NAPPY HAPPY:
A REVIEW OF BELL HOOKS' *HAPPY TO BE NAPPY*

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Don't remove the kinks from your hair.
Remove them from your brain.
-Marcus Garvey (1887-1940), founder,
United Negro Improvement Association

African American cultural critic and feminist theorist bell hooks' first children's book, *Happy to be Nappy,* is the political calm after the two-year storm of controversy that accompanied African American author, scholar, and educator Carolivia Herron's *Nappy Hair.*[1] Clearly not the socially and politically controversial text that Herron intentionally or unintentionally creates and defends as a positive message about the personal and communal acceptance of black folks' hair—particularly little girls' hair—*Happy to be Nappy* comes from a veteran participant in this discourse about the gender and racial politics of hair. Dedicated to her nieces Katrese and Sarah whom hooks identifies as "the sweetest of the sweet," the book achieves its racial and gender positive message by unilaterally challenging and replacing negative images and attitudes about black people's hair—its textures, its lengths, its grades, its shapes—with unquestioningly celebratory ones that define, self-empower, and unite

Happy to be Nappy follows a trail of children's books about African Americans and their hair. For instance, one of the earliest celebratory treatments of black children's hair comes in Camille Yarbrough's *Cornrows,* a book that uses the ritual and occasion of African American hairbraiding as a lesson in African history and storytelling. The inside cover describes the book's focus: "Mama's and Great-Grammaw's gentle fingers weave the design and their lulling voices weave the tale as they braid their children's hair into the striking cornrow patterns of Africa" (NP). In Alexis De Veaux's *An Enchanted Hair Tale,* young Sudan initially dislikes his dreadlocks because his friends and neighbors mock him, saying that it's "ugly, unsightly, and uncombed," and insisting that because of his dreadlocks, "He's strange. He's queer He's different" (14). When Sudan discovers a group of traveling circus performers with dreadlocks like his, he is convinced that his hair is wonderfully magical and enchanting. Tololwa M. Mollel's *The*

Princess Who Lost Her Hair, an Akamba Legend is a parable that attacks vanity and selfishness associated with a girl's long hair, hair that is initially taken away and restored. Nikki Grimes' *Wild, Wild Hair*, an early reader, shows the Monday morning ritual of a young girl's hair braiding. Because "Tisa Walker's hair was long and thick and wild" (NP), the morning combing ritual between Tisa and her mother becomes for the family a game of hide-and-seek as they each try to find Tisa to avoid being late for school. In the end, Tisa's hair is braided royally and adult-like. Carolivia Herron's *Nappy Hair* details in a call-and-response format of black southern churches a family's playfulness with a little brown girl's "nappy, frizzy, screwed up, squeezed up, knotted up, tangled up, twisted up hair"$(Np)^2$ hair that cannot and need not be tamed by harsh chemicals, a hot comb or public perception. Although there were parental objections to Herron's use of the loaded term "nappy" and to the fact that the white, allegedly culturally uninformed third-grade teacher "performed" the text in the black vernacular with her African American and Hispanic students, the book is one of celebration and cultural affirmation. Addressing her intentions in the book on the *Today* show, just a week or so after the controversy made national news, Herron clarifies: "I was just celebrating my hair and my little character's hair, my Brenda's hair. I was not trying to write a political book at all, although, I do, of course, know that the, word 'nappy' is loaded for many people. I'm a '60s person [and] . . . thought we went through the '60s and. . . dealt with this hair problem and that we loved our hair, guess I was living in another world" (Transcript 34). Finally, Natasha A. Tarpley's *I Love My Hair!* is a kind of fictionalized autobiography celebrating family and storytelling. In her "Author's Note," Tarpley explains:

> This is how I fell in love with my hair. When I was a little girl, my mother would often comb my hair in the evening before I went to bed. I would make myself comfortable between her knees as she rubbed sweet-smelling oil along the line of my scalp where she parted my hair. Then she would start to comb.
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> Sometimes she would tell me stories to distract me from the pain of stubborn tangles. But what I enjoyed most

> about those evenings was being so close to my mother—the texture and sound of my hair sliding through her fingers, the different hairstyles she would create, the smell of the hair oil mixing with the lingering scent of her perfume. I loved the way we laughed and talked about the day's events, just the two of us.
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> . . . [W]hen I sat between Mom's knees, I was at peace with my hair, at home again with myself.

On the controversy surrounding Herron's *Nappy Hair*, bell hooks weighed in at a February 1999 conference, "New World (Dis)Orders: Globalization, Culture and Identity" (Rutgers University), calling it a "dangerous cultural narrative," in which the players were the "shadow figure" of the "educated Harvard black woman" given legitimacy by her Harvard ties, and the "Playboy bunny white woman teacher," photographed seductively in hotel bedrooms by the press, who was "bringing truth to the natives." "And who are the natives?" hooks asked, "the parents demonized by the press?" Having read no press giving the parents a voice, hooks contended that the real problem at the heart of this issue was that "poor, black, working class parents actually felt that they could make an intervention, and they were stomped on. . . The tension started with the parents jumping out of their class to make a critique." "How," she asked, "do we divest ourselves of our white supremacy enough to hear the critique?" hooks' contribution to this dialogue on racial and gender politics of hair is an affirmation and self-acceptance of little black girls and by extension black women and their hair. Without the political binaries that can disrupt and confuse communal and individual identities in terms of artificial and polarized Eurocentric ideals and Afrocentric ideals related to hair, *Happy to be Nappy* is total affirmation-of cultural uniqueness, cultural ritual, and cultural identity.

The book's affirming and even defiant tone is imaged on the cover with its vibrant and warm pastel colors-oranges, light blues, browns, greens, and yellows, colors often associated with cheerfulness and playfulness, precisely the energy derived from experiencing and reading hooks' book. The drawings are playful, the language is simple and whimsical, and the incidental rhyming punc-

tuating certain ideas and drawings-sweetest/nieces, crown/ round, play/ away—reinforces the plethora of positive adjectives sprinkled throughout to describe both the hair types, textures, styles, shapes and sizes, adjectives that can also characterize the attitude of self-acceptance, presented throughout the text: happy, nappy, sweet, clean, soft, smooth, patted down [as in grounded and sure], tight [as in uptight and out of sight], close [as in unified mid unifying], hopeful, joy[ful], short and strong, girl happy. The words themselves create a mood poem, and the drawings dance as does the strand of hair that, as my ten-year-old daughter and seven-year-old son pointed out to me, is imaged in the words cursively written on the pages. The unfanciful almost rudimentary penmanship underscores the book's message of little black girls' fundamental self-acceptance, devoid of adult confusion about beauty politics and female identity.

The forthrightly political implications come in the book's deliberate denial of racist stereotypes associated with black people's hair: that it is dirty and stinky because of the hygiene grooming techniques exactly opposite hair grooming for whites. For instance, few black females and males are able to wash and dry their hair and head straight to the outside world—the white way—without oiling the scalp to avoid scalp dryness, Indeed, one sign of dirty hair for whites is that it is oily. In contrast, oiliness for blacks helps alleviate scalp flaking and itchiness. hooks recognizes here the racist myths of whites that know so little about black people's hair and respond to it simultaneously with curiosity[3] and repulsion. African American sociologist, comedian, and former talk show host Bertyce Berry offers a personal testimonial:

> One day in a grocery store, a young [white] girl looked at my dreadlocked hair and loudly exclaimed, "Mommy, that black lady has funny hair." The Mother, clearly embarrassed, and for some reason frightened, quickly hugged the child and said, "Yes, it is fancy." Not wanting to deny the child the opportunity to learn, I walked over and said, "No, she said 'funny.'" I offered the child the opportunity to touch my hair and she [the child] burst out into tears. I quickly grabbed her mother's hand and placed it on my hair, The mother now slightly less frightened, was amazed by the feel. "It's beautiful. How

> different," she said. The child now asked if she could touch it also. She did and a transformation occurred. She no longer found my hair strange, but asked her mother if she could make her hair like mine. (R8)

Berry's account is all too familiar to African Americans with new white college and grad school roommates or acquaintances. In this regard, *Happy to be Nappy* is also directed toward white audiences who are almost always amazed that there is such complexity associated with black people's hair. For those blacks subjected to white scrutiny of their hair—having it fondled and patted to see if it is as *coarse* as steel wool or sandpaper or sniffed to see if its scent is unpleasant, hooks merely asserts without adornment: "Girlpie hair smells clean and sweet/ is soft like cotton, flower petal billowy soft,/ full of frizz and fuzz" (NP).

Importantly, the book's whimsical feel and sound are balanced by the inclusion of important cultural rituals associated with hair. For instance, at least five of the thirty-two pages present ritual hair combing, brushing, and styling in process. Mothers and daughters and sisters and aunts and neighbors have used this time of hair preparation as familial and communal bonding. Although hooks has talked on other occasions about hair straightening as a time for female bonding with other women-a time full of rituals from gossip to storytelling-she recreates in this children's text these same rituals of safety, security, and intimacy.[4]

> On Saturday mornings we would gather in the kitchen to get our hair fixed, that is[,] straightened. Smells of burning grease and hair, mingled with the scent of our freshly washed bodies, with collard greens cooking on the stove, with fried fish. . . . In those days, this process of straightening black women's hair with a hot comb. . . was not connected in my mind with the effort to look white, to live out the standards of beauty set by white supremacy. It was connected solely with rites of initiation into womanhood. To arrive at that point where one's hair could be straightened was to move from being perceived as a child (whose hair could be neatly combed and braided) to being almost a

> woman. It was this moment of transition my [five] sisters and I longed for. ("Straightening Our Hair" 291)

While hooks makes no mention of hair straightening or relaxing in this book, she, at the same time, places no value on whether a child's hair is straightened chemically or unstraightened. Rather, hooks' emphasis is steadfastly on how the child feels about her hair no matter what has been done to it stylistically. Although hooks deals with straightening above, the same female bonding occurs in the everyday rituals of hair preparation presumably between a mother and daughter, she adds:

> Hair pressing was a ritual of black women's culture—of intimacy. It was an exclusive moment when black women (even those who did not know one another well) might meet at a home or in the beauty parlor to talk with one another, to listen to talk. . . . It was a world where the images constructed as barriers between one's self and the world were briefly let go, before they were made again. It was a moment of creativity, a moment of change. ("Straightening Our Hair" 291)[5]

Not coincidentally, the two-page spread of the four little girls having their hair combed by four women creates the image of a "beauty saloon"—even if it's the family kitchen—similar to what hooks' childhood revelry describes.

hooks' fanciful text neutralizes potentially loaded political words associated with blacks' hair—naps and kinks—of its negative associations by not polarizing the somewhat arbitrarily defined Eurocentric and Afrocentric ideals suggested in Carolivia Herron's *Nappy Hair:* "Ain't going to be nothing they come up with going to straighten this child's hair. . . . I'm talking about straightening combs. . . . I'm talking about relaxers and processes. . . . Ain't nothing going to straighten up the naps on this chile's head" (NP). hooks demonstrates in her book that public discussions of hair among black folks need not be politically divisive. Hence, her contribution to these hair tales is full of hope, celebration and joy personally and communally.

Aside from Chris Raschka's effective rudimentary crayon draw-

ings with watercolor strokes, the text reiterates community, especially among black women, by presenting about fourteen variously brown shaded "girlpie"[6] heads sprinkled thought the text, While one of the "girlpies" stands defiantly smiling on the cover of the book with both hands on her hips and a wide smile on her face—the young child clearly is not angry, confused or being womanish—she is joined at the story's end by the other thirteen girlpies in an eternal circle of personal and communal defiance. Their symbolic bond recalls the traditional figures of Little Sally Walker and her sister friends who "put their hands on their hips and let their backbones slip, as they shake it to the east and shake it to the west steadily shaking it to the ones that they love the best." The young girls' creative hair styles, textures, lengths, shapes, and sizes-along with their individual facial expressions but different skin colorings-render *Happy to be Nappy* a performance of black "girlpie happiness" in their celebrated nappiness. hooks' intent is *Heart and Soul* Editor-in-Chief Stephanie Stokes Oliver's dream regarding African American female identity:

> Surely we are coming into more positive thinking about our hair as we embrace the many varieties of natural hairstyles-and we find less damaging ways to "relax" it. But we should never relax our effort to keep it healthy and to *instill in our children positive feelings about their hair, whether it's straight, naturally curly, or tightly coiled*[7]
>
> Celebrate [black hair's] versatility and resilience. . . . Give thanks for the beautiful, unique, and wondrous textures of hair that we African American have been blessed with. (55)[7]

To the traditional childhood tune of "If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands," hooks' *Happy to be Nappy* might well add the following verse as African American mothers and daughters, sisters and aunts, female cousins and female neighbors join hands Singing:

> If you happy to be nappy, clap your hands
> If you happy to be nappy, clap your hands.
> If you happy to be nappy, my hairstyle's really snappy, If
> you happy to be nappy, clap your hands.

NOTES

1. Recall the November 1998 controversy over Herron's *Nappy Hair* when a white third grade teacher in Brooklyn, New York, read the book to students as part of multicultural celebration. While the students allegedly loved hearing the book read in its folkloric call-and-response, improvisational format and even dramatized movements with the responses to the teachers calls, some parents were outraged when they found student-requested xeroxed copies of pages from the book in their children's book bags. The poor quality of the xeroxed African Americans rendered the photographs caricaturishly dark. These parents were equally offended by the black vernacular languages used in the text as well as the very use of the word "nappy," assumed to have a racist and negative connotation, especially read aloud by a white teacher to black and Hispanic students. Concerns of racism reached national news, and the teacher and the author were threatened with violence by angry parents. Such controversy has led Herron and Professor Neal Lester (Arizona State University) to project a study guide to help contextualize the book for African American parents and for teachers unaware of the folkloric, social, and political history of blacks' attitudes toward hair.

2. Perhaps hooks offers direct response to Herron's text as hooks uses variations on Herron's words: frizz and fuzz, tight and close, combing, brushing, twisting, plaiting and lying flat, kinks gone, tight naps.

3. I was attending a multicultural children's book fair a few months ago and was seated on a bench examining my purchases when a little white boy, perhaps three or four years old, who was climbing on the bench already, came over unexpectedly and started playing with my six-inch dreadlocks. He flipped them up and down without saying a word as his mother looked on mortified. She apologized for the son, and I explained that there was no reason for apology. Meanwhile, I have a white female colleague, in my predominantly white English department, who always questions me about dreadlocks—why I decided to grow them, how they grow, how they are cleaned, what "dreadlocking" means etymologically. I see parallels in white curiosity between the adult and the child, curiosity that I had not witnessed in twenty years, when my first college roommate, a white male, wanted to pat my hair as "cultural exploration."

4. Alice Walker shows in her story, "Olive Oil," the sensuality and sexuality also associated with this ritual of hair care and grooming, a ritual foreign to many whites on many levels Walker explains first how Orelia discovers the arousing and soothing feel of olive oil she uses to rid her skin of its dryness:

> She remembered being a little black girl with skinny, knock-kneed ashy legs, and how every morning her

> mother had reminded her to rub them with Vaseline. Vaseline was cheap and very effective. Unfortunately Orelia almost always put on too much or forgot to wipe off the excess so everything she wore and everything on which she sat retained a slight film of grease. This greasiness about herself and her playmates (almost as ashy as she) eventually sickened her, especially when television and movies made clear that oiliness of any sort automatically put one beyond the social pale. The best white people were never oily, for instance, and she knew they put down readily poor whites and black people who were. (364)

The ritual of oiling her husband's scalp becomes a lesson in eroticism for readers as John sits between her legs as his wife massages and fondles his scalp:

> Orelia carefully covered John's shoulders with a towel and soon she was scratching huge flakes (embarrassingly many and large, to John) off his scalp and explaining how dandruff, especially among black people, was caused not only by a lack of moisture but by a lack of oil. "We're drier than most people, she said, "at least in America we are. . .
>
> As careful as a surgeon she divided his hair into dozens of segments and poured small amounts of oil between them. Then, using her fingers and especially her thumbs, she massaged his scalp vigorously, humming a little tune as she did.
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> After she'd thoroughly oiled and massaged his scalp, she amused herself by making tiny corkscrew curls, "baby dreads," she called them, all over his head. She explained that tomorrow he could wash out any excess (though surprisingly the oil seemed to have soaked in instantly and there didn't seem to be any), leaving his scalp comfortable and his hair shiny. . .
>
> It was wonderful to John, sitting between Orelia's knees, feeling her hands on his head, listening to her hum softly and talk to him, an intimacy he'd longed for all his life. But one he had assumed would never be for him. His sisters, with their unruly locks, had enjoyed the haven between his *mother's* knees and between each other's knees, and between his aunts' cushiony knees, as they fiddled with each other's hair, but he, as a boy,

> had been excluded. He imagined himself as a small child and how much he must have wanted to get between somebody's knees; he imagined the first few times being cajoled and then being pushed away. He knew that if he went far enough back in his memories he would come upon his childhood self weeping and uncomprehending over this.
>
> But now. Look.
>
> John knew there was a *full* moon, he could feel it in the extra sensitivity of his body, and the fire made a gentle droning sound in the stove; the leaping of the flames threw heat shadows across his face. He felt warm and cozy and accepted into an ancient women's ritual that seemed to work just fine *for* him. It turned him on and gave him an idea.

5. Hair grooming has also been a time for teaching lessons when the younger child combs or scratches the head of an elder woman. Such a moment occurs in Spike Lee's movie, *Do the Right Thing* (1989), when Jade "parts, greases, and combs" Mother Sister's hair on the apartment stoop and listens to Mother Sister's comments on the ways of the world.

6. hooks uses "girlpie" as a term of endearment to describe little black girls, a word similar to perhaps more common words like "sweetie pie" and "cutie pie."

7. Italics added for emphasis.

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