out of her classroom for reading students of color a story about 'nappy' hair. As Jacobs-Huey convincingly argues, this incident involved more than just 'political correctness gone amok' (128). With provocative examples from cross-racial encounters in her own work, Jacobs-Huey details the ways in which African American women must constantly reposition themselves in relation to white women. When African American women's hair is seen as difficult to work with or hard to learn, black women are quick to quip that 'Hair is just hair' to protest their stigmatization. When white women are too quick to jump into the fray, without sufficient cultural, historical, or linguistic knowledge, they can find themselves tripping over the 'other n-word,' as Ruth Sherman did. In these contexts, African American women strongly assert, 'Hair is not just hair.' Jacobs-Huey's analysis of these white women's cross-racial forays is sympathetic but firm: 'I wish to suggest that Black women's resistance to or outright rejection of these women's well-intentioned speech and action might also be read as an explicit call to white women to interrogate where they fit vis-à-vis Black women in the racial and cultural divide in the United States' (128). As such, this chapter provides an excellent example of how conversation analysis can take up the challenge of Third-Wave feminism, interrogating how race and gender work together, and yet simultaneously, at odds.

From the Kitchen to the Parlor is a fascinating exploration into the intersection of gender and critical race studies that highlights, in particular, the impacts of institutionalized sexism and racism. While the author does not make this point explicitly, her data powerfully illustrates African American women's vulnerability. In terms of making a living and turning a profit, hair care is one of the few arenas open to female African American entrepreneurs, and even within this realm, racism and sexism limit both the breadth of their clientele and the depth of their pockets. And yet, African American hair care is now a multibillion-dollar industry that directs most of its money into white hands. In daily life, however, as this work painstakingly shows, the dynamics of this white-on-black exploitation play out most acutely through the struggles between African American women. As stylists fight to distinguish themselves from the lure and expertise of 'kitchen beauticians,' attention is diverted away from the fact that it is white racism that inevitably structures this divide and limits African American's ability to bring new revenue into their communities.

There is something deeply disturbing about watching African American women negotiate the price of a salon hair style, pay \$50 to attend professional hair conferences, and promote the use of expensive hair products – presumably sold most often by white companies. And as Geneva Smitherman and others have noted, it would be impossible to calculate the profit that white people continue to generate through the marketing, selling, and appropriating of black language and culture. It is not the author's intention here to diminish the agentic ways in which African American women negotiate their hair and their identities as black women. And yet, institutionalized racism seeps through every corner of this narrative, from African American women turning to science and religion to authorize their speech and their profession to African American men and women debating questions of authenticity and whitewashing online and African American comedians playing burned scalps and 'borrowed' hair for laughs (as discussed in Chapter 4).

The fact that African American women wear their race in their hair is something that white people (men and women) know but rarely understand. African American women are made hypervisible through their hairstyles, where 'individual' choices inescapably racialize and sexualize them, locating them in space and in time. The politics of this visibility remain remarkably undertheorized. How do we explain the white women who look longingly at the versatility of African American women's hair, swinging their own golden locks as if through nervous twitch, while letting their white daughters bead and braid their hair as souvenirs of vacations at the beach? Following up on Jacobs-Huey's brilliant discussion of the 'Nappy Hair' controversy, there is a lot left to explore here in the fundamentally transracial negotiation of African American hair. While hair of all kinds is 'cultivated,' the hypervisibility of black hair must be constructed. Just as African American women are not likely to acquire full control over their hair-care industry anytime soon, as black people and as women, they have never retained uninterrupted power to determine its meaning or its worth. The question remains how to introduce critical accounts of white power in a way that retains the focus on how African American women powerfully shape – but also must reckon with – meanings about their own hair.

And yet, it is hard to fault a multisited ethnography such as this for not taking on additional sites. Jacobs-Huey's is an excellent study of race, language, and gender, ethnographic discourse analysis, language socialization, and 'native' anthropology. It asks provocative questions about the role of language and the topic of hair in the co-construction of race and gender. Like any good work, it points us in the right direction and whets our appetite for more.