

Spring 2017

## A Delicate Knot: Photographing Black Girlhood and Womanhood

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### Recommended Citation

Brown, Nakeya. 2017. "A Delicate Knot: Photographing Black Girlhood and Womanhood." *Journal of Feminist Scholarship* 12 (Spring): 77-80. <https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/jfs/vol12/iss12/7>

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## VIEWPOINTS

# A Delicate Knot: Photographing Black Girlhood and Womanhood

Nakeya Brown

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I welcomed my daughter in 2012 after 9 months of anticipation. Girlhood returned in a very tangible way with her arrival. The stakes in womanhood grew higher as the two came in close proximity. I started to see girlhood and womanhood as two phases of femaleness that were intrinsically tied. Becoming a mother compelled me to reflect on the unique notions and traditions of black girlhood I experienced over the years. How would I pass those memories onto my daughter? Which ones were worthy of our attention? And, most important, what could those memories look like through the medium of photography?



The attainment of beauty for black women is embedded in multiple areas of our bodies—from skin complexion to body size, from facial features to hair texture. My work responds directly to our hair politics and addresses the levels of visibility and erasure, isolation and shared experience, self-care and harm it brings through girlhood and womanhood. So the novice, newly natural (but previously permed and weaved) mother in me decided that the hair norms thrust upon black women and girls deserve a moment of critical and gentle attention.

Multiple bodies of my photographic works were created to highlight the pleasure/pain paradox within the hair traditions of black girlhood and womanhood. *The Refutation of “Good” Hair* (2012), *Hair Stories Untold* (2014), and *Facade Objects* (2016) are lovingly critical of these experiences circulating within girlhood and womanhood. Together they reveal how within our communities hair became a tool to collapse the spaces of girlhood and womanhood. We could successfully look “girlish” by wearing “bo-bos,” barrettes, or beads in our hair. Looking “grown” was all a matter of hair straightening, or decorating our two-strand twists, locks, and braids with shells and gold-colored gems. I was interested in showing that girlhood could be recalled and womanhood can be revealed through different hair practices or choices.

*The Refutation of “Good” Hair* (2012) explicitly displays the texture enigmas introduced by using Anglo-Saxon standards as a yardstick for femininity and beauty. The “good hair” idiom, whether outwardly expressed or not, began with the straightening of black hair so that it appeared to mirror the hair texture of our white female counterparts. An affirmation or diss regarding black hair often teetered on its realness or fakeness, being permed or free form. These divisive reactions toward hair remain prevalent in girlhood and womanhood. This series gives the right of choice back to black girls and women, despite our having to deal with racial codes that exclude us in our plenitude from mainstream beauty.



*Hair Stories Untold* (2014) showcases a selection of beautification tools and processes that remain vivid in our memories of girlhood as individual moments worth contemplation. Often these moments, such as having our hair straightened with a hot comb or having braid ends sealed with a lighter, were first introduced to us in girlhood and continued into womanhood. They are forms of care but at the same time can inflict physical pain. This pain is mostly endured in the privacy of our kitchens, bathrooms, living rooms, and salons. It's an invisible but shared experience amongst us. This body of work embodies the invisibility of that pain and also reveals how within our upbringings we practiced self-grooming one and the same, irrespective of age. Black girls have long experienced beauty rituals, which continue into black womanhood.



In *Facade Objects* (2016), the nature of hair to collapse the space between black girlhood and womanhood is further explored. The series showcases profiteering, black-owned and white-owned, child and adult, perm kits to highlight normalcy of hair straightening amongst our young and adult circle of sisters. However, as much as this form of self-grooming is performed for the purpose of being seen, it homogenizes our fullness, erasing the nuances of our identities. The product packaging masks this fact with its girl and woman archetypes, devised to lure us in under the guise of heightened self-worth through physical appearance. Black beauty is to be consumed by girls and women alike, but the sense of self-worth is only attainable by mimicking the facade looking back at us.





The photograph has the power to share the mystique, meaning, and memories that black hair culture initiates in girlhood and continues into womanhood. With the making of each part, greasing of each scalp, and insertion of each twist, track, perm, or braid, there is the possibility to share a story, however raw or romantic it may be. Within my work, the photograph creates a space to reflect on how hair rituals and beliefs within black girlhood and womanhood overlap, crisscross, and intersect. Our stories converge so much that they form a delicate knot loaded with personal meanings, entrenched in a collective identity.