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Hair Everywhere: Anthropological Notes on the Long and Short of It

The Editors' Note: Hair Everywhere: Anthropological Notes on the Long and Short of It

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With hair, you can have good days and bad ones, too much in the wrong places, and too little in the right ones. The legend and lore surrounding hair both caution individuals against cutting it (alas, Samson) or allowing others to keep it (no doubt for witchcraft). Let down, covered up, or shaved off, its presence and absence are important and meaningful in human experience.

For this issue of *Open Anthropology*, we combed through the journals of the American Anthropological Association and compiled these twelve articles and two book reviews that consider hair in terms of human biology, culture, and language.

Hair is one of the defining features of mammals. It provides insulation and protection against the sun. It also is seen as a marker of difference, with glabrousness distinguishing humans from other primates. Aside from hair on the head (and male face), under the arms, and in the groin area, humans are naked apes—or so zoologist [Desmond Morris](#) famously claimed in [his 1967 book](#). However, biological anthropologist [Nina Jablonski](#), in her 2004 *Annual Review of Anthropology* article on “[The Evolution of Human Skin and Skin Color](#),” reminds us that far from being hairless, our skin is covered with hair that is less dense and much finer than that of other primates. “Explanations for the evolution of human hairlessness have been many, varied, and often highly creative,” Jablonski observes, apparently referring to claims made for sexual selection and the [aquatic ape hypothesis](#) that proposes loss of body hair as an adaptation to activity in water. “The most cogent explanations are based on the importance of a functionally naked skin in maintaining body temperature in hot environments” (598).

Hairiness is associated with other (non-human) animals and also with ancestral and early humans, as Judith C. Berman discusses in her 1999 *American Anthropologist* article, “Bad Hair

Days in the Paleolithic: Modern (Re)Constructions of the Cave Man.” The focus here is on the trope of the Cave Man—a conflation of Middle Paleolithic hominids like Neanderthals and early modern humans of the Upper Paleolithic—as depicted recently in popular culture and historically in artistic and scientific works. Berman emphasizes that we have neither direct evidence of what they looked like nor scientific reason to assume they were wild-haired and hairy, as commonly portrayed. First, as primatologist [Alison Jolly](#) noted, non-human primates invest considerable time in grooming, which results in both social bonds and neat and clean (though not styled) hair. Second, if the loss of body hair is a thermoregulatory adaptation in humans, then it is likely to have occurred in the Lower Paleolithic period. Third, visual representations dating to the Upper Paleolithic—specifically, the so-called Venus figurines—depict styled or at least stylized hair in great detail, suggesting that early modern humans attended to their coiffure. Thus, images of the hirsute Cave Man are more revealing of our historical and modern imaginings than of ancestral and early humans themselves.

The archaeological data suggest that the Cave Man can control the world around him to the extent of making tools, making art, and wearing clothing. But his hairiness subverts his humanity; it implies that he cannot master his own body, cannot tame its nature, cannot sever himself from the world of animals. The Cave Man is located in Nature, marked as a primitive and placed below modern humans on the ladder of evolution (read Great Chain of Being). (290)

Berman comments on the tangled meanings of hair—for example, it is associated not only with wildness, but also with power. Its presence is a sign of maturity and adulthood in contrast to its absence on the heads of infants and the faces and bodies of children. These understandings of hair underscore “Notes on the Hairy Men of the Philippine Islands and Elsewhere,” published in 1913. In this *American Anthropologist* piece, anatomist [Robert Bennett Bean](#) compares the facial features of individual males representing four groups indigenous to the Philippines, Japan, Australia, and India. “There is something about all these men that any competent observer will at once assign to the European (Caucasian or white) people. What is it that gives the appearance of similarity?” (416). In contrast with the other more glabrous peoples of Asia, these groups exhibited more hairiness, which is the focus of Bean’s analysis alongside measurements of the face and skull. The study is based on photographic images that are included in the article. Bean concludes that these four groups of hairy men must be related to each other as well as to Europeans. At the time, variation in hirsuteness as well as in hair color and texture were viewed as significant evidence of racial difference—a topic of interest for the author, who had conducted a 1906 study comparing the brains of black and white Americans. Stephen Jay Gould critiqued Bean’s work in [The Mismeasure of Man](#).

Hairiness is, interestingly, both a paleoanthropological and pathological sign. Genetic conditions associated with hypertrichosis, or an abnormal amount of hair growth, have been described as “atavistic” or throwback mutations. Hair is also a symptom of sickness or health, as [George E. Luber](#) describes in his 2002 *Nutritional Anthropology* article, “‘Second-Hair’ Illness in Two Mesoamerican Cultures: A Biocultural Study of the Ethnomedical Diagnoses of Protein Energy Malnutrition.” Luber examines two fatal illnesses that two different indigenous groups in Mexico associate with the loss of normal hair and the growth of abnormal ones or “second hair.” One,

called cha'lam tsots by the Tzeltal Maya of highland Chiapas is said to result from an infant hitting its head and not being sufficiently protected from the sun and losing its hair as a result of the blow or the intense heat. The other, called maajts baajy by the Mixe of highland Oaxaca, is said to be a particular manifestation of susto or fright illness. In addition, both groups articulate a connection to infant malnutrition. After discussing the explanatory models for both sicknesses, Luber turns his attention to an etic perspective on second-hair illnesses, which he contends are forms of serious Protein-Energy Malnutrition.

Chemical analysis of hair is used today to screen for exposure to environmental toxins, particularly arsenic, lead, and mercury. Sampling hair is also used as a non-invasive alternative to testing blood or urine for illicit drugs. Because hair testing may be required by employers and admissible in legal proceedings, a thorough understanding of its limitations is important and necessary. In "Considering issues of Racial Bias in Drug Testing Where Hair Is the Matrix," published in *Transforming Anthropology* in 2003, [Saundra F. DeLauder](#) raises questions about a disproportionately high rate of false-positive hair test results reported for African-Americans. "Of the four proposed reasons for the uptake and retention of drugs, genetic differences were proposed because of the obvious differences in hair test results based on race" (58). However, DeLauder and other researchers "cautioned at labeling this as racial bias and proposed cultural hair-care practices as the major bias" (58). Hair testing is based on the assumption that drugs, once ingested, will be incorporated into hair through the bloodstream. However, DeLauder, an analytical chemist, reports on studies showing that the cosmetic treatment of hair facilitates the chemical binding of substances on the hair surface so that even passive exposure to other individuals' drug use can yield false-positive results. She considers treatments used commonly among African Americans, such as relaxers, bleaching, and permanent wave, as well as the frequency of hair washing. She suggests that consideration of these cultural practices and their impact on the reliability of hair testing must be taken into consideration.

If it can be said that there is an anthropology of hair, then one of the field's most vibrant and vital literatures is on Black hair, particularly on Black women's hair. The next three articles and one book review examine the racialized and gendered significance of Black hair. In "Look at Her Hair': The Body Politics of Black Womanhood in Brazil," published in *Transforming Anthropology* in 2003, [Kia Lilly Caldwell](#) draws on interviews with Afro-Brazilian women who describe their experiences of racism and sexism as manifested in anti-Black aesthetic values, which they do not internalize, but come to question and resist.

In their attempts to develop positive self-images and identities, Afro-Brazilian women are forced to confront dominant values that caricature and malign their physical features. Many of the women who participated in my study described personal struggles related to beauty and self-image that centered on accepted of their hair. In addition, despite differences in their experiences, most women underwent a process of acceptance that required them to reassess the social stigma associated with black hair in Brazil. One of my interviewees commented on the stigmatization of black hair, by stating: "Why ruim (bad)? Cabelo crespo (kinky hair), but cabelo ruim (bad hair) is already a sign of this racist thing [belief] that the hair of Blacks is bad." (22)

Hair care demands the time, effort, and knowledge of others as well as one's self. Thus, the activities directed at styling hair, including the talk that occurs about and around hair care, accomplish important and meaningful cultural and social work, as [Lanita Jacobs-Huey](#) demonstrates in her 2006 book, [From the Kitchen to the Parlor: Language and Becoming in African American Women's Hair Care](#), reviewed by [Raymond Codrington](#) in *American Ethnologist*. In her 2003 *Transforming Anthropology* article, "Remembering Chrissy: EnGendering Knowledge, Difference, and Power in Women's Hair-Care Narratives," Jacobs-Huey presents an analysis of a conversation among five women attending a Black hair-care seminar; four of the women are African American and one is European American. In their ensuing discussion, which is prompted in response to the white speaker's criticism of other white stylists' discomfort with working on Black hair, the Black speakers both counter the "myth" that Black hair is especially difficult to work on and assert the value of their own expertise and experience. Central to this conversation is the Black stylists' talk about their childhood memories of playing with the Black Chrissy doll and especially dressing the doll's hair. Jacobs-Huey comments on the significance of the Chrissy narrative as "a collective and nostalgic account of their initial hair grooming practice. It is also a means through which Black women discursively coaffiliate with one another by virtue of their shared childhood grooming experiences and discourse practices" (38).

The women in Jacobs-Huey's account contrast their fond memories of hair play with their Black Chrissy dolls to their negative feelings and remembrances of the White Barbie doll. Interestingly, the children who are the subjects of [Elizabeth Chin's](#) 1999 *American Anthropologist* article, "Ethnically Correct Dolls: Toying with the Race Industry," were "black girls with white dolls whose hair had been elaborately braided, twisted, and styled in ways racially marked as black" (306). Chin clearly appreciates and admires the skill and especially their creativity of the girls. In their hands, she argues, these are not white dolls wearing co-opted or appropriated black hairstyles, but "racially queered" dolls. However, Chin reminds us: "These playfully imagined, resistant realities are not separable, however, from the context of discrimination, segregation, and oppression in which they have been generated, to which they ultimately refer, and with which they remain enmeshed" (308). She compares the children's efforts with those of the Mattel corporation—the maker of Barbie dolls—to produce and promote a line of "ethnically correct" Shani dolls. None of the girls in Chin's study had these dolls, which were ostensibly made to look like them.

The next two selections consider hair in terms of what is imagined as "modern" and "global." Both of these studies are based on fieldwork in Tanzania and in the specific sites of the recently established "salon" and the new social institution of the barbershop.

In "The Birth of the 'Salon': Poverty, 'Modernization,' and Dealing with Witchcraft in Southern Tanzania," published in 2005 in *American Ethnologist*, [Maia Green](#) and [Simeon Mesaki](#) observe that while anthropologists suggest the conditions of modernity contribute directly to accusations and claims of witchcraft, people themselves describe witches as unmodern. Green and Mesaki offer a fascinating account of the modernization of anti-witchcraft rituals, which includes their

removal from homestead to specialized space or “salon” to a chain of multiple outlets of the salon advertised on billboards. The services themselves, which entail shaving the head and body, are synchronized with train arrivals and departures, and clients pay a standardized fee rather than perform labor in exchange for the performance and supervision of the rites.

Witchcraft-suppression services delivered in a distinctly modern manner remain based on traditional practices involving shaving, medicine, and purification. The modernity of such practices is not now merely symbolic, as earlier account of witchcraft-suppression practices, Green’s included, suggested. The routinization and bureaucratization associated with them is to some extent necessitated by the volume of clients and the demands of patient management. (382)

[Brad Weiss](#) describes urban barbershops in Tanzania as tonsorial sites of tension in his 2002 *Cultural Anthropology* article, “Thug Realism: Inhabiting Fantasy in Urban Tanzania.” More recently established than women’s hair parlors, men’s barbershops bear English names like Brooklyn Barberhouse and Death Row Barber House (named for rapper Tupac Shakur’s record label) that evoke global connectedness. The barbershops are spaces where young men not only can get a shave and haircut, but also have their shoes shined and their outfits tailored; catch up with radio, TV broadcasts, newspapers and magazines; and talk and complain about women. In short, they participate in and perform a masculinity of what Weiss calls thug realism that does not, however, extend to how they wear their hair:

For many, wearing hairstyles associated with global hip-hop (bald heads and dreadlocks in particular) is simply dangerous. In fact, the dangers of hair are a regular topic of conversation in many barbershops. People told me (and more regularly told one another) stories of how guys who shaved their heads faced punishment from principals, if they were still in school, or were likely to be seen as threatening and suspicious in the eyes of the police. . . . Again, local bodies are evaluated (and imagined) with respect to the place of Arusha as it is positioned in global terms. In each of these cases, hair—and especially men’s hair—is a means of provocation as well as a medium of discipline. (116)

In the next selection, [Emma Tarlo](#), in her 2017 *Anthropology News* photo essay, “Close Encounters of a Hairy Kind,” reminds us that hair itself is also a precious global commodity, with the market for wigs and extensions made from human hair worth more than one billion dollars. She follows the trade from the fallen hairs saved from women’s combs in Burma to a factory in China where the strands are bleached, dyed, and retextured, then fashioned into wigs and extensions sold at a shop in the UK.

Seeing hair in its liminal state allows us to dwell on its liminal status. Is hair alive or dead? If dead, why does it look so disturbingly life like? Is it the texture? The movement? The sheen? The way it seems to cling to walls and surfaces with apparent deliberation? The way it rises from the floor as if seeking to make itself heard? Or is it its structural similarity to sheep’s wool, bird feathers, and horses’ tails—its brute animality that reminds us that we too are animal?

Tarlo's musings return us to the points, raised above, about hair and human status. Worth noting is that the hairiness of Europeans also left impressions on the late imperial Chinese imagination, so that Europeans were compared with macaques, as [Jeannette Mageo](#) notes in her 1999 *American Anthropologist* review of [Alf Hiltbeitel](#) and [Barbara D. Miller's](#) edited book, [Hair: Its Power and Meaning in Asian Cultures](#).

It came to me reading *Hair* that so many different kinds of identity are nested in and expressed through hair: civilized (versus wild), gender and sexual identity, racial religious, national, ethnic, political, personal, public, class, caste, and what one might call historical ("traditional" versus "modern") identity. Indeed, is there any kind of identity that is not for someone, somewhere also a hairstyle? (676)

No discussion of hair is complete without a consideration of the practices of covering hair. [Sally Campbell Galman](#), in her 2013 *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* article, "Un/Covering: Female Religious Converts Learning the Problems and Pragmatics of Physical Observance in the Secular World," considers the multiple meanings of covering, from [Kenji Yoshino's](#) observations on obscuring "unfavorable" identities to the fundamentalist Christian and Jewish shorthand for a woman's covering her hair or wearing modest dress, and the Muslim woman's hijab, also a form of covering one's hair and wearing modest dress. I suggest that for some religious women, the, the act of covering their hair or bodies in accordance with religious identity and observance is really, and paradoxically, an act of uncovering, in the sense that they are choosing to actively resist the pressure to cover. (423)

In this piece, Galman considers the experiences of three women in the United States who choose to cover their hair. They describe having been motivated by their religious conviction and especially interest in modesty, yet covering also makes them conspicuous and visible in modern secular society.

The final selection in this issue on the anthropology of hair considers the hair of anthropology—or more specifically, the beards and mustaches of male anthropologists. In "Facial Foliage among Male American Anthropologists: A Quantitative Analysis," published in *Anthropology Newsletter* in 1973, [Christine Padoch](#) and [Michael Chibnik](#) present data they collected at the AAA's annual meetings, indicating a high incidence of beards and mustaches among men in American anthropology. Notably, Padoch and Chibnik also called for readers to suggest comparable descriptive indices for women in anthropology. (Today, this might prompt a conversation about not hair, but [scarves](#).) This not-so-serious piece, revisited in 2018, raises questions about the meanings of hair—from hippies to hipsters—and what has or has not changed in our profession and discipline during the last 45 years.

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