

Editorial note: Fashion Theory

Lucia Savi, Alexis Romano, Ellen Sampson & Nathaniel Dafydd Beard

Pages 561-568 | Published online: 26 Feb 2019

<https://doi.org/10.1080/1362704X.2018.1533331>

In our understanding of the dressed self, hair holds a particular position: both an aspect of the body and garment-like, an accessory, which may be altered at a whim. It is, to borrow Elizabeth Wilson's phrase, a "... frontier between the self and the not-self" (1985, 3). Often the peripheral aspects of the body are those that we decorate most extravagantly—as though in adorning them we are strengthening the boundaries of the self. Many other body parts are decorated and modified (fingernails, in particular, eyebrows and lashes and even teeth), yet the manipulation of hair remains both the most frequent and most diverse of these practices. Although the texture and color of our hair is, at least initially, biologically determined and hairstyles may be socially and culturally prescribed, hair is almost infinitely malleable. In the performance of our dressed identity, hairdressing is an integral tool. We cut, shape, color, and style it in order to transform image and regenerate an identity, and in so doing we negotiate many unspoken social and cultural rules.

As an object of fashion, hair takes many forms, from high-fashion hair on catwalks and in magazines to everyday hair styled at home. High-fashion hairstyling, an act of 'making' fashion, of producing an image for display, is a collaboration between stylists and other professionals; one which often depicts the stylist as artist or performer and the model as a canvas for someone else's work. Conversely, home hairstyling is often a habitual bodily practice, although one which is also performative and identity-making. This aesthetic labor includes processes such as washing and drying but also the covering of hair with wigs, hats and veils. These acts are negotiations with multiple agencies, not least the agency of the hair itself. Moreover, between home hairstyling and the catwalk sits the salon, a space of self-expression and ritual, in which coded practices are performed, and relationships mediated. The salon, personal and social space, like hair itself, crosses binaries between private and public, between home and the world. Away from the body, hair evokes mortality and histories, or serves as a keepsake, a reminder of the bodies to which it was once attached. Its liminal position between self and the world disturbs subject-object binaries, triggering disgust or compelling us to recollect. Our experiences of hair away from the body can be both nostalgic (a lock of a loved one's hair kept in a locket) and abject (piles of shorn hair in concentration camps). The bodily nature of hair enhances its capacity to recall those to whom it once belonged, a fact that is evident in the use of hair in mourning jewelry and artworks which deal with loss.

This special issue builds upon the Fashion Research Network symposium titled, "The Personal, Fashionable and Archival Spaces of Hair," held at Somerset House in November 2016 to accompany the exhibition, *Hair by Sam McKnight* (November 2016–March 2017). Curated by Shonagh Marshall, the exhibition served both as a retrospective of sessional and catwalk hairstylist Sam McKnight's work and an examination of the agency and role of the hair stylist in fashion image-making. The exhibition used photographs, videos, hairpieces,

tools, and full catwalk looks to contextualize the broader cultural significance of hair and the role of the session stylist within fashion. Taking the exhibition as a starting point, the interdisciplinary symposium sought to unpack the multiple meanings and connections of hair, by interrogating three real and conceptual sites in which hair is styled, displayed and preserved: the salon, catwalk, and museum. The day drew into focus the multiple ways that hair is both a source of agency for those who style, wear and own it, and an agent itself. By examining hair through the spaces it occupies and is displayed in, our speakers highlighted the multiple ways hair functions as a maker of meaning.

In editing this special issue, we drew both on the discussion and debate of the day and the curation and content of the exhibition to examine and highlight the numerous ways that hair can be addressed as an object of culture, a tool for identity construction, and as an agent in social interaction. However, this issue takes a broader approach than the symposium itself, looking at hair in the cinema, alongside black hairdressing, wigs and Orthodox Jewish salons, hair and wig-wearing in the eighteenth century, manscaping, Victorian hair jewelry and artist's practice, a hair dress and museum display, and hair as sculpture. This interdisciplinary approach, with papers from media studies, anthropology, history, fashion theory, and fine art, reflects the core ethos of the Fashion Research Network that, to understand and interpret the dressed self, we must bring together multiple approaches and fields.

Simultaneously, this special issue builds upon the scholarship presented in *Fashion Theory's* 1997 special issue on Hair. Only the fourth issue of the journal, it highlighted the importance of hair in our understanding and theorizing the fashionable self. Just as fashion studies have shifted significantly in the intervening 20 years, so has our understanding of hair. The earlier issue was notable for its engagement with hair as a marker of identities, particularly the ones that sat outside the mainstream canon of fashion. In the specific, these papers addressed individual hairstyles as representative of particular identities and modes of self-presentation: of the ways that a hairstyle can become a metaphor or synecdoche for its wearer. The five papers took diverse approaches, exploring the afro, and the once popular but now forgotten style "The Conk," alongside the significance of bobbed hair in China and of short or boyish hair for women in the early twentieth century, plus nineteenth-century hair jewelry. Beyond this interrogation of identity there are multiple thematic overlaps between the two issues, not least the discussions of both hair jewelry and black hairdressing practices. More broadly, both issues address hair as a source of agency for its wearers while simultaneously acting as a powerful material agent itself—whether by way of women subverting gender norms by imitating men, or men reclaiming power via personal grooming, or in the material traces of forgotten figures in the archive that speak in the present. An underlying theme unites both issues, that hair is a site on which identities are negotiated and performed, and as such is a powerful agent in our capacity to both self present and conform to social and cultural norms.

Since 1997, studies on hair from historical, material culture, sociological perspectives have expanded significantly, with publications including Banks' *Hair Matters: Beauty, Power and Black Women's Consciousness* (2000), Biddle-Perry and Cheang's *Hair Styling, Culture and Fashion* (2008), Althea's *The Politics of Black Women's Hair* (2009), Byrd and Tharps' *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* (2014), Tarlo's *Entanglement: The*

Secret Lives of Hair (2016), Stenn's *Hair: A Human History* (2016), and Vincent's *Hair: An Illustrated History* (2018), to name but a few. The acknowledgment of hair as a significant if impermanent cultural artifact reaches a comprehensive conclusion in editor Biddle-Perry's (2018) forthcoming multivolume series *Cultural History of Hair from Antiquity to the Present Day*.

Similarly, an increasing number of exhibitions have highlighted hair's many meanings and its potential as a material and medium of creative expression. As a marker of identity, hair was the theme of *Hair: Untangling Roots of Identity* (April 20–July 14, 2013) at Cornell University's Johnson Museum of Art in New York, and *Hair: Heritage, Attitude, Identity, Respect* at the Museum of Liverpool (February 13–August 31, 2015), which, through a local perspective, explored historical and contemporary aspects of black hair cultures. 2018 saw two exhibitions, which interrogated the narrative potential of hair and its significance in relation to global labor: *Hair! Human Stories* (June 7–26, 2018, Library Space, London) and *Material Contemplations in Cloth and Hair* (May 2–25, 2018, Constance Howard Gallery, Deptford Town Hall, London). The salon as a site of social interaction and identity formation has informed exhibitions such as artist Michael McMillan's *The Beauty Shop* at 198 Gallery, London (January 25, 2008–March 28, 2013), which examined the subject of black hair and cosmetics through the *mise-en-scene* of a salon. The creative and social milieu of the salon also underpinned *Beehives, Bobs and Blowdries* (February 17–April 7, 2018) at the Civic in Barnsley. Away from the body, hair has served as an important artist's material, an idea which has been explored in *Hair: Object of Desire and Culture* at Daniel Blau, London (2015) and *Hair and Skin* (July 9–August 15, 2013), curated by Isaac Lyles at Derek Eller Gallery in New York. Likewise, *Woven Strands: The Art of Human Hair Work* (January 9–September 16, 2018) at the Mutter Museum, Philadelphia, studied the ways hair was incorporated into the creative economy and material culture of the nineteenth century.¹

We seek to bring this same layered and transdisciplinary perspective to this issue. It begins in the real and imaginary space of the salon as a means of framing personal grooming and hairstyling narratives from the eighteenth century to the present day. From this vantage point and site of production and experience, essays explore the intersections of individual and social aspects of hair, on and away from the body, and the many ways personal accounts connect to broader histories. They position hair as a mediating layer between the personal and the social. Therefore, a common thread among authors questions how the various spaces of hair production function as complex territories of both self-expression and ritual.

Anthropologist Emma Tarlo provides readers access to the often-hidden, closed-off Orthodox Jewish wig (*sheitel*) and hair salon. Her extensive fieldwork in the USA and Britain reveals multiple layers of meaning—identifying the wig as a source of conflict and choice for women, and “of creative friction between religious regulation and fashion”—and the coded practices performed within (and outside of) the salon walls. There, the *sheitel macher*, or wig stylist, brokers intimate relationships and performs beauty work all while advising women on wig-wearing, which is itself a negotiation of religious observance, modesty, wealth, fashion, appearance and constructions of self. Kim Smith likewise pieces together a story of women's history and hidden players. In her case study of Trinidadian British singer Winifred Atwell, she positions the salon as a space of midcentury female entrepreneurship in the context of the “Windrush Generation” migration of Caribbean groups. Echoing Tarlo's

singling out of actual individual *sheitel* wearers and stylists, Smith deploys biography as a foundational method in her text. She demonstrates how Atwell was instrumental in professionalizing black hairdressing in Britain, linking her experience of integration, otherness and hair to that of a wider public. The article illustrates the many links that are to be made between such histories, the business of hair and hair products, and politics. The thread of the individual extends to Emma Markiewicz's study of hairstyling and wig-wearing in eighteenth-century England for men and women. Individuals' accounts are read alongside period journals and hairdresser's manuals, as well as visual representations in portraiture and caricature. Centering around the barber and perfumer's shop, with their emphasis on medical services, she explores the multilayered construction of physical appearance—based on moral outlooks, social status, understandings of health, and ideals of youth and beauty. At the heels of the Enlightenment, during which time individuals assumed more control over their own well-being, the styling of hair was a powerful means of self-transformation based on everyday life practices. Janice Miller's article provides a fascinating counterpoint to these ideas of everyday practices and the biological and metaphorical male body in her study of contemporary men's grooming, and on "manscaping" of body hair and the chest in particular. Taking the 1950s "Age of the Chest" (Armour [1958](#)) as a symbolic foundation of traditional masculinity, Miller asks how "deeper issues of masculine identity are being contested" in present-day social media representations of chest hair—a link to Tarlo's approach. Here, the act of grooming is self-transformation that connects to crisis and struggle, in the context of "a volatile political landscape where groups of men are attempting to reaffirm the boundaries of their masculinity and their dominance." These questions of power dynamics and identity politics of a white, western masculinity strike one as all the more compelling read after Tarlo and Smith's texts foregrounding hidden female voices.

We move from the realm of the salon to that of the cinema, which in ways further extends Wilson's "frontier between the self and the not-self," and representation and reality. Geraldine Biddle-Perry traverses literature, film and reality in her study of the character Maria's haircut worn by Ingrid Bergman in Paramount Pictures' adaptation of Ernest Hemingway's novel, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (dir. Sam Wood, 1943). Biddle-Perry shows how "the Maria cut" is a narrative of transformation in the deepest sense, in its on- and off-screen meaning for Bergman and its ramifications for film viewers: she explores the onscreen transformation of Maria's shaven head, from its "brutal cutting [...] potentially symboliz[ing] her and Spain's loss of innocence through war," to its styling into a "natural" ring of curls mediating "the dual demands of a Hollywood glamour aesthetic and [Bergman's] sense of personal and professional agency." In so doing she questions the relationship between manipulation and naturalness within Hollywood's "mechanics of glamour" and shifting notions of femininity in the actual hairdressing industry. Ali Criddle's article further illustrates the pull between multiple realities and selves through the junction of hair and film by tracing the swirl of the protagonist Madeleine's chignon through and beyond Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. Treating the motif of the coiled hair as the central theme of the film—a construct which allows the viewer to spiral between characters and times—she draws on Proust's own madeleine to example objects which trigger reminiscence and unravel linear time. She "traces the images of madeleines as multiple and multi-sensory and spirals across time, frame and page spaces to unpin and explore memory, moving image and encounter—strands wound together as in the coiled chignon of hair."

The final three articles show the myriad ways we might find and interpret hair in the museum collection, and the range of stories it can tell. They highlight the convergence of curatorial practice, art practice and practice-based research. In a poetic style that echoes her approach as an artist and art historian and her interest in late Victorian era mourning and remembrance, Jane Wildgoose chronicles the process of researching, creating work for and mounting the site-specific exhibition *Beyond All Price* at Waddesdon Manor. She discusses her aim of “thawing” the historical picture that is typically frozen in the museum archive, by focusing on the social and emotional life of objects and forging connections to visitors through their senses and memories. Hair is a central unifying element in this procedure, tying together the preserved lock of hair that triggers her reinterpretation of the collection and piece of hair-work she creates, to visitors’ engagement with the display. Conversely, curator Pauline Rushton delves deeper into the ethical issues related to the sourcing and display of human hair in museum settings. Rushton details the 2012 acquisition of a dress made from human hair extensions (by Liverpool dressmaker Thelma Madine of Nico Special Occasion Wear and Ryan Edwards, then Artistic Director at local hair salon Voodoo) for the National Museums Liverpool. The dress was specially made for Zoe Graham for the 2011 Alternative Miss Liverpool pageant, part of Liverpool’s annual Homotopia Festival. (Homotopia is a large-scale UK LGBT arts and social justice organization.) She explores how its construction of hair shades the many meanings of the garment, at once a work of fashion, fine art, performance and activism; as well the different display approaches taken to date and viewer’s reactions to the multifaceted object.

Lastly, we move from a garment constructed of hair to the sculptor Yasemen Hussein’s depictions of hair in metal, of wigs evoking period hairstyles for mannequins in the Museum of London’s display of the city’s eighteenth and nineteenth-century Pleasure Gardens. A conversation between Hussein and the museum’s senior curator of fashion, Beatrice Behlen, contextualizes the installation against Hussein’s artistic practice and personal relationship to and history with hair, one that was shaped by her gendered identity and feelings of cultural difference. We return to the theme of transformation, of hairiness and hairlessness, and everyday embodied practices via Hussein’s revealing words: “I sometimes wake up and feel like I want to shave my hair off. I would love to have a two or a three buzz cut to see if I could pull it off. Every day my hair tells me what it wants to do, whether it is to pull it back or leave it out. Every day is different.” These diverse papers represent only a fraction of the multiple and varied ways one might approach the study of hair and yet they illustrate the power of hair as an object of identity, creativity, memory and agency. Read together in one compendium, they demonstrate how wide the parameters of fashion studies and theory can be, and the many directions future research into hair might take, building upon the past twenty years of scholarship.

Notes

1 Many of these and other projects can be viewed on the digital platform www.infringe.com: *Infringe: Anthropology of Hair*, developed by Anthony and Pat Mascolo, a testament to the pervasive and multilayered role hair plays in today’s cultural landscape.

References

1. Armour, R. 1958. "The Age of the Chest." *Playboy Magazine*, July, 69–70.
2. Banks, I. 2000. *Hair Matters: Beauty, Power and Black Women's Consciousness*. New York: New York University Press.
3. Biddle-Perry, G. and S. Cheang, eds. 2008. *Hair: Styling, Culture and Fashion*. Oxford and New York: Berg.
4. Byrd, A. D., and L. L. Tharps. 2014. *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America*. New York: St. Martins Press.
5. Prince, A. 2009. *The Politics of Black Women's Hair*. London, ONT: Insomniac Press.
6. Stenn, K. 2016. *Hair: A Human History*. New York: Pegasus Books LLC.
7. Tarlo, E. 2016. *Entanglement: The Secret Lives of Hair*. London: Oneworld Publications.
8. Vincent, J. S. 2018. *Hair: An Illustrated History*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
9. Wilson, E. 1985. *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity*. London: Virago.

Author information

Alexis Romano, Adjunct Faculty, Parsons, the New School for Design,
romaa095@newschool.edu;

Lucia Savi, Curator, Victoria & Albert Museum, l.savi@vam.ac.uk;

Ellen Sampson, Curatorial Fellow, Costume Institute, Metropolitan Museum of Art,
ellen.sampson@metmuseum.org;

Nathaniel Dafydd Beard, Senior Lecturer, Coventry University London,
nathaniel.beard@coventry.ac.uk.