

2010

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Recommended Citation

Ashe, Bertram. "Invisible Dread, from Twisted: The Dreadlock Chronicles." In *Blackberries and Redbones: Critical Articulations of Black Hair/body Politics in Africana Communities*, edited by Regina E. Spellers and Kimberly R. Moffitt, 53-66. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2010.

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Chapter 3

Invisible Dread

From *Twisted: The Dreadlock Chronicles*

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This excerpt traces the issues and process surrounding the dreadlocking of an African-American professor's hair. The personal history leading up to the decision to grow locks is briefly addressed, as is the experience of getting twisted for the first time and some reactions to the new hairstyle. *Twisted* discusses issues of cultural authenticity and academic nonconformity. It examines dreadlocks as a pathway to explore black identity, but in opposing ways: the act of locking ones hair does display unconventional blackness—but it also participates in a preexisting black style. To what extent, the excerpt asks, can the adoption of a hairstyle allow the wearer to nonverbally “speak,” particularly when the hairstyle “says” something completely opposite the wearer's demeanor? Finally, through various reactions to the altered hairstyle, Ashe explores the boundaries between personal style and preexisting conceptions of style possessed by the world at large.

And yet there is something arresting about the episode: the writer sitting in his green retreat dutifully attaching words to natural facts, trying to tap the subterranean flow of thought and feeling and then, suddenly, the startling shriek of the train whistle bearing in upon him, forcing him to acknowledge the existence of a reality alien to the pastoral dream. What begins as a conventional tribute to the pleasures of withdrawal from the world—a simple pleasure fantasy—is transformed by the interruption of the machine into a far more complex state of mind.

—Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden:
Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*, 1964

I walked in and immediately faded to black. I thought the place was called Twist and Shout, but it turned out that wasn't exactly true. It was Twist and Shout *Global Village*. As I pulled

up and parked in front, I could see the shop took up a vast corner of a squat downtown Long Beach building. Railway tracks next to the building carried light-rail riders all the way to downtown Los Angeles. I entered cautiously, not knowing quite what to expect, at twelve noon, straight up. The shop turned out to be a much bigger space than I thought I'd see. A few dreadlocked men and women milled about inside, mostly standing in front and behind a soda-stand that took up much of the back wall.

The vibe was mellow. Caribbean islanders grinned down at me from the walls. Reggae music gently coated the atmosphere, and either everyone was truly in good spirits or I was projecting that good feeling onto everyone. One or two customers browsed a glass sales counter that contained a few hair-care products, but was mostly covered with a selection of mud-cloths, kente cloth, and lock-ties. I walked through the door, and I faded to black—adapting, adjusting, stepping into the room's groove as if I had arrived late to a party where the roof had already been torn off.

Not that there was any actual twisting and shouting going on in Twist and Shout. No, I'm talking about the *blackness* inside the space. The decibel level was low, all right, but the cultural noise was blasting at full volume—the Africanist v.u. meters were pegging into the red. And as I stood there inside the shop, I couldn't help wondering how much of the shop was inside me. I wore no kente, no African medallion. I wore no t-shirt that said, *It's a Black Thing, You Wouldn't Understand*, or *Black By Popular Demand*. I was wearing what I always wore, my suburban uniform: Levi's, sneakers, and a long-sleeved, buttoned-down Oxford shirt. The colors, I assure you, were not red, black, and green. Nevertheless, when I walked into Twist and Shout on that late July Saturday, I stepped, as best I knew how, into the spicy black rhythm of the place. I walked around, casing the joint, taking it all in. Off to the side, in a far corner, almost as an afterthought, were the chairs where hair-stylists stood, where customers sat, where hair got "done."

I ambled over to the wide, pane-glass window that faced the street and stood for a few moments, my back to the glass, feeling soothing sunshine on my neck and shoulders. Just inside the window was a small, recycled-water fountain surrounded by a few plants and rocks, an island of manufactured nature in the midst of commerce. There was a line of folding chairs on either side of the fountain, set up for clients waiting their turn.

I sat in one of those chairs. And sat. And sat. Waiting. Although it was true that I had entered the shop on time, in one sense I was a little early—about five months early, actually. One Monday morning that previous spring I had stepped, dripping wet, into the mirror. Having just turned off the shower, I stood there, immobile, gazing at my reflection, focusing on the space of air just above my forehead, just past my temples, just below my ears. My hair at the time was about a quarter of an inch thick—standard, factory-issue Negro hair, clipped a few weeks earlier into an all-too-basic haircut. I looked past it, trying to imagine thick, angry, rebellious locks of hair cascading past my shoulders.

I'd followed this ritual for a long time, easily since the 1970s turned into the 1980s—my undergraduate years. Every once in a while I'd stand and gaze into the looking glass, peering into an uncertain future style. Like most college-aged kids, I tried hard to be different—as long as I didn't call too much attention to myself. I had the usual hang-ups college kids have, jerking back and forth between difference and conformity. I grew up in the sheltered suburbs of Los Angeles, and then went to a state school, San Jose State University, where black students ranged from the middle-class few to the working-class many. It was the late 1970s, after all, and the school was stuffed with fresh, new affirmative-action babies. I pledged a fraternity, hung out occasionally at the student union, did the "freak" at P-Funk parties like everybody else (though never too flamboyantly, lest someone actually notice me), but I was always on

the edges, on the margins; I liked it there. I felt most comfortable dancing on the fringes of the school's black society. Friends would tell me they had to work hard when speaking of me to others. Sometimes they'd refer to me as "the guy who likes rock n' roll"; other times they'd say, "You know, the guy who plays jazz on the college radio station." I was invisible. And back then it wasn't even Ralph Ellisonian invisibility: it wasn't a matter of people seeing what they wanted to see when they saw me. I mean I was invisible: as in literally, willfully transparent. I was there, but not there. I was on the scene, but not seen. I was aware of dreadlocks, of course—the woman who lived across the hall in my dormitory was as big a Bob Marley fan as was possible. But on my head was an all-too-conventional short natural. I was in style, I suppose. But I was imprisoned in style. It wasn't my choice. It was conformity's choice.

My first real flirtation with dreadlocks happened while I was working as a radio disc jockey in Louisiana starting in 1983. Dreadlocks was standoffish, and did not respond to my flirtation at all. Actually, I'm not sure I could have gone through with it then, anyway. One reason was that I was dating a Caribbean woman who was adamant that dreadlocks were solely a sacred mode of expression for the Rastafari. She argued passionately that my wearing dreadlocks without "wearing" the religion would be a massive cultural insult. And I believed her. I thought that made sense. I really don't think that was the drop-dead reason, but it was a factor. Probably more like an excuse. I just wasn't ready.

For practical reasons, I couldn't get dreading from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, either. I was, after all, a corporate boy—first in real life, then on video. After my radio career ended I wore a short, sharp cut, a coat, and tie while working at a market research firm in Richmond, Virginia. And after leaving actual corporate life I began virtual corporate life as an actor while attending graduate school. I wore a suit and tie in most of my roles; no matter how much I tried to expand my range, I usually ended up playing a loan officer or a banker or some other white collar worker in corporate instructional videos or commercials. Fact is, actors with dreadlocks don't get much work. I gave up acting when I was hired as an assistant professor of English at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts, in the fall of 1996. Because I grew up in the 'burbs, I'd been around and familiar with white folks my whole life; I was surprised, then, to find that shortly after I started teaching at this New England liberal arts college I began to feel somewhat uneasy about just how comfortable I felt on-campus. I experienced none of the alienating distance that I'd so often heard my darker-hued colleagues complain about. Surely, I would have felt any overt racism directed my way—except that there *was* no overt racism directed my way. Everyone was friendly and obliging, calm and accepting. I actually felt like I fit in. Perhaps, I began to feel, *too* far "in." And so, not long after I began my professorial career, I began looking in the mirror more often, imagining my head with dreadlocks.

For well over a year, every chance I got, I stared at my head in the mirror. Sometimes I was able to imagine it, sometimes not. Every now and then hair would shoot out—imaginary fast-motion photography would morph my near-baldie into a head of hair you could lose a hand in. That's what happened that morning, months before, that led to me waiting and waiting some more at Twist and Shout. Maybe I was able to imagine it that particular morning because of a secret development I had that day, a certain plot twist: I'd last cut my hair near the end of February. So on that first Monday of March in 1998, I decided I wasn't going to cut my hair again for a long, long time. I said it aloud, my mirror image forming the words as the sound broke bathroom silence: "I'm growing dreadlocks."

The words changed nothing. No thunderclap, no lightning, no rumbling, ominous music slowing emerging from underneath the scene. I simply said it aloud, and then said it again. "I'm growing dreadlocks." No one knew. And no one would guess. As short as my hair

was, the idea that I was growing dreadlocks would seem as absurd as an asthmatic fat boy insisting he was going to run the marathon. My hair was longer than it had been a couple of weeks earlier but it was still very, very short. When I stood in the bathroom and blinked and my hair shrank back to reality, I laughed at the notion. Dreadlocks. Please.

But since the early 1980s, thanks to people like Alice Walker, Whoopi Goldberg, Lenny Kravitz, and Toni Morrison—as well as plenty of local dread iconoclasts—dreadlocks weren't seen as solely worn by Rastafarians and reggae musicians. They all opened up a dread cultural wormhole, and as I stood and smiled at myself-in-the-mirror that early March, I decided that I was going to aim straight for that wormhole, hoping to safely hit the brakes on the other side of the black hair universe. I'd said I was going to wait a year and just let it grow so I would have really long hair once I went to a locktician, but it wasn't long before I was impatiently twitching, itching get *on* with it. And so it was that at my wife's suggestion, and while I was in Los Angeles for my family's reunion, I made an appointment to get my head twisted. I just couldn't wait any longer. I asked my sister about it, and she recommended that I get it done at Twist and Shout by a woman named B.J. From the time we set the date I could hardly think of anything else. Yes, I was getting twisted about five months before I'd planned and, because of that, well, no, my hair wasn't as long as I originally thought it would be. But I liked the idea of having locks—legitimate, locked-up, for-real-deal “locks”—sooner, as well.

And so there I sat, a Twist and Shout Global Villager, waiting for B.J. I had plenty of time to consider the significance of the nearby railroad tracks (even if it they were laid through an urban garden) and the trickling water fountain (even if it was artificially constructed). Staring into the pool, I thought about John the Baptist, for some reason, gently laying sinners backward into a natural body of water. And long before Christ was born, I recalled, African peoples used water for their own rites: cleansing rituals, perhaps, or as libation, as a way to honor ancestors. Paule Marshall (1983) used water four ways at once in her novel *Praisesong for the Widow*: Avey Johnson traveled in a boat on her way to a celebration on the island of Carriacou; she lost control of her own “water” along the way; she was, shortly thereafter, soothingly, ritualistically bathed; and finally she emerged, fully prepared for the ultimate use of water: rebirth.

I had all the time in the world to idly spin symbols around my own personal sense of dread exploration, my own sense of stylistic rebirth that would grow out of getting, at long last, my hair twisted into starter dreadlocks. I had all this time to think *because B.J. was a full hour late for my appointment!* I was sitting by the fountain, bored stupid and getting more pissed off by the minute. I had drained my peachy drink. I had seen all there was to see in the room long before now. And so I sat, waiting. And waiting. And waiting—fighting, all along, to remain somewhere close to good spirits.

It had, after all, been a long, curious few months of growth. Because I had worn my hair very short for a very long time, people close to me who hadn't seen me for awhile struggled to deal with my longer hair. I'd spent that summer of 1998 dashing back and forth across the country and up and down the East Coast. May was particularly busy. I drove my family—wife, daughter, son—down to Virginia for my Ph.D. graduation from the College of William and Mary. A few days after we returned from Richmond, I flew to San Diego to present a paper at the American Literature Association conference. Of the two road trips, the graduation party, at Winnie's Caribbean Cuisine in downtown Richmond, was the place where I received the most intense reaction to my increasingly lengthy hair. Most attending friends and family hadn't seen me for a year or two, and those who had seen me as recently as a few months before were still stunned at how long my hair was. Come to think of it, if I had been a guest at my own graduation party I would have been shocked at myself. It's not that hair growth, in and

of itself, is that unusual. I mean, let's face it: but for pattern baldness, hair emerges; that's its job. People shape and style it to their preference, or they completely ignore it, but hair does, indeed, grow. What else would it do?

But I had relentlessly cut my hair so close for so long that I guess friends and family had certain expectations. When, by way of their ears or neural impulse, "Bert Ashe" appeared in their brains, they'd open a file that contained all they knew and remembered about me, and apparently the visual space in that file had me in the close haircut I'd sported for so many years. Must have been, because folks were mighty surprised that I had altered that expected visual. For instance, I had just emerged from the rental car and was standing on the sidewalk outside Winnie's, ready to go inside, when one brother asked me about the length of my hair. I deadpanned something about how it was as short as ever just last week, and that it had grown this long virtually over night. We stood there, silently staring at each other for several seconds, during which I swear I could see Belief, the challenger, and Disbelief, the reigning champion, leave their respective corners and move out onto the surface of this brother's face, gloves raised, ready to get down. When I finally grinned, effectively declaring that Disbelief had retained his crown, the brother looked kind of hurt, as if I had made a fool of him. And I suppose I had, although that wasn't my intention.

To most of the inquiries I replied that the length was symbolic; it marked the occasion of my receiving my Ph.D. "You know the way some players—or teams—will shave their heads before a big game?" I said a few times, "well, this is roughly equivalent—but I couldn't shave my head because that would have been too close to what I'd always done. So I went in the opposite direction." They bought it, even though it was only partly true. Actually, I had shaved off my mustache and goatee for symbolic reasons. My bald face brought comments, too.

As it turned out, it wasn't so much the length of my hair that everyone found so peculiar, although in Richmond it certainly was that as well. No, what was odd—and completely unexpected—was that people in Worcester and in Richmond and in San Diego, people who'd known me for the space of a conference weekend (scholars I met for the first time in San Diego), people who'd known me for a couple of years (Holy Cross colleagues), people who'd known me for a few more years than that (William and Mary professors), and people who'd know me for long years (professors from Virginia Commonwealth University, where I got my masters degree), even people who've known me all my life (my *sister*, for Pete's sake)—all had their eyes affixed to the gray at my temples more than anything else. And what almost all of them said, in one way or another, was that it was "distinguished" and, sometimes in the next breath, that it was "professorial."

Ah, yes, "professorial." *Professorial*. I first realized what a squishy mess "professorial" was back when my hair was still close-cut and conservative. I read a revealing article on-line in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* titled, "Frumpy or Chic? Tweed or Kente? Sometimes Clothes Make the Professor." (At the time, I had no idea that the term "professorial" would, within months, be repeatedly hurled at me, although far more as a compliment than an epithet.) "There are semiotic codes of dress, makeup, and hair that say things about your allegiances," declared Wayne Koestenbaum, an English professor at City University of New York. He's right, whether those codes refer to what grows out of one's head or the shoes on one's feet—and the stakes are high indeed for the soles of black folk. "If you wear a pair of classic trousers and no kente cloth, that makes a statement," said Nell Painter, a black historian at Princeton. "And if you wear kente cloth, *that* makes a statement" (Schneider, 1998).

"My difficulty with that," retorted Karla F.C. Holloway, a professor at Duke University, "is that it makes the other parts of you invisible—your scholarship, your intellect, your seriousness." Holloway, as a result, won't go casual, and here she speaks for many blacks: "Casualness

has never been part of our professional demeanor,” she said. “Maybe because we can’t afford to make it part of our professional demeanor” (Schneider, 1998). The price tag, then, for “professorial” considerations is pretty steep.

But if there’s a fashion region in which dreadlocks live, it’s definitely in the hemisphere of the casual. Dreadlocks grabs “sharpness” by the throat, body-slams it, and throws it into the dumpster. Suit-coat lapels, shirt collars, and creases-in-slacks can be reduced, really, to straight lines, acute angles and pin-points—and each correspond with the carefully carved “lines” that barbers expertly cut into black hairlines. Dreadlocks? Dreadlocks are blurry, they’re fuzzy; if a short haircut is twelve noon or midnight, dreads are hanging out at dawn—or dusk. A tight, well-cut ‘do is a crisp, cold New England morning; dreads are Los Angeles during a rush-hour smog alert: they’re hazy, at best. And more than that, they’re threatening. Robin D.G. Kelley, a historian at N.Y.U., was waiting for his hair to lock up when he was interviewed for that on-line *Chronicle* story. Kelley has always projected a genial sense of cool, but he also feels he’s paid for that cool: “At every stage in my career, youth and informality—in dress, in appearance, in presentation—have been the bane of my existence. Professors take me less seriously.” It was Kelley who, in the article, soberly suggested that “‘People lose their jobs over how they style their hair.’ A big Afro is associated with late-’60s radicalism, while straightened hair signals that you’re a ‘serious sell-out white wannabe.’ Braids, dreadlocks, and shaved heads give the impression that you’ve got a chip on your shoulder. ‘When I had my hair short, I was a safe Negro,’ Dr. Kelley says. Now he’s growing dreadlocks . . .” (Schneider, 1998).

Some of the professors interviewed—and many of the dozens who weighed into the on-line colloquy in response to the article—seemed to have difficulty fitting into what would be considered an appropriately “professorial” image. Others questioned exactly what that image was. But just beneath the surface of the article was an exploration of that painful space between a recent hire’s first attempt to fit the *role* of “professor,” and eventual success. The bottom line is that although it takes time and struggle for some, sooner or later professors must finally find their own conception of being “professorial”; they must find their own way to credibly perform the role of professor.

I never had that problem. I’m human; certainly I had my adjustments to make when I arrived at Holy Cross, but struggling with performing the role of professor simply was not one of them. My years as a corporate manager had put me in the groove, had given me a credible jazz “head” off which I could solo and riff in the academy. I knew what I would wear; I knew what my in-class demeanor would be; I knew what my syllabi and classroom policies and pedagogical stances would look like. Still, I suppose the crucial question was this: how much did my immediate success in the role of professor have to do with the (external) expectations of my colleagues and students combined with my own (internal) comfort zone? The two must have blended; there must have been some overlap, or else I would have struggled, as well.

And anyway, even if the absence of gray at my temples meant that I didn’t look classically professorial when I started at Holy Cross (if, indeed, my blackness allowed for that possibility at all), my part-time acting career had been fairly instructive. Fact is, the reason I got so many calls for corporate gigs as an actor was because I somehow happened to have “the look.” Apparently, I fit America’s popular idea of what a black corporate manager should look like. I was a serviceable actor, surely; that didn’t hurt. But it was “the look” that made me especially attractive to casting directors and on-the-set corporate consultants. It was a short leap to appearing “professorial” on campus. But this whole image game, on-set and off, eventually started to wear on me. “I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind,” wrote Ellison in the prologue to *Invisible Man*. “I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard,

distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me” (Ellison, 1989).

Oh, I have little doubt I walked the Holy Cross campus as an exceedingly professorial young prof., largely, I suppose, because I *felt* professorial. I’m sure my performance was convincing; it was an easy role to play. As I said, the liberal arts college environment fit me almost a little too snugly. And anyway, as I mingled, chatting up my guests at my graduation party, I was far more interested in what these folk *meant* by “professorial,” what that image sustained in their heads, than the relative ease with which I might have matched that image. My response to the Grayness Question was, most of the time, “Well, yeah, but you’re only seeing the gray now because I let it grow. I’m telling you, it was there all the time, it was just cut short.” It was in the midst of a conversation with Paule Marshall, as a result of her complimenting me on how distinguished and professorial I looked as we sat at adjacent tables at Winnie’s that I realized—and I shared it with her when it occurred to me—that it’s entirely possible the gray *wasn’t* there all along, that I *was* more gray than I used to be, that even though it was cut short, my long hair could very well have been revealing a relatively recent growth of gray. I thought, at the time, about that *Seinfeld* episode in which Elaine Benes dated a guy who had been shaving his head completely bald for some years. She was curious, so she asked him, “What do you look like with hair?” She eventually nagged and teased him into growing it back—but he couldn’t. During the space of time he’d been shaving his head, he’d been slowly going bald and never knew it. He was appalled, to little surprise. (Predictably, Elaine, for her part, quickly lost interest in him.) Similarly, although my hair was, for years, too short for me to be aware of it, I do think my temples were slowly graying (certainly the preferred option if I had to choose between Elaine’s boy’s “development” and mine). It only told on me when I let it grow. What made it all so secretly amusing was that all this fuss over my increasingly bushy Afro was only a prologue to the main part of the narrative: dreadlocks. So virtually every time someone said something about me looking “professorial,” I would conspiratorially chuckle to myself, thinking, *Enjoy this look now, homes—’cause pretty soon I’m going to shed this skin, too*. Before my parents left Richmond we went back to Winnie’s Caribbean Cuisine for dinner. Just before the waitress brought our food a man with grimy, messy locks—he looked to be either a delivery man or someone who bussed tables at the restaurant—walked in and headed directly to the rear of the restaurant. My mother, a snicker at the back of her throat, nodded at him and said, “You going to have something like that?” It was hard to tell whether I was talking to my mother or to myself when, after I watched him quietly for a moment or two, I softly said, “Could be . . .”

The minutes ticked by; I forced myself to stay calm. I flexed my hands so that I wouldn’t clench my fists. I kept my jaw slack so that I wouldn’t grind my teeth. I fixed my eyes straight ahead so that I wouldn’t roll them in disgust. I was sitting there, concentrating on keeping my breathing regular, trying to keep my heartbeat steady, when, into this languid space, with the soft reggae playing, the water trickling through the pool, the quiet conversation across the room, B.J., an example of human locomotion if there ever was one, powered through the door—much like the introduction of a noisy machine into a previously placid garden. She entered talking, pointing, bearing food, wrapping her smock, her thin dreadlocks nearly horizontal as she whipped her head in one direction or another, moving here and there about the room before following her head to me: “Hello, I’m B.J., pleased to meet you, I’m sorry I was delayed.” She briefly met my eyes before her eyes began critically interrogating my hair from crown to kitchen, left ear to right ear, and back again to repeat. Twist and Shout became a Global Village indeed when B.J. returned to fill up the space.

I was wary. An hour is an hour, after all. But she did apologize, and I was finding it hard to resist what I can only call her vivid, pulsating life-force, her *ashé*. And anyway, I didn’t want to feel down on this day, of all days.

She invited me to get into her chair, and I accepted. Just as I was settling into it, I heard a woman say, "That's going to look good."

I looked up. I blinked. I'd never seen this woman before in my life. Her twists were wet, she was wearing a protective smock; she was obviously someone also getting her hair worked on who had wandered over from one of the other chairs to offer that fusion of compliment and encouragement, apparently because it seemed to her the thing to do. For me, it measured the difference between barber shops and beauty parlors. (Although this hair place was no ordinary black beauty parlor, by any means: no one was getting their hair fried, dyed, and laid to the side). It had been a while since I'd spent time in a hair joint, barber shop or otherwise. Before I began cutting my own hair, I'd regularly go to a barber shop in Shockoe Bottom, in downtown Richmond. I witnessed brothers receiving comments from men sitting in waiting chairs, but I never heard "That's going to look good." What I heard was, "Forget about your hair, son—where'd you get that *head* from?! That ain't no forehead, it's a *fivehead*!" And just as the laughter would begin to die down, somebody'd mutter something like, "Oughta call that nigger 'headquarters.'" That sort of ritualistic insult was far more likely. Storytelling, too. And spirited discussions about topics that merited a spirited discussion, mixed in with spirited discussions about all sorts of things that really didn't merit discussion at all—spirited or otherwise.

"Glad you think so," I replied to the woman, smiling at her. We were about eye level, me in the chair and her standing inches away, but her eyes were on my hair as she continued to gaze with a curious intensity all over my head, as if she expected it to change form right before her eyes. It occurred to me that it soon would, at that. Another woman was in the third chair, waiting for B.J. to give her a shampoo and re-twist. Soon enough B.J. squared off and addressed my head. "Yes," she agreed with the first woman, "this *is* going to look good." She gave me a white smock to wear. Then she led me around the corner to get my head shampooed. Now, I'd seen plenty of television and movie scenes in which women received shampoos. Movies like, well, *Shampoo*—and countless Prell and Head and Shoulder commercials, as well. Even though the women almost always wore ecstatic, rapturous looks on their faces, I still wasn't prepared for just how pleasurable an experience that shampoo would be. I leaned back and placed my neck in the bend of the porcelain sink. B.J. sprayed my hair, getting it wet in preparation. Once she began, the feeling wasn't so terribly different from when I would shampoo my own hair, but everything else surrounding that feeling was wildly surprising: I could hear and feel the water on my head, trickling past my ears. It felt peculiar, ticklish and lush at the same time. I felt as if I was being fully immersed, even though I was fully clothed. I closed my eyes, which only heightened the sensations: the unexpected introduction of the cool shampoo, B.J.'s exploratory fingers massaging my scalp in one direction or another; I didn't know which sensation I would feel next—a rinse? more shampoo? more kneading?—and I didn't care. I surrendered all.

After awhile B.J. tapped my shoulder, and said, "Rise." I rose. After wrapping my head in a white towel, she led me back to her chair. Then she placed a plastic cap on my head and disappeared (I'm glad I couldn't see what I looked like; I'm sure I would have looked as ridiculous as I felt). I was completely at ease, however, and I sat and chatted about books and authors with the two women in their seats. B.J. returned and worked on one woman and then the other. After about 20 minutes, she removed my cap and asked me what thickness I wanted my dreadlocks to be. "About as thick as my little finger," I said, showing her. "Something like that." B.J.'s dreadlocks were extremely tiny, and I thought I wanted mine a little fatter.

"So. Let me get this straight," B.J. declared. Her voice, though pleasant-sounding enough, could surely cut straight through marble. "I'm going to give you a dry twist, and then you're

leaving? going back to where?" B.J. was unhappy that I was leaving Los Angeles in a few days to go back to Massachusetts. She was bothered that she wouldn't be able to take me all the way through what she called "the locking process." Before I left, she gave me the name and address of a place in Washington, D.C. that shared her locking philosophy. I told her about a place in Worcester called Roots 'n Locks that I had in mind for maintenance, but B.J. was dismissive; she was certain that they'd want to use chemicals. That was definitely not part of B.J.'s locking philosophy. "Bert, you do not want to let those people put chemicals in your hair. That nasty waxy stuff." She sharply sucked air through her teeth in disgust. "Sometimes they even put lemon juice in there." She was very explicit about just how disgusting my hair would turn out if I allowed that. "It's a shortcut, and it's not necessary," she insisted. "It's just not natural."

Then she started twisting. Before long, she didn't seem as concerned about maintenance. "Something in your hair just seems to grab," she said, with something in her voice that sounded like wonder. Beginning at my back hairline and advancing toward my forehead, she took small portions of my hair and gathered it in a fine-toothed comb, and then twirled the comb, and when she stopped and pulled the comb away, the "twist" remained. Then she went on to the next small portion of hair.

It took about an hour and a half. She's from Michigan, and we talked about that. I weighed in on living in New England, among other things. Finally, I steered the conversation to what I was really thinking about: black hair. She had a lot on her mind. For one thing, when the Bible says that Jesus' hair was "like wool" (Revelations 1:14). She believes he had dreadlocks. I left that one alone. Maybe he did, maybe he didn't, but beliefs are what they are, and most people just can't discuss them, because, really, how do you justify a belief? The wiser move is to simply not go there, whatever it is. So, maybe because so many people kept coming up and telling me how good my hair looked, I asked her whether black folks' historical notions of "good" and "bad" hair are completely flipped upside-down when it comes to dreadlocks. In other words, although people usually take "nappy" to mean "bad," and "straight" to mean "good," didn't, oddly enough, in this instance, "nappy" mean . . . "good"?

In the mirror, I saw her smile. "Yes, in this case, 'good hair' is 'bad hair' and 'bad hair' is 'good hair.' But it's all good hair to me," she said. "I don't use those terms, and when people in my chair use them I have to straighten them out." I believed her.

Most importantly, I finally received an answer to the one question that usually got me shrugs or a baffled "I don't know": why—how—does black hair "lock up"? "After all," I said, as B.J.'s hands continued to comb and twist, comb and twist, "the hair is out of our heads, right? So how does it happen?—*why* does it happen?"

She said that dreadlocks would naturally occur if we didn't do anything to our hair. "This hairstyle is truly 'natural,'" she said, speaking the words literally in the same instant she twisted yet another section of hair, apparently completely unaware of the irony of her words. She spoke to the "why" of dreadlocks this way: "African hair grows in circles."

If she said something next, I never heard it. I had already begun free-associating: I was thinking of Frederick Douglass (1982) and his "within the circle" description of African-American culture in his 1845 *Narrative*; I was thinking of the black vernacular tradition and the way black folk practice "group creation" (Gates & McKay, 1997), implying an unending circle of "call-and-response" (Caponi, 1999); I was thinking of prayer circle; I was thinking of the ring shout (Floyd, 1999); I was thinking, as well, of specific black "circles": Harlem Globetrotters at center court, twirling to "Sweet Georgia Brown," the round of solos in a jazz quintet, even the unending rotation of the Soul Train line—God, what an amazing metaphor for the black vernacular! Even our hair grows in circles!

It all made sense then. Physically, dreadlocks happen because the hair grows in circles: each solitary lock of hair creates an interdependent relationship by circling around other solitary locks of hair to create a group, a large, free-standing strand, a “lock,” which stands with other strands in order to become, finally, a full head of dread. As I sat in the chair, under B.J.’s practiced hands, I remember thinking that dreadlocks could be a way of visualizing the blended mixture of black strands of difference and reality. Over time the circular process of combining and mixing these cultural strands, running through and over and under and around each other, produces a chaotic-yet-coherent black whole: the dreadlock. In that sense, then, I’m wearing a prime metaphor for the rich diversity of blackness with every thin thread of hair that rotates up and out of my head. It “grows in circles.” Of course!

But now, hold on, wait a minute, I thought, as B.J.’s voice buzzed pleasantly in the background. In a sense, this hairdo is no more “natural” than the 1960s Afro. Let’s face it: it’s a style. Earlier that morning, just before driving to the hair shop, I had finished Albert Murray’s *The Hero and the Blues*. He put it this way: “What makes a blues idiom musician is not the ability to express RAW emotion with primitive directness, as is so often implied, but rather the mastery of elements of esthetics peculiar to U.S. Negro music. Blues musicians do not derive directly from the personal, social, and political circumstances of their lives as black people in the United States.” In exactly the same way people who decide they want dreadlocks come to that realization, at least in part, by having seen them on someone else’s head, blues musicians “derive most directly from styles of other musicians who play the blues,” writes Murray. “In art both agony and ecstasy are matters of stylization” (Murray, 1973).

It’s the same with black hair. Even the most “roots”-looking dread is participating in a specific “style.” The fact is, that which would look “natural” is consciously *styled* to look “natural.” And therefore is not, truly, “natural.” It’s a matter of style. “Not even the most spontaneous-seeming folk expression is artless,” writes Murray. These expressions, including a hair style, fit into what Murray calls “an esthetic system” (1973). The “system” was in place, then, when B.J. pointed to her own hair and asked if I wanted it like *this*, and I answered, relying on my own knowledge of the prevailing dreadlock “esthetic system,” No, I want it like *that*. The whole idea of the completely “natural” dreadlock style was detonated at that very moment, and somewhere in some parallel universe small, singed tufts of hair, little smoking naps, fallout from that exploded notion, slowly drifted down past our heads and shoulders, finally settling ankle-deep around B.J.’s chair as I sat and she twirled small sections of my hair. Anything truly “natural,” in other words, couldn’t be so carefully planned—chemicals or no chemicals. Dreadlocks are more like . . . *a garden*: natural elements shaped—twisted—into a specific and expected construction.

And if locks are like a garden, the presence of the wise and experienced lock-titian, a medium, really, makes for an unconscionably loud, if meticulously tuned, machine in the garden. And why not? After all, who wants “natural”? If I had, I’d’ve just stopped combing and washing my hair and let whatever happened happen. (Although, of course, even if I’d consciously let it grow “naturally,” in order to achieve a specific style, it still wouldn’t be truly “natural,” even then.) And anyway, why would I come to a hair stylist if I didn’t want my hair styled? I did. And it was! B.J. finished her dry twist shortly after she finished her lecture; she awarded me an instructional brochure, made a follow-up appointment for next Saturday afternoon, and sent me on my way.

I loved it. I thought it looked wonderful. I floated home as if on air. As I turned into the Palo Del Amo Woods, the Los Angeles County subdivision where I grew up, my mother, my father, and my two kids were waving at me as they turned out, on their way to the mall.

It wasn't until I actually reached home and stood in the driveway that I remembered I didn't have a house key. Thankfully, my father also realized it and doubled back to let me in.

He pulled into the driveway, turned off the engine, and handed me the keys. I unlocked the house and then, returning the keys, stood next to the car. My parents had familiar, somewhat weary, almost embattled looks on their faces, expressions I'd seen many times throughout my life. It was the same expression they wore when I came home from playing flag football at my junior high school with a badly broken nose, the victim of a mistimed double-reverse; or the time a German Shepherd I was calmly petting turned and bit clean through the webbing of my right ear; or when I told them I was dropping out of college half-way through my senior year to move to rural Louisiana to become a disc jockey. They're steely veterans, you might say. They're beyond surprise. But my children, Jordan and Garnet, quietly stared at me from the back seat, their mouths slightly open.

When she regained the power of speech, Jordan said, "It looks like a bunch of worms are growing out of your head." (She was right. It did look exactly that way.) "Does Mommy know about this?" she added suspiciously.

"Actually, it was Mommy's idea that I get it done here in L.A."

Jordan looked dubious, the little snickens.

Garnet just pointed, still speechless. But Jordan relentlessly cross-examined me from the back seat. "You really look different. Why did you do it? I liked you the way you were before. Didn't you like yourself the way you were before?"

"Sure," I replied. "I still like myself. But I wanted a different hairstyle. Don't you have different hairstyles from time to time?" She crossed her arms, her mouth set; she said nothing more.

They drove off; I went inside. I lounged magnificently around the house for the rest of the evening, a self-satisfied smirk creeping onto my face from time to time. Seemingly out of nowhere, I could be heard chuckling delightedly to myself now and then. For much of the evening I held my glorious head of hair so erect I was in danger of getting a stiff neck. I did have a difficult moment, though, when, per B.J.'s instructions, I actually put a shower cap over my delicate hair before stepping under the water. I tried to avoid the mirror before opening the shower door, but I failed.

I've always felt that the best way to observe a beautiful woman is to not look at her. I mean, sure, I look at her, I watch her, because she's beautiful and I want to enjoy the aesthetic beauty of the human form, the same way I'd look at a spectacular sunset or a gorgeous painting or a dazzling house or car or an extremely stylish or otherwise interesting-looking man, for that matter. But because I watch beautiful women, I've always felt that the best way to do it is by not looking at her, but by looking at the men around her. It's fascinating to watch women through the eyes of men. I've seen longing, I've seen deep pleasure in men's eyes as they watch a stunning woman. More than once I've seen a man relentlessly eye a woman's torso as if he thinks he can read words written on her body underneath her clothes.

I found myself using that strategy in order to "watch" my hair. I couldn't see my hair, of course—it was on top of my head, and my eyes, obviously, were looking out. So the only way I could "see" my hair was to watch the reaction of people who were looking at me. The only problem was that I often forgot I was wearing the hair style. In the same way a beautiful woman whose looks are not important to her might well forget she's beautiful until some leering jerk makes a point of reminding her, I was reminded that I was wearing an unusual hairstyle by the looks I'd get when people reacted to my hair. It put me in mind of my childhood, of when I used to torture my little brother, in ways that big brothers do, by

staring just above his head. It drove him crazy; so, of course, I kept doing it. Soon enough, I had trained myself: don't look at his face, look above his face; don't look into his eyes, look inches above his eyes, over his head, and wait patiently for him to dissolve. And so now, in a kind of karmic reversal, people were doing it to me—only they weren't staring at the space just above my crown, they were staring at the fuzzily furious tangle of hair growing out of my head like black weeds. It's almost as if my dreadlocks were a thick, matted Rorschach test; people looked at them and projected onto them what they would:

Riding northbound on the San Diego Freeway in the passenger seat of my college friend Keith's Volvo . . .

"I always wanted to do that," he admitted, glancing up at my hair as he accelerated slightly, the rush-hour traffic as tight as naps on an uncombed head. "But see, it might disturb business. I'm a mortgage broker, man; I have to go into people's homes," he explained, as if dreadlocks was a communicable disease, as if potential clients, fearing contamination, would fearfully shout at him from behind locked doors to go away.

Standing in the living room of the house where I grew up, looking over the shoulder of Mr. Howard, a family friend, as he flipped through photos my mother took at my graduation ceremony in May . . .

"Now here he looks like a professor," he said to my mother, staring down at a "distinguished" photo of me with graying temples—before I got twisted.

Pausing for a moment on the steps of Sullivan Hall at Worcester State College as a friend, the director of Worcester's Charles Houston Cultural Project, walks up . . . "Aha!" she said brightly, "you're doing the Rastafarian thing!"

Standing and chatting with the pastor's wife after worship services at First Baptist (Centralia) in Richmond, Virginia . . .

"I like your Afrocentric look," she said, with dancing eyes.

Riding on the New Jersey Turnpike, heading back to Worcester, my wife tells me about a girlfriend of hers who was astonished at the black sprouts on my head . . .

"Bert is the last person I would imagine doing something like that. He was always so clean cut," she said. Girlfriend thought for a moment and then said, "Well, I guess there always was a little 'Dirty Bert' waiting to come out . . ."

Creeping forward after church in Richmond, Virginia, stuck in the middle of First Baptist Centralia's crowded, after-church lobby, a tall, corporate-ready, clean-cut brother whom I've always liked spots me. His eyebrows fly into the air. He fights his way over and breathlessly looks down at me silently for a few moments.

"Don't you teach at a college that . . .?" He left the rest unspoken.

"Yes . . .?"

Staring in horror at the growth on my head, he said, "And they let you . . ."

I smiled and shrugged. I said, "They can't stop me!"

Slowly, a smile snuck across his face, and he repeated my words, with his own I'll-be-damned shrug: "They can't stop you!"

We shook hands, laughing, and after a brief conversation went opposite ways.

Indeed they could not stop me—although in all honesty it didn't appear that they wanted to, either:

Mingling before a dinner at Holy Cross for incoming students of color, just before the beginning of the fall semester . . .

A female colleague I'm friendly with walked up and briskly said, "New 'do, eh?" Said another, who was standing nearby: "This is a new image for you, isn't it, Bert? Think Andre Braugher will break out in something like this?" she asked, folding a quip into a reference to "Homicide: Life on the Streets," a series we both loved (Baltimore detective Frank Pembleton,

the character Braugher played, wore a baldie at the time). She considered me thoughtfully and then asked, "So, Bert. Tell me. *Is this a new 'do?—or is it a reprise of an old one?*" (At least one person, then, couldn't have seen my getting twisted as such a radical departure; how could she, if she thought it might have been a "U" turn all along?)

Having found my table, moments before sitting down, a black male colleague sidles up to me and says, out of the corner of his mouth,

"You know, Bert, guys aren't supposed to say things like this to other guys, but . . ." He lowered his voice, leaned in close, and said, confidentially, "*I like your hair.*"

Sitting outside at a sidewalk restaurant on Pine Square in Long Beach, California, smoking cigars with Mark, an old friend from high school . . .

"You look like a professor, Bert," he said. "I'm telling you, I like the dreads, man. Makes you look, I don't know . . . *professorial.*"

Then he said, "I can't believe this is your first cigar, 'B.' I figured you'd be smoking cigars by now . . ."

And *then* he said, almost inevitably, ". . . or at least a pipe, or something . . ."

(So—let me make sure I understand this: The classroom door opens at exactly the appointed hour, and The Professor enters: he's wearing a trim salt-and-pepper beard, as well as spectacles, loafers, a buttoned-down Oxford shirt, a silk tie, cuffed wool slacks and a tweed coat, speaking in a clipped and proper, almost British accent, with manner to match. He stands stiffly before his students, nose pointed toward the ceiling and, before he begins lecturing on the assigned poet, he pauses briefly to light his pipe—as *dreadlocks tumble about his neck and shoulders!?*)

I don't *think* so.

And yet, when people I've never met before see me, I'm clearly The Kind of Guy Who Wears Dreadlocks. When people I'd known for years see me, they struggle even more than when I grew my hair out, trying to match the Me they've always known with their preexisting notions of, well, The Kind of Guy Who Wears Dreadlocks. And so the Me-I-used-to-be morphs and shape-shifts and fades in and out like so much visual static, as if I'm a body out of phase, scrambled between realities, a flashing body struggling to beam aboard a starship.

It was, and remains, a peculiar "invisibility." There's the Bert I feel I am, which apparently differs from the Bert others see, and yet "others" don't, in any way, agree amongst themselves as they contemplate the Bert they think they see when they gaze upon me. Deeper, *I'm* not really projecting the Bert I've matured into, since this dread-style seems to scream things about me that don't quite match the identity I carry inside, but I vibe on that difference, after all. I thrive on that difference.

It's really hard to tell, as I stand once again in the mirror, gazing at the very dreadlocks I dreamed of so long ago, just where the line rests between the Bert I think I am and the quite separate and distinct identity that I've grown accustomed to projecting. I don't think I'll ever be The Kind of Guy Who Wears Dreadlocks, whatever that means, but I am, indeed, a guy who wears dreadlocks—I'm floating in between those two poles, and I'm not at all sure I'll ever be able to strap myself firmly to either one of those poles; and anyway, I'm not so sure I want to.

So. It appears that a slightly-less-queasy comfort zone, a sense of dread quasi-equilibrium is what I'm after: a way of allowing the invisible to become visible (to me, if not to anyone else)—to the extent that that's even possible. . . .

Meanwhile, an almost microscopic bit of hair pushes out of my scalp like an idea, like a possibility; even as I write this; even as you read this. Slower than the naked eye can see, it circles up and out and into the air, ready to meet the world, ready to mirror perceptions carried by us all.

Discussion Questions

1. Does the process of hair locking stand as a metaphor for “black strands of difference and reality”? What are the advantages and disadvantages of this cultural view? How does any adopted view of dreadlocks serve as a view toward blackness in general?
2. Are Robin D. G. Kelley’s comments on black hair correct? If so, what are the stakes for black academics in having a “chip on your shoulder” growing out of your head? What are the various ways this act can be viewed in the academy, and, in the end, how advantageous or disadvantageous could this act of nonconformity be for African-Americans in the academy?
3. Discuss dreadlocks as either transparency (as a demonstrable view of who the wearer truly is) or as cultural mirror (displaying and confirming society’s norms as American culture reacts), or both. What are the implications of viewing dreadlocks in this fashion?

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