

**From the Kitchen
to the Parlor:
Language and Becoming
in African American
Women's Hair Care**

Lanita Jacobs-Huey

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

From the Kitchen to the Parlor

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Printed in the United States of America
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for Gwendolyn Stewart,
my first and most cherished hairstylist

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FOREWORD

Research on language and gender in African American speech communities dates back at least as far as the notional beginning of the field of language and gender studies in the early 1970s. Yet for many years the intellectual contributions of much of the pioneering scholarship in this area was not fully recognized. This oversight can partly be attributed to a general scholarly inattention to racial and ethnic diversity in the majority of feminist linguistic research, a problem that has hindered the development of other academic disciplines as well. As critics have pointed out, throughout much of its history language and gender research in the United States was primarily focused on the speech of women of the white middle class. Despite the existence of a few influential early studies of black women and girls, only in recent years have language and gender scholars begun to fully acknowledge the theoretical and methodological importance of incorporating a wider range of language users, linguistic varieties, and social contexts into research.

Moreover, a number of early investigators of African American female and male speech—most of them African American themselves—did not receive the attention their work merited from other language and gender researchers because their theoretical, methodological, and political commitments did not conform to then-central trends in the field. This was not simply a matter of being out of step with mainstream concerns, but rather of purposefully developing an alternative perspective that more adequately captured the complex realities of racialized gender and gendered racialization than had yet been offered by dominant feminist linguistic approaches. In part this was a problem shared by feminism more generally: as articulated by European American

women, its most visible proponents, feminism often represented the relationship between women and men as inevitably oppositional, with men necessarily seeking and holding power over women. For African American women, this situation seemed to offer an untenable choice between a gender-based alliance with white women or racial solidarity with black men. The explicit focus on comparing women's and men's speech, which long predominated in language and gender research, further reinforced this division by highlighting cross-gender differences in language use rather than points of similarity and commonality.

By contrast, research on language and gender among African Americans was often innovative in taking a deliberately noncomparative approach, in which gender was not foregrounded as the primary explanatory parameter. Speakers' linguistic interactions were analyzed on their own cultural terms, and the resulting findings provided an important counterpoint to widespread scholarly and lay misrepresentations of African American women. At the same time, the tendency of much early feminist linguistic research to position women as subordinate to male power was overwhelmingly rejected by researchers of language and gender in African American communities. Perhaps the most consistent finding of such researchers was the clear evidence of African American women's social agency, often in the face of significant structural constraints. In this regard, the study of African American speech communities is of particular importance in the continued progress of the field of language and gender studies, by offering a representation of women that neither diminishes their abilities nor romanticizes their struggles.

Into this theoretically and politically fraught history, Lanita Jacobs-Huey makes an intellectual intervention that is as groundbreaking as it is vital. In *From the Kitchen to the Parlor: Language and Becoming in African American Women's Hair Care*, Jacobs-Huey draws inspiration from early scholarship on both black and white women's language use while laying out a wholly new direction of inquiry grounded in multisited ethnography, discourse analysis, and the investigation of embodied social practice. Recognizing that, next to language itself, hair is the most complex signifier that African American women and girls use to display their identities, Jacobs-Huey examines how hair and hair care take on situated social meanings among African American women in varied linguistic interactions—whether with one another, with African American men, or with European American women. Based on years of ethnographic fieldwork in a range of sites, from cosmetology schools in South Carolina to hair care seminars in Beverly Hills, from standup comedy clubs in Los Angeles to online debates about black hair, Jacobs-Huey's multifaceted approach comprehensively documents exactly how and why hair comes to matter so much in African American women's construction of their identities, and how language both mediates and produces these social meanings. Along the way, the author takes seriously her commitment to ethnography as an intersubjective relationship between self and other by reflecting on her own role in the research process, her own racialized and gendered identity, and her own understandings of black hair and its meaning.

From the Kitchen to the Parlor thus represents a new stage in language and gender research, one that creatively brings together the most powerful tools and acute insights of a variety of disciplines to examine an issue that has never been studied through a linguistic lens: the practices and discourses surrounding black hair. Jacobs-Huey compellingly demonstrates the symbolic and social significance of hair among African Americans in constructing race, gender, and other dimensions of identity. In its multisited analyses, this volume forges numerous new directions for language and gender studies. As a study of language and gendered political economy, it offers a rare study of African American women's discourse in the workplace, examining stylists' tenuous position as service providers in a cultural context in which "kitchen beauticians" frequently win out over hair professionals, and documenting stylists' appropriation and interweaving of culturally valued discourses of science and religion to legitimate their professional status. As a contribution to the emerging field of language and the body, it provides a rich portrait of the politics of beauty in African American women's lives, one that closely attends to the role of embodiment, gesture, and the material world in the linguistic navigation of beauty work—even in the "bodiless" world of cyberspace. As an addition to our knowledge of African American discourse practices, it demonstrates the nuanced and subtle ways in which speakers employ the tools of indirectness to achieve such diverse interactional goals as humor, negotiation, and critique. And as an ethnography that sensitively and skillfully portrays ordinary people's ordinary lives, it is rich in methodological creativity and theoretical insights gleaned from the ethnographic dialogue.

Thus *From the Kitchen to the Parlor*, like many of the studies of African American language and gender that preceded it, speaks to a number of different audiences, but it has special importance for language and gender research. This most recent contribution to Oxford University Press's series *Studies in Language and Gender* asks fresh questions and offers insightful answers. Most important, in offering the field an exceptionally rich representation of African American women in diverse cultural contexts, *From the Kitchen to the Parlor* promises to change what we know and how we think about the intricate relationships among language, gender, and race, and the theories, methods, and politics that underlie them.

Mary Bucholtz
Series Editor

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This “hair story” began during my graduate training in linguistic anthropology at UCLA and, as such, my gratitude begins there. I owe Marcyliena Morgan a special “thanks” for inspiring me as an undergraduate and graduate student to look at language and ethnography as windows into the study of culture, gender, class, and race/ethnicity. I also want to thank Asif Agha, Roger Andersen, Alessandro Duranti, Candy Goodwin, Chuck Goodwin, Paul Kroskrity, Emanuel Schegloff, and especially Elinor Ochs—whose impassioned and varied approaches to teaching and research affirm my appreciation for the theoretical promise and methodological rigors of language analysis still today. I must thank another important cohort at UCLA: the Discourse, Identity, and Representation Collective (DIRE), which included Marcyliena Morgan and my then student colleagues Patricia Baquedano-López, Dionne Bennett, Kesha Fikes, Soyoun Kim, Adrienne Lo, Sepa Seté, and Steve Ropp. To them I owe endless gratitude for critical and collegial dialogues around race and discourse that ultimately helped me navigate my place in the academy.

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that are Geertzian “thick.” My colleagues in the USC Program in American Studies and Ethnicity also afforded ongoing opportunities for intellectual exchange (and priceless fellowship) that helped me to chart new interdisciplinary pathways in this and ongoing research. I must also thank another invaluable and supportive cohort, WHAM (Women Helping and Motivating), which includes Andriette Ward, Donna Washington, Arleen F. Brown, and Carolyn Brown, each of whom saw me through the arduous process of writing this book.

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CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----|
| Introduction: From the Kitchen to the Parlor | 3 |
| 1. Negotiating Expert and Novice Identities through Client-stylist Interactions | 17 |
| 2. “We Are Like Doctors”: Socializing Cosmetologists into the Discourse of Science | 29 |
| 3. A License to Touch: Cosmetology as a Divine Calling | 47 |
| 4. Gender, Authenticity, and Hair in African American Stand-up Comedy | 71 |
| 5. “BTW, How Do You Wear Your Hair?”: Gender and Race in Computer-mediated Hair Debates | 89 |
| 6. Constructing and Contesting Knowledge in Women’s Cross-cultural Hair Testimonies | 105 |
| 7. Critical Reflections on Language, Gender, and “Native” Anthropology | 129 |
| Appendix: Transcription Conventions | 149 |
| Notes | 151 |
| Bibliography | 153 |
| Index | 173 |

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From the Kitchen to the Parlor

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Introduction

From the Kitchen to the Parlor

HAIR. It may seem like a mundane subject, but it has profound implications for how African American women experience the world. Historically, Black women's tightly curled hair textures have presented an array of challenges, epitomized in debates concerning Black hairstyles as indicators of racial consciousness, the suitability of Afrocentric hairstyles (e.g., braids, Afros, dreadlocks) at work, and the extent to which cultural notions of "good" versus "bad" hair continue to privilege Eurocentric standards of beauty. One important implication of such debates is that Black women's hairstyle choices are seldom just about aesthetics or personal choice, but are instead ever complicated by such issues as mate desire, mainstream standards of beauty, workplace standards of presentation, and ethnic/cultural pride.

Over the past decade, a proliferation of academic books, anthologies, novels, and biographies have been published that explain why hair remains a highly symbolic and, at times, controversial medium for African Americans, particularly women (e.g., Bonner 1991; Bundles 2001; Byrd and Tharps 2001; Due 2000; Harris and Johnson 2001; Lake 2003). Recent work by Noliwe Rooks (1996), Ingrid Banks (2000), Kimberly Battle-Walters (2004), and Yolanda Majors (2001, 2003, 2004) are especially relevant testaments to the central role of hair in Black women's lived experiences and conceptions of self. Rooks's book, *Hair Raising: Beauty, Culture, and African American Women*, examines how historical and contemporary Black hair advertisements inflect the politics of Black women's self-concepts and bodily and business practices. Banks's text, *Hair Matters: Beauty, Power, and Black Women's Conscious-*

ness, employs interview and focus-group methods to explore how Black women and girls of diverse ages and socioeconomic backgrounds discuss hair in relation to their identity, cultural authenticity, gender, and sexuality, among other factors. Battle-Walters's book, *Sheila's Shop: Working-class African American Women Talk About Life, Love, Race, and Hair*, shares insights gleaned from a 16-month study of a southern beauty-salon show to describe how working-class African American women—who are underrepresented in sociological studies—come to see themselves as victors rather than as victims during salon conversations. Majors's articles similarly employ ethnography to explore constructions of self among African American women in a midwestern hair salon; however, she carefully examines women's conversations—or “shoptalk”—to illuminate how women learn, construct, and transmit their understandings of the world through such verbal strategies as participation, collaboration, and negotiation. While the aforementioned work is complementary to this book, these authors leave room for a broader analysis of the vital yet undiscussed role of language in negotiating the social meaning of hair for African American women.

This book breaks new ground as an ethnographic and multisited account of how Black women use language to negotiate the significance of hair in their everyday lives. As a linguistic anthropologist, I am interested in how African American women use both hair itself and language about hair as cultural resources to shape the way they see themselves and are seen by others. By exploring how women make sense of hair in the everyday and across the many places where the subject of hair is routinely taken up (e.g., beauty salons, hair educational seminars, stylists' Bible study meetings, hair fashion shows, comedy clubs, Internet discussions, cosmetology schools), I aim to present situated and lived accounts of the role of hair and language in the formation of Black women's identities. In essence, I want readers to understand how, when, and why hair matters in African American women's day-to-day experiences and how it is they work out, either by themselves or with others, when exactly “hair is just hair” and when, alternatively, “hair is not just hair.”

Why study hair?

Hair appeals to anthropologists as a highly symbolic part of the body that offers insights into individual and collective culture. Hair also provides individuals with a means of representing themselves and negotiating their place in the world (Furman 1997; Ilyin 2000; McCracken 1995; Obeyesekere 1981; Peiss 1998; Scranton 2000; Severn 1971; Simon 2000). Further, what people do and say through hair care can shed light on how members of a cultural group use hair more broadly as a signifier of status, and hair care as a site of routine cultural practice. In this book, I examine Black hair as a window into African American women's ethnic and gender identities, and Black hair care as a linguistic and cultural engagement with these identities. I argue that each site presents opportunities for learning and change, thus offering insights into the discurs-

sive and corporeal dynamics of African American women's being and becoming. The terms *being* and *becoming*, which are used throughout this text, refer to Black women's self-perceptions as individuals and members of a collective (*being*), as well as their transition into different dispositions, ideological stances (or positions), professional statuses, and phases of life (*becoming*). In other words, I take women's being and becoming to be dynamic accomplishments and processes, and look primarily to language to see how this gets done.

My work builds upon an established body of research on African American women's hair by anthropologists, historians, visual artists, performers, biographers, and novelists. Through a cross-section of methods, including narrative, focus groups, interviews, surveys, observation, photography, memoir, performance, and visual/textual analyses, these authors document the many ways in which hair is culturally and politically meaningful across cultures, time, and place (e.g., Bonner 1996, 1997a, 1997b; Cunningham and Marberry 2000; Ebong 2001; Gaskins 1997; Gibson 1995; Mastalia, Pagano, and Walker 1999). My contribution to this body of work is to incorporate language as well as the role of gender and professional socialization (Garrett and Baquedano-López 2002) into current understandings of how African Americans, particularly women, make sense of the role of hair in their daily lives.

Language, gender, and multisited ethnography

My approach to hair is a decidedly anthropological pursuit, born of ethnographic observations and a quest to understand how cultural significance is nested in the mundane realities of everyday life. My focus, at its heart, is also language-centered and mines ordinary conversations and more specialized performances for insights into the role of hair, language, and culture in the constitution of African American women's being and becoming. This linguistic-anthropological approach foregrounds talk and discourse as integral to the construction of cultural identity and political ideology. By analyzing women's everyday conversations about hair care, I aim to delineate the dynamics of Black women's becomings: that is, how their socialization into new roles and sensibilities is negotiated in actual dialogues and hair-care practice.

This book's focus on women's language, embodiment, and beauty work marks both its relation and its contribution to language and gender research. To date, language and gender studies have paid limited attention to embodiment, which various scholars have shown to be a vital aspect of gender (Butler 1990; Camaroff 1985; Lock 1993; Young 1993). This book reveals language as an integral, albeit missing, link in this work by showing how the embodied social action of Black women's hair care remains deeply indebted to language for its accomplishment. This book also seeks to augment existing research exploring the role of language in girls' and women's cosmetic practices (e.g., Eckert 1996; Mendoza-Denton 1996; Talbot 1995) by describing the processes through which language mediates African American women's beauty work on themselves and others.