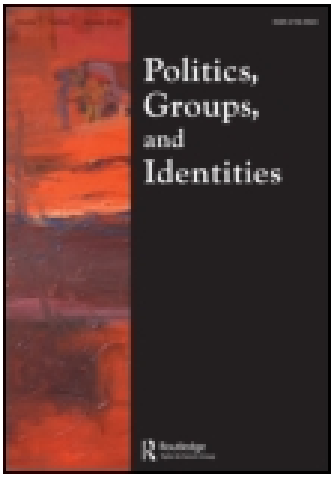

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"It's more than hair…that's why you should care": the politics of appearance for Black women state legislators

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"It's more than hair … that's why you should care": the politics of appearance for Black women state legislators

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African American women female state legislators navigate the politics of appearance differently from others. Black women's texture and style of their hair and their skin tone influences their experiences as state legislators. In sum, this essay contends that Black women's appearances have led to experiences that are linked to building their self-confidence, internal fortitude, and building their character, which they attribute to assisting them with dealing with adversities. In turn, these experiences impact their practices as state legislators.

Keywords: African American studies; women studies; representation; racial politics

None of us is responsible for the complexion of his skin. This fact of nature offers no clue to the character or quality of the person underneath – Marian Anderson

Hey, I am not my hair, I am not this skin
I am not your expectations, no
I am not my hair, I am not this skin
I am a soul that lives within
India Arie – I Am Not My Hair

I am shocked. It's upsetting to be described as chocolate, not just for me, but for all Black women and Black people. I do not find any humor in this. It is insulting and hurtful. – Naomi Campbell

People act like Black girls are born with a little tube of relaxer & a note that says, "My bad."- God. - Jermaine B

African American women face different challenges and opportunities in state legislatures because of their race and gender. Scholarship on how race and gender influence Black women's legislative experiences has often documented the marginalization, alienation, silencing, and invisibility and hypervisibility of this group of legislators (Barrett 1997; Hawkeworth 2003; Moncrief, Thomspon, and Schulmann 1991; Smooth 2001). Although such work often takes racial and gender identities as a starting point of analysis, none has critically investigated the embodiment of race/gender for Black women. Feminist scholars have observed that gender

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and race are dominant markers or experiences of actual bodies (Ahmed 2000; Alcoff 2006; Butler 1993). Scholarship on body politics—that is, work that analyzes power relationships that "regulate, denigrate, define or produce [the body] as well as … identify[ing] the ways different bodies are located and constructed" (Coole 2013, 165) often focuses on how diverse bodies are treated by policy makers, but seldom investigates constructions of the raced/gendered body of legislators themselves. The focus of this study is African American women who held elected seats in the Maryland state legislature during the 2011 session[1] and how body politics influenced their perceptions of themselves, their colleagues, and how their constituents perceive them. The complex and often ambiguous attitudes of cultural politics of race, gender, and aesthetics illustrate how the body is a medium of expression. Black women's bodies situate them in a unique place where their perception of self and beauty meets other social signifiers such as class status, age, generation, and sexual orientation. More importantly, the ways in which their bodies are viewed is related to constituent support, suspicion, and denigration from senior colleagues, and their perception of legislative norms in the statehouse.

I discovered the importance of Black women's bodies while conducting feminist life histories with Black women in the Maryland state legislature. The legislators disclosed that their skin tone and decisions about how to wear their hair influenced how their colleagues and/or constituents viewed them. The legislators' narratives point to the uniqueness of Black women state legislators' interpretations and perceptions of how the politics of appearance affect their legislative experiences. Pointing to the importance of the body's role in locating individuals on a continuum of privilege and marginalization, the women's narratives indicate how bodily markers are unevenly distributed across social hierarchies. Focusing on the intragroup differences among Black women exposes how the effects of colorism and hair texture can play a significant role in their legislative experiences.

While other scholarship has noted that the appearance of female candidates' influences voters perceptions (Devitt 1999; Kahn 1996) or Black candidates (Weaver 2012), scholars have yet to explore the impact of appearance on legislators. Other studies have documented that Black women legislators experience marginalization, stereotyping, and challenges to their authority (Brown 2013; Hawkesworth 2003; Smooth 2001) however, these studies failed to examine how appearance impacts legislative experiences nor do these studies offer an intragroup account of Black women's experiences in the statehouse. I will argue here that Black women's appearances have led to experiences that are linked to building their self-confidence, internal fortitude, and building their character, which they attribute to assisting them with dealing with adversities – specific to hair texture and skin tone. In turn, these life experiences affect their practices as state legislators as well as their experiences within the state legislature.

Black women's hair – the intersection of race and gender

The politics of Black women's hair reveals broad and complex social and historical realities. Blacks rate themselves and each other (even within families) on a "good" and "bad" hair scale. "Good hair is perceived as hair that is closest to White people's hair – long, straight, silky, bouncy, manageable, healthy, and shiny; while 'bad' hair is short, matted, kinky, nappy, course, brittle, and wooly" (Lester 2000, 204). Indeed, the Black hair business is lucrative. The first self-made Black woman millionaire, Madame C. J. Walker, made a fortune with her 1905 invention of the straightening comb and other Black hair care products. These products and procedures are necessary in turning "bad" hair into "good" hair.

To be sure, many link African Americans' preoccupation with hair as a direct byproduct of slavery, where miscegenation between White masters and Black slave women was common. This mixing led to increased variation of Blacks' skin tones and hair textures. Darker skinned

slaves with "bad" hair were sometimes relegated to field work while lighter skinned slaves with "good" hair had a "privileged" position as a house slave (Sims 1982). This caste system of hair textures and skin color has had far reaching effects on the psychological and social manifestations of Black society. Indeed, "some Black churches and other Black civic organizations used the brown paper bag test for skin tone and the fine-toothed comb or soda-can test for hair length and texture to admit or reject members" (Lester 2000, 205).

That "good" hair is closely associated with Whiteness leads to the social unacceptability of Black women's hair, leading some within the Black community to criticize those who chemically straighten their hair for falling victim to hegemonic racist ideals of beauty. Many Black women who chemically straighten their hair have been accused of internalizing feelings of self-hatred, or at the very least succumbing to societal pressures to transform and discipline Black hair to fit societal norms of beauty. As bell hooks forcefully states, "The reality is: straightened hair is linked historically and currently to a system of racial domination that impresses upon Black people, and especially Black women, that we are not acceptable as we are, that we are not beautiful" (2001, 115). However, it cannot be assumed that a majority of Black women who choose to straighten their hair in order to achieve "good" hair status are practicing self-hatred.

Judith Wilson finds that "hairstyling practices of African Americans represent a convergence of African and European needs, implements, and beauty ideals born out of the necessity to adapt to new environments in the new world" (1994, 13). Some African American women wear their natural hair as a source of racial and cultural pride. One African American woman professional in Rose Weitz's study articulated that her hair allows her to express her heritage. She also links her dreadlocks to a political position. "I consider myself in a constant state of protest about the realities of cultural alienation, cultural marginalization, cultural invisibility, discrimination, injustice, and all of that … my hairstyle has allowed me to … voice … nonverbally" (Weitz 2001, 680). In essence, a select number of Black women may assume reactionary positions to beauty culture mandates that challenge the good hair/bad hair dichotomy (Hooks 2001).

Bell Hooks notes that she received hostile and contemptuous stares when she gave a lecture to a packed auditorium and her hair was unprocessed (2001, 115), and she found other Black women to be the most judgmental. This finding is consistently echoed by other Black professional women who detail that other African Americans criticize their natural hair choices because such choices are feared to undermine their academic and professional accomplishments (Caldwell 1991; Grayson 1995; Hooks 2001; Lester 2000). As a result, several Black women often elect to straighten their hair for a job interview or maintain a straight hairstyle until they have been on the job for a while, proving their competence while their hair is a nonissue (Weitz 2001).

Social science research consistently indicates that women and minorities face a disadvantage in attempting to craft a professional image due to negative stereotypes, lower expectations, and work place norms that advantage White male standards of behavior and appearance (Alversson and Due Billing 1997; Rosette and Dumas 2007). As such, White women and minority men and women face obstacles in presenting their desired professional image. Gender is a double-bind for women who want to display professional characteristics, which are defined as typically male characteristics such as ambition, competitiveness, and competence. Thus, some women may not want to accentuate their femininity or attractiveness (Heilman and Stopeck 1985).

Conversely, attractive women make more money than less attractive women and are the recipients of more job offers and promotions (Hamermesh and Biddle 1994). Similar to women of other races and ethnicities, Black women must negotiate femininity and attractiveness in the work environment, yet Black women navigate both their race and gender to find a suitable way of presenting themselves to their colleagues. Minority men, specifically Black men, are also at a disadvantage[2]. In spite of their diminished maleness, however, Black men do not have to deal with gendered biases associated with being a woman. African American men's

natural hair can be acceptably worn in professional environments as long as it is short and conservatively groomed (Rosette and Dumas 2007). Thus, the politics of hair in a professional environment plays itself out differently for African American women. For professional some Black women, hair is not a trivial issue, nor is the politics of hair something they share with their male counterparts.

To be sure, Black women do not face the burdens of race and gender presentation better or worse/more or less than other minority women. Other minority women face race–gender disadvantages differently. The Western standard of beauty, exemplified by Mattel's Barbie doll – buxom, long legs, blond hair, blue eyes, pale skin, and European facial features – has little room for Black women's naturally kinky hair, ample derrière, thick lips, and dark skin tone (Grayson 1995). In the work environment, African American women's hair choices are often read as either unintended or intended personal *and* political statements. Given that "within the workplace as well as other social and institutional environments Black women have found that all too often choice of hair style has a tremendous impact on how our personal appearance and thus our personal value will be judged" (Grayson 1995, 23), it is not surprising that corporate culture expectations will clash with their individual sense of style and hair textures.

Colorism

Colorism is one of the many manifestations of racism. While racism is a systemic social process that structures American society, colorism is less discussed. Colorism and hair texture is part and parcel of a larger racial project that communicates meaning and status about race in the USA (Omi and Winant 1994). While scholars have explored how a candidate's skin tone can be a crucial factor in an election (Weaver 2012), little is known about how skin color affects Black women legislators' experience in the statehouse.

Scholars have noted that the racialization of appearances is a gendered process as well. Sexual violence against Black women during slavery produced racially mixed children as well as the systematic privilege of lighter-skinned Blacks (Hunter 1998). As a result, social status and skin tone are inextricably linked for some African Americans (Hughes and Hertel 1990). Skin tones are also categorized as "good" or "bad." With a "good" appearance resembling White features – small nose, thin lips, and light eyes – and a "bad" appearance resembling African features – full lips and a wide nose (Neal and Wilson 1989). Hair texture and skin color are important intraracial status indictors within the Black community (Gwaltney 1980).

Colorism as a subset of racial discrimination is experienced differently for African American women than for men. While both Black men and women experience privilege and discrimination based on their skin tone, color helps to define beauty (Hunter 2002; Wolf 1991) and, like hair, it is also a form of social capital for women. Feminist scholars contend that too often "beauty is power" because a woman's attractiveness is treated as equivalent to a man's intelligence, political influence, and/or physical strength (Lakoff and Scherr 1984, 279). Because there is more gender-specific emphasis on body image, the importance of physical appearance is different for women from men (Cash and Pruzinsky 1990). Beauty standards are more stringently applied to women than to men (Collins 1990).

Hierarchies of attractiveness result in women whose skin tone and facial features more closely approximate Whiteness being labeled as most appealing, and darker-skinned women being devalued because they do not approximate the beauty standards of Whiteness (Hunter 1998). Conversely, some light-skinned Black women are cognizant of the privileges that accompany their lighter skin tone and also recognize some of the negative intraracial effects surrounding their appearance. For example, light-skinned women have reported experiencing resentment, distrust, and rejection by other African Americans as well as challenges to their membership in the Black community

(Neal and Wilson 1989; Okazawa-Rey, Robinson, and Ward 1987). For many African American women, issues of appearance and identity are directly related to skin color. In the sections that follow, I present ways in which Black women state legislators in Maryland navigate these treacherous waters of hair and skin tone as elected officials.

Data and methods

The data used for this analysis are part of a sample ($n = 53$) collected between 2009 and 2011 with members of the Maryland state legislature. I chose to study Maryland because of its large number of African American women state legislators and the structure of the legislature, which makes it easy to identify how race and gender influence legislative behavior.[3] Feminist life histories were conducted with 18 of the 20 Black women Maryland state legislators between June and October 2011. I call them feminist life histories because feminist theorists across several academic disciplines have argued for the importance of locating and historicizing the lives of women (Bell and Nkomo 2001; Berger 2004; Collins 1990; White 2009). The life histories provided me with valuable insight about how identity has influenced legislators' decisions and challenged me, as a researcher, to understand my subjects' current attitudes and behaviors as well as account for how they might have been influenced by previous decisions made in other times and places. In the course of these feminist life histories, the Black women state legislators I interviewed crafted their narratives by drawing on native imagery and representing cultural mores that are indigenous or organic to their own biographical, generational, cultural, historical/material, and geographical situations.

Qualitative research methods are key for this study because, as Hawkesworth notes, quantitative techniques "devised to reveal uniformities of behavior are by design insensitive to difference, treating anything that deviates from the norm as an outlier or anomaly" (2003, 532). Furthermore, standard social science methodological techniques that attempt to isolate the effects of gender by controlling for race/ethnicity or by controlling for gender are at odds with efforts to trace the complex interactions of race and gender (Spellman 1988, 103). It is for these reasons that I utilize qualitative techniques, namely feminist life histories, to observe the nuances of how Black women's hair and skin tone are related to their perceptions of the state legislature, interactions with constituents and colleagues, as well as their behavior in the state legislature.

The feminist life histories I conducted were broken into three parts. The first focused on early life experiences – childhood through young adulthood. The next focused on their work in the Maryland state legislature, and the last section focused on their current private life – significant relationships and family. By the completion of the interviews, I had heard these legislators' life stories. Feminist life history interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were conducted in places convenient for legislators – their district offices, places of employment, or coffee shops. Only three feminist life histories were conducted over the telephone. Questions for the 2011 feminist life histories were informed from the elite interviews I conducted with members of the Maryland state legislature in 2009.[4] Because I had interviewed the majority of the Black women Maryland state legislators in my 2009 study, many were eager to participate in these longer life history interviews.

Through the use of feminist life histories, I was able to gather information about the Black women of the Maryland state legislature to provide a holistic picture of these women and how they came to be who they are as legislators. While I informed the legislators that their interviews were "on the record," I have replaced legislators' names with pseudonyms due to the candid nature with which some legislators engaged me in conversation. While it was impossible to

remove all identifying information, I believe that the pseudonyms provide a healthy amount of anonymity for the women in this study[5].

Initial questions about Black women's physical appearances were not included in the feminist life histories questionnaire. After the first three legislators mentioned their appearance, namely the ways in which hair and skin tone mattered in the statehouse, I began to incorporate questions about appearance in the feminist life histories. To be exact, I asked legislators if their appearance played a role in their legislative experiences. This broad question provided room for legislators to respond in terms of physical appearance broadly defined. In response to this question, legislators focused on clothing choices, hairstyles, skin tone, and body type; however, the majority of responses detailed the impact of their skin tone and hairstyles. The respondents shared similar stories, which indicated that I had achieved data saturation – where the stories were repetitive among informants. The legislators readily opened up, by providing specific examples of how Black women's bodies are read by their constituents and colleagues. African American women's hair and skin tones dominated these conversations. The legislators and I engaged in what Few, Stephens, and Rouse-Arnett refer to as sister-to-sister talk or "Afrocentric slang to describe congenial conversation or positive relating in which life lessons might be shared between Black women" (2003, 205). Engaging in sister-to-sister talk required a form of cultural competence, which mandated that I adopt an approach to "both reflect and respect the values, expectations, and preferences" of the Black women Maryland state legislators (Pinderhughes 1989, 163).

As with any case study, this study is a descriptive method and is not explanatory in nature. I do not contend the stories of these 18 legislators are representatives of Black women in general or African American women legislators nationwide. Additionally, the women's narratives are retrospective. While this article cannot fully capture the rich narratives of all of the women in this sample, I am confident that I have portrayed myriad of experiences that are representative of the group. The legislators' recollections of past events are subject to problems inherent with memory, yet the selected quotes are representative of the diversity of experiences of the women in this sample.

Legislators' narratives of hair and skin tone

Several of the Black women Maryland state legislators interviewed discussed their perceptions of their hair and skin color affecting interactions with colleagues and/or constituents. The state legislators in this study discuss how their skin tones influence how others perceive them. Next, Black women legislators detail how their chosen hairstyles drew different responses from their White (male) colleagues. Lastly, African American women legislators contend that their hairstyle impacts how constituents view them.

Dark skin/nappy hair

Two delegates began their interviews by sharing how they were teased growing up because of their dark skin tone and hair texture. As girls, they were subjected to ridicule because they did not fit the European standard of beauty. Indeed their rich chocolate complexions were the farthest thing from Barbie's pale skin tone.

Since "bad" hair is usually accompanied by darker skin, the experiences of dark skin/nappy hair often work in tandem. For example, Delegate Angela James expressed that she was often chided growing up in a small segregated southern town for being "drunk Lorraine's dark skinned nappy headed daughter" (personal communication, July 6, 2011). To be sure, some of the derogatory comments were made because her mother was considered the town drunk, but

Delegate James was also struck by how mean children and adults were to her over factors that she could not control. She stated that being a "bastard child with dark skin and nappy hair meant that people never expected me to succeed in life" (personal communication, July 6, 2011). Delegate James stated that she used the negative comments from her community to fuel her desire to succeed. Many years later, she returned to her home town to receive an award because of her accomplishments as Maryland state legislature and as the author of several books. She was showered with accolades by people who as children made fun of her.

> Little do they know, but their harsh and hurtful words made me stronger. Because I endured being called names like *picaninny* and *tar baby* I learned that words were only that, words. They have no physical power over me. Therefore, when I'm in the legislature people can say what they want about me. I know who I am. I'm here for a purpose. What people say can't deter me from reaching my goals (personal communication, July 6, 2011).

Delegate James added that she believed she was in the legislature to advocate for the voiceless. She added that she will not shrink from representing marginalized populations in spite of what others might say about her. The strength to push aside people's criticism of her was derived from initial bullying as a child due to her dark skin and course hair. Additionally, Delegate James commented that "people who call you names or try to make you feel bad for who you are will eventually have to recognize you for who you are, not just what your background is or what you look like. Substance always rises to the top; no one can take your character away from you" (personal communication, July 6, 2011). While Delegate James began her feminist life history interview identifying as "drunk Lorraine's dark skinned nappy headed daughter," she ended with a life lesson that aids her legislative work. Delegate Angela James noted that one should not let others' opinions dictate who one is or what one does. Instead, she is self-assured enough to use her own principles to guide her political agenda instead of looking for others to validate her positions.

Another dark skinned delegate shared a similar story about being teased for her ebony complexion. Growing up three decades later after Delegate James, in the 1980s, Delegate Julissa Moore centers her pivotal race–gender awareness moment as being a teenager in the 1980s during the popularization of hip hop culture, when watching music videos alerted her to the darkness of skin. "When you look at all the videos and things like that you always saw the very fair skinned women and this and that. So back then I was a dark skinned woman, or girl at the time, I was definitely and constantly reminded of that" (personal communication, July 20, 2011). Both Music Television (MTV) and Black Entertainment Television (BET) were launched in the early 1980s. This new medium broadcasted a rock star lifestyle into American culture and normalized a specific beauty standard. While the debate on how Black women are portrayed in music videos debate originated in the 1980s, conversations about the lack of dark skin video vixens are still a major point of contention (Whiting-Sharpley 2007). Indeed, as Delegate Moore explains, conceptions of beauty and the visual aesthetic of hip hop are inextricably linked. These depictions, like others, denigrate dark skinned women with course hair texture. "In hip hop culture, darker skin among women is a handicap to be overcome; dreaded, braided, or 'happy to be nappy' hair are 'no-no's'; and 'big,' as in body type is definitely not beautiful" (Whiting-Sharpley 2007, 36). Again, skin tone and hair texture are conceptually intertwined. Thus, this constant reminder of being dark skinned vis-à-vis popular culture sensitized Delegate Julissa Moore to her race–gender identity as being outside the beauty norm.

Like her older counterpart, Moore also details that while she was teased as a child because of her dark skin tone, she later used that pain to motivate her. "And you know, I think, you know obviously it's hurtful any time someone is teasing you or whatever but it also made me very

strong" (personal communication, July 20, 2011). When asked to explain how she made difficult legislative decisions, this delegate gave an example of voting against the party line. She found the strength to vote her convictions in spite of the potential political fallout based on her experiences being bullied because of her dark complexion. "You know, being bullied or teased whenever, I mean it's terrible the way it happened. But if you're able to channel that and use that to strengthen yourself [by believing] that no matter what anyone says [you know that] you are good, valuable, and a wonderful person. And my parents have always instilled that in me. No matter what anyone says about you, they do not define who you are. You define who you are" (personal communication, July 20, 2011). For both Delegates James and Moore, the trials and challenges related to hair texture and skin tone during their formative years shaped who they are as delegates in the Maryland state legislature.

Light skin/good hair

In contrast to the two delegates above, the lighter skinned delegates tell a different story. An understanding of colorism in the African American context would lead one to assume that light skinned individuals enjoy a more favorable status within the Black community and in mainstream America than their dark skinned counterparts. But two light skinned Black women delegates' narratives suggest that we need a more nuanced understanding of how skin tone can simultaneously privilege and marginalize their legislative work, depending on the context. Unlike Delegate James and Moore, whose stories are remarkably similar, the light skinned delegates tell two completely different stories about how their complexion impacts legislative performance.

Delegate Naomi Young, a middle aged, light skinned attorney and daughter of a prominent Baltimore civil rights activist is very outspoken on racial issues. Our meeting to conduct the feminist life history was our third professional encounter. Perhaps she was especially comfortable speaking with me because we had built a rapport, she was familiar with my project, or perhaps it is her nature to be brutally honest about race and gender issues within the Maryland state legislature. Delegate Young's interview began with an unprompted 20-minute soliloquy on how being a light skinned Black woman impacts her legislative work. Despite the fact that she expected they would work together and that older Black women who had been in the legislature for longer would mentor their younger counterparts, Young noted, "No one has mentored me, especially not the senior Black women in the legislature!" (personal communication, June 16, 2011). She mentioned that she has had difficulty working with other African American women in the legislature, and even accused a particular Black female colleague of undermining her legislative agenda.

> The most senior Black woman delegate opposes my legislation because I'm lighter than her. Delegate Bella Campbell used to be the lightest Black women in the legislature until I was elected. Another Black woman [names this other Black woman delegate] told me that Delegate Campbell worked against me on one of my bills because I'm lighter than she is! Seriously, she doesn't like me and actively works to sabotage my bills because I'm lighter than her (personal communication, June 16, 2011).

Because she has lighter skin than Delegate Bella Campbell, Delegate Young believes that her skin tone works to the detriment of her legislative agenda. Furthermore, here her ability to build coalitions with other legislators who also represent Baltimore city is comprised because of her skin tone. Delegate Campbell is not only the most senior African American delegate, elected in the early 1970s but she is also one of the longest serving members of the Maryland legislature.

Clearly, Delegate Young felt as if she could have benefited from Delegate Campbell's 40 years of knowledge from the Maryland state legislature. As a newly elected legislator, Delegate Young was astonished by Delegate Campbell's behavior. Even though she did not expect Delegate Campbell to support her bills just because they were Black women serving the same constituency, Delegate Young did *not* expect Delegate Campbell to actively campaign against her bills. More than anything, Delegate Young expressed that she was appalled at the reason for Delegate Campbell's hostility.

While scholars have examined the influence of intraracial politics, most notably light skin versus dark skin, we do not often witness overt tension between light skinned and lighter skinned people of color. This unusual debate is also an anomaly within a legislative context. Scholarship posits that the prevailing sources of contention between legislators are matters of partisanship (Lee 2008), leadership (LeBlanc 1969), constituent wishes versus following the party line (Nokken 2000), or positioning oneself for reelection (Marcus and Hanson 1993; Mayhew 1974). No mention is made of skin color. Delegate Naomi Young's narrative illustrates that there may be other causes to consider that serve as sources of legislative disagreement between delegates.

Another young light skinned delegate began her feminist life history by explaining that although she is biracial, she self-identifies as a Black woman. Delegate Yasmin Wood's father is a light skinned Black man who married a White woman during a time period when anti-miscegenation laws prohibited these unions in Maryland and Virginia. As a result, her parents lived in D.C., and after they divorced, she moved with her father and step-mother to a Maryland suburb of D.C. Delegate Wood's remembers that she was "teased a lot for being light skinned, having a big curly afro, braces, and glasses" (personal communication, July 6, 2011). She noted that the neighborhood children were particularly cruel and would constantly torment her because of her looks. "I was an awkward looking teen; looking back on pictures, man, it was bad" (personal communication, July 6, 2011). Delegate Wood quickly notes that she still encounters negative reactions from people because of her skin tone. In particular, this delegate states that "there's an older Black woman delegate who treats me poorly because I'm light skinned[6]" (personal communication, July 6, 2011).

During my 2009 interview with Delegate Yasmin Wood, she shared that she is able to build coalitions among various racial groups in her district because she is a light skinned African American woman. Lightheartedly, she joked that constituents who are unaware of her racial background assume that she is a member of their racial group. For example, Delegate Wood heavily campaigned for minority votes by visiting racial/ethnic-based social and civic organizations in her district. When she visited African American associations she was viewed as a Black woman. Delegate Yasmin Wood is married to a dark skinned Black man who is a well-known political figure in Prince George's County. The name recognition of her husband, which is tied to his race, also helped the majority Black section of Prince George's County presuppose that Delegate Wood is African American. However, Delegate Wood also noted her Jewish constituents believe she is Jewish due to her naturally curly hair, European facial features – including slight freckles, and light skin tone. Her Jewish constituents use inclusive words such as "us" and "we" when they talk with her. Lastly, Delegate Wood shared that her Latino constituents believe that she is Hispanic. She notes that people speak Spanish to her and assume that she can speak and understand the language. Because of this, Delegate Wood jokingly adds that she has picked up a few Spanish phrases to communicate with constituents but that she is not a fluent Spanish speaker. During her first campaign, Delegate Yasmin Wood admitted she did not readily disclose her racial identity but allowed voters to assume what they wanted. This strategy may have helped her win election, as each of the three major racial and ethnic groups in her district voted to unseat the incumbent African American woman delegate.

The narratives of Delegates Wood and Young complicate the lighter is better than darker dichotomy that posits that lighter complicated Black women have more advantages than darker skinned women. Instead, their narratives illustrate that colorism informs how Black women treat one another in the statehouse as well as how constituents perceive them.

Reactions by Whites in the statehouse

Three African American women legislators stated that their White colleagues have made comments about their hair or other Black women's hair. They all conclude that Whites are amazed at the versatility of Black women's hair and prefer Black women's hair to be straight. Delegate Olivia Jenkins noted that she frequently overhears her White colleagues talk about other Black women delegates' hair – especially those that switch between weaves and braids. She chuckled that "they're always trying to figure out how we do a lot of different things to our hair" (personal communication, July 28, 2011).

Senator Pamela Price shared that she recently transitioned her hair from chemically straightened to natural hair. She wore weaves as part of the transitioning process, and then when her hair was fully natural she wore twists. Senator Price noted that she received more compliments with the long weave than either her own chemically straightened hair or the twists (personal communication, June 21, 2011). Echoing these sentiments, Delegate Justine Anderson added that her White male colleagues on a high-ranking legislative committee consistently complimented another Black woman committee member when she donned a long silky straight black weave, but gave no such approval when her hair was braided. When I asked why she believes that her White male colleagues pay so much attention to her Black woman colleague's hair, Delegate Anderson stated that it is because "White women wear their hair the same way for 40 years. We like to change our hair more often; men notice the change" (personal communication, July 25, 2011). Delegate Anderson saw Black women's freedom and propensity to don a variety of looks ranging in lengths, textures, and colors as a key difference from White women. These observations, while elucidating the cultural climate of state legislatures for some African American women, do not immediately point to consequences for the political respect or influence of Black women legislators.

In spite of the versatility of Black hair, several African American women legislators noted that they tended to straighten their hair. Delegate Ingrid Jefferson expressed that "I haven't gotten my hair [professionally] done in years! I don't worry as long as it's clean and well groomed" (July 19, 2011). However, she describes her hair as too soft to do much with. As a result Delegate Jefferson normally wears her wavy shoulder length hair pinned up in a low bun. She commented that her age and other responsibilities leave her with little time to style her hair. Similarly, Delegate Tanisha Harold added that she, too, does not have much time for her hair. As a result, she chemically straightens her hair to make it more manageable. Delegate Harold noted that she restricts her activities because of her hair. She added that she does not engage in "strenuous physical activity that might cause my hair to 'revert back' to its natural state" (personal communication, July 28, 2011). Both Delegates Jefferson and Harold commented that their White colleagues compliment them when their hair is straightened.

In sum, the European standard of beauty exists for Black women within the legislature. The narratives of the women of this study indicated that some White legislators seem to prefer and comment positively on weaves rather than other hairstyles commonly worn by Black women. While this hair preference does not impact Black women's legislative work, it is interesting to note that informal interactions within the legislature indicate that White legislators, men in particular, prefer Black women with straight hair. While Whites' statements on Black hair do not have a substantive legislative impact, they point to the level of congeniality between colleagues.

It is also necessary to acknowledge that White legislators did not comment on the Black women's skin tone. This may indicate that discussions of colorism are limited by what society and subgroups in society feel is acceptable to discuss or acknowledge. White legislators probably did not reference Black women's skin color because this is socially unacceptable for them to do so.

Natural hair[7]

Delegate Leila Baker is the only one Black woman in the Maryland state legislature who wears her natural hair styled in an Afro blow out. Her easy smile and friendly personality made it effortless to engage in sister-to-sister talk even on our first encounter. Delegate Baker was recently elected and was not part of my original sample from 2009. She was my first feminist life history interview scheduled; consequently, this interview set the tone for subsequent interviews. Indeed, her statement on hair cued me in on the importance of hair texture and skin tone in the Maryland state legislature. Delegate Baker stated, "I'm the only Black woman legislator with un-pressed hair. I'm going to get it pressed tomorrow just to do something different. But yeah, I'm the only one who has nappy hair" (personal communication, June 16, 2011). The reference to having "nappy hair" because it's in its natural state was meant as a joke, but it also connotes imagery of "bad" hair because it is not in the appropriate style for her new role as a state legislator. Along those lines, she connected her appearance to her struggle to present herself as "traditional" legislator. As a lesbian, this legislator referenced feminine attire that highlights one's womanly features as well as act ladylike behavior as markers of "traditional" Black women legislators. However, Delegate Leila Baker stated that her new colleagues and constituents should get adjusted to her appearance. "You have to learn how to present yourself 'just right' as a new legislator. I'm still learning. But hey, I'm elected now so they have two years to deal with me looking like this" (personal communication, June 16, 2011). This newly elected delegate demonstrates that she is comfortable in who she is and what she looks like. Delegate Leila Baker is unapologetic for her natural hair. If she decides to change her hairstyle, it is because she wants to switch it and not because she wants to fit into a look that others might be more comfortable with at least at the outset of her first legislative term.

Similarly, expressing that she is comfortable with her hair but others would prefer for her to straighten her hair, one middle-aged Black woman senator detailed how her choice of hairstyle is sometimes controversial. Senator Bailey Smith's narrative reveals a generational shift between the older and younger cohorts of Black woman legislators:

> I spoke with someone yesterday and they were speaking about another legislator who doesn't identify with his community. That bothers me because I can't hide the fact that I'm Black. Interestingly enough, on this cover [holding up the *Baltimore Jewish Times* magazine from 2003, which she's on the cover of] I was concerned about my braids [hairstyle]. And I kept thinking that older Black women don't necessarily like braids. My mother is one of those women, you know, that kind of woman who will just look at me and go "hmm!" But I am what I am. And sometimes my hair is in braids. Better in braids than all over my head – I'm still who I am. (March 13, 2009)

Senator Bailey often wears her hair in braids when the legislature is out of session. This traditionally African hairstyle is not typically preferred by more conservative or older African American women. The irony in her statement is that this senator is proud of who she is and sees a direct connection with her Black constituency and African roots – yet she is also concerned with her hairstyle on the cover of a magazine because of what Black women in her mother's generation will say about her. Her hairstyle points to a larger cultural conversation about braids or other ethnic hairstyles in the workplace. Although ethnic hairstyles have begun to infiltrate the corporate world, the practice is still controversial.

In addition to her mother's admonishment about Senator Bailey Smith's hair on the cover of the *Baltimore Jewish Times*, she acknowledged that her hairstyle drew a lot criticism from both her Black and Jewish constituents. Senator Smith's dark brown hair was styled in cornrows. She admits that the cornrows were an unexpected and risky hairstyle for the cover of the magazine.

> I was like, oh God, the whole Jewish community is going to meet me in cornrows! And it wasn't even like singles, they were cornrows. I mean straight up cornrows. And I'm thinking, "This is going to be tough." And it wasn't braided like the way AI, my normal stylist, would have done it. And it was not the look I would have liked, but nevertheless, she braided it. And then I see myself on the cover of this paper and I'm thinking "well, your senator's Black." The message was one thing, your senator's Black. You don't have to say it. What are you going to say? You don't think that this is a Black face? So I do think that looks are really at the top. And the thing is, I like the pictures, I'll be honest, I like them. (personal communication, June 30, 2011)

When the periodical hit the stands, Senator Smith quipped that this was the first time some of her Jewish constituents were aware that they had a Black senator representing them in Annapolis. She laughed this off saying that she does a good job representing Jewish interests although she is an African American woman, but she adds that in spite of her pro-Jewish stance on legislation, her racialized look might have startled some of her Jewish constituents who may not have known that she was Black. Although Senator Smith liked her image on the magazine, she acknowledged that she received serious backlash from her cover picture. "Some people especially don't want to see you on the front of *Jewish Times* in braids. And so, I got criticized, I had people who called me, my neighbors cussed at me and I was like 'when was the last time you read the *Times*?' But they were mad about it" (personal communication, June 30, 2011). While the picture did not affect Senator Smith's legislative behavior, it did impact how some of her constituents viewed her. She noted that the cover may have been the first time that some of her Jewish constituents realized that their senator was an African American woman. This overtly racial hairstyle alarmed both her Black and Jewish constituents because they may have viewed braids as an unacceptable choice for their state senator. Senator Bailey Smith noted that all her constituents preferred her hair a certain way. "They want you to look like flat and straight like this; if you saw my hair naturally, they'd be like 'Good God!'" (personal communication, June 30, 2011). While Senator Smith laughed off this 2003 hair controversy in our 2011 interview, it is clear that she has altered her appearance as a result. Now she readily admits that "I do think that Black people, Black women are burdened by that, and how we look" (personal communication, June 30, 2011).

Senator Smith now keeps her natural hair pulled back during legislative sessions. In my three encounters with Senator Smith she has worn her hair in a bun, either with her own hair or with a hairpiece for additional fullness. Senator Bailey Smith noted the difference in how White people and Black people comment on her hairstyle. One White woman colleague in her law firm told her "'I really like your hair when it's pulled back like that.' I don't think they [White people] understand. This clearly is grease and water [keeping her hair slicked back in this bun]. And I just don't want to get that nappy stuff to get up top, like shhhh, I'm rushing all day trying to keep mine down." (personal communication, June 30, 2011). Similar to Delegate Harold, Senator Smith works hard to ensure that her hair does not "revert back" to its natural state. She notes that White people do not notice that her hair is natural as long as she keeps it in a tight bun. As previously mentioned, the Black women in this study surmise that Whites prefer Black women's hair to appear to be straight. But Senator Bailey also notes that Blacks also prefer for her hair to straight. "And Black people, they are large; they really are large on their hair" (personal communication, June 30, 2011). In this situation, Senator Smith found her preferred hairstyle of choice offended both her Black and Jewish constituents. She now wears her hair in a bun, which seems to satisfy both sets of constituents.

Lastly, Fatima Coleman, a newly elected legislator, went into extreme detail about the importance of her hair on the campaign trail. This young, dark skinned and reserved delegate opened up during her feminist life history only after I expressed interest in learning about her hair. This is the point in the interview where our sister-to-sister talk began. We met in the conference room of her law office. Delegate Coleman wore dark micro-braids held in place with pins to sweep the braids to one side of her face. Delegate Fatima Coleman explained that her hair has played a major part in her identity formation over the years, yet her hair varies in importance depending on her life circumstances. This young delegate seemed comfortable discussing how her approach to hair has matured as she experienced new milestones in her life.

Delegate Fatima Coleman cut off all her hair after graduating from college; during law school she experimented with several different natural hairstyles. As she began to look for employment after law school, she wore weaves and wigs to hide her natural hair for job interviews. After securing her first job in the legal profession Delegate Coleman decided to chemically straighten her hair, but, all the while she really longed for natural hair. Additionally, her chemically straightened hair began to fall out while she was pregnant. Delegate Coleman alternated between wigs and weaves again, but this time to compensate for her damaged hair. When she decided to run for office she was in the process of transitioning back to her natural hair. While campaigning, she would wear her transitioning hair in what she termed "a very funky hairstyle" (personal communication, July 29, 2011). Her husband, a political advisor, suggested that she needed a more professional looking hairstyle for the campaign. In addition, other professional African American women whom she trusted advised her to chemically straighten her hair to appear more polished. They cautioned her that her current hairstyle might distract voters. They said Delegate Coleman needed "go along to get along hair" (personal communication, July 29, 2011). While she pondered what to do, Delegate Fatima Coleman used older pictures of herself with chemically straightened hair for her campaign fliers. However, she knocked on doors with her "funky hairstyle" during the campaign because she did not want to relax her natural hair. Delegate Fatima Coleman shared her encounter with an older African American man on the campaign trail who eventually convinced her to straighten her hair.

> He opened the door and asked who I was after I handed him the campaign flier and other informational leaflets. I told him that I was running for the House of Delegates and I wanted his vote. He asked who the girl on the flier was and I told him that it was me. He looked really intensely at the flier and then back at me. He concluded that I was not the same person. He stated that woman on the flier was cute. I again told him that I was the woman on the flier. He said that if that was the case, that I'm cute and that he'd vote for me … once I fixed my hair. (personal communication, July 29, 2011)

Delegate Fatima Coleman chemically straightened her hair shortly after this encounter. She showed me a picture of her campaign flier and then another picture with her natural hair. We both agreed that her natural hair photo was much nicer than the campaign flier, but her soon-to-be constituency expressed that they liked her hair straight. After she won election, she cut her own hair in her bathroom using her husband's clippers. Delegate Fatima Coleman described this feeling as freeing and liberating. She wore a wig to the swearing in ceremony and wears her hair in micro braids during session. Delegate Coleman explained that hair is a part of who she is, how she expresses herself, and that she is happiest when her hair is natural. But she does not wear her natural hair out during her legislative duties in Annapolis or when meeting with constituents. Delegate Coleman can keep her natural hair and camouflage it when necessary, but think she will chemically straighten it again.

The narratives of Black women with natural hair indicate that legislators delicately negotiate how to present themselves. While straightened hair may be the preferred style of some constitutes

and colleagues, some women are opting to embrace their unprocessed curly, kinky, or wavy tresses.

Conclusion

The narratives of the women in this study illustrate that that their hair and/or skin tone influence their perceptions of self, interactions with one another, their constituents, and their White colleagues in the Maryland state legislature. Additionally, their life-long experiences around skin tone and hair texture influence their self-perceptions and their behavior as elected officials. Black women's legislative experiences are connected to what they look like. Previous scholarship that takes for granted that Black women legislators will have the same or similar legislative experiences because they are Black women miss the complexity of how race/gender is embodied for this particular group of legislators. Furthermore, rather than simply making comparisons between racial and gendered groups of legislators, I consider the diversity of physical appearance and, consequently, the body politics of Black women in the statehouse. As a result, I am able to examine intragroup differences among Black women legislators to offer new insights about their role of colorism and hair style/texture on their legislative experiences.

Understanding the politics of skin tone and hair style/texture of Black women state legislators has important political implications. First, knowing how Black women are judged based on their physical appearance is helpful for Black women political elites. This study may serve to validate the experiences of other Black women elected officials who may feel that their appearance have influenced their political interactions was unique to them alone. Instead, this study has shown the Black women elected officials have similar experiences as well as the importance of physical appearance in one's legislative life. Next, political psychology studies that mostly rely on experiments to illustrate that physical attractiveness of candidates are often a heuristic for voters (Brown, D'Andra Orey, and Bonnette 2014; Herrick, Mendez, and Pryor 2010; Lawson et al. 2010; Sapiro 1981–82). This is the first study to use feminist life histories to obtain the narratives of Black women state legislators about the relevance of their appearance in the legislative roles. As such, this study breaks new ground in both the methodology used and the subject pool. Lastly, this study speaks to broader implications for how Black women may navigate electoral politics in the third wave of Black politics – meaning the transformative leadership of Black elected officials in the "post-racial" Obama era, comprised of leaders from a generation of Blacks who do not feel cut off from the larger society and are determined to move beyond the moods and methods of their predecessors toward improving Blacks' ability to live the American Dream (Gillespie 2012). Here we see that Black women are not "post-racial" because the embodiment of both race and gender, as seen in their hair texture/style and skin tone, impact their engagements with colleagues, constituents, each other, and largely impact their legislative experiences. These women do not transcend race; indeed, the somatic markers of both race and gender are bound together in the physical personhood of Black women state legislators.

The feminist life histories combined with my elite interviews from 2009 indicate that light skinned Black women delegates do not necessarily have a legislative advantage over darker skinned Black women legislators. They both face unique challenges and benefits because of their skin color and hair texture. It is important to note the similarities in how their appearance aids their legislative work. In some instances, African American women's childhood experiences based on their appearances have helped to mold them what they perceive to be successful legislators. On the other hand, some Black women legislators also contend that mistreatment based on their skin color and hair texture follows them into adulthood and, specifically, into the Maryland state legislature.

This study has broached this subject, but further work is needed to more fully elucidate the impact of colorism on legislators' political behavior. The legislators in the study universally employed an intersectional approach to understanding Black women's hair as a distant and unique feature of their cultural appearance. As such, the Black women legislators detailed how cultural norms impact their legislative experiences. These narratives illustrated that some African American women still face adversity and unique challenges based on their appearances even in a supposedly post-racial society. Furthermore, these narratives illustrate the perceived and real need to alter one's physical appearance in order to be viewed as competent and acceptable. Conversely, this study also demonstrated that hair and colorism do not necessarily negatively affect Black women in politics. Indeed, a number of women in this study used their hair and skin tone to their advantage. Because all of the Black women in this study were able to get elected and reelected we cannot conclude that they are all disadvantaged when they wear their hair a certain way or because of the shade of their skin. However, this study makes it apparent that context matters.

In a profession where people use physical cues to communicate who they are, the substantive differences in self-presentation styles of minority women legislators have political implications. These findings may have practical ramifications of natural hair and colorism insofar as electability and bill passages success may be jeopardized, yet further research is needed to solidify these claims. Because of the raced/gendered constructions of beauty, Black women face different challenges and opportunities in their self-presentation than Black men, White men, and White women. Even comparing Black women state legislators among themselves reveals interesting narratives of colorism. Indeed, skin color shapes how legislators interact with one another – especially among Black women lawmakers. Here we see that perceived unity or a sense of linked fate among Black women might be a surface level assessment that fails to account for differences among this group of state legislators. The perceptions expressed by the women in this study highlight the possibility of intragroup competition and disagreements based on hair texture and skin tone.

Notes

1. In 2009, this number was distributed among 15 delegates and 5 senators and between 14 delegates and 6 senators in the 2011 session. Maryland is an important site for study because, as of 2012, women accounted for 30.9% of the state legislature, and one of its two senators was a woman. The state ranks eighth in proportion of women serving in state legislatures nationwide and, during the 2011 legislative sessions, Maryland had 20 Black women state legislators.
2. Black men are economically emasculated by White men in a patriarchal society built upon racism and sexism (Davis 1981).
3. During the 2009 and 2011 legislative sessions, Maryland had 20 Black women delegates. (In 2009, this number was distributed among 15 delegates and 5 senators and between 14 delegates and 6 senators in the 2011 session.) The Maryland legislature is comprised of part-time representatives who dedicate a 90-day period annually to law making. Maryland's political culture is regarded as individualistic, akin to that of a business, where individual legislators broker deals and orchestrate political favors (Elazar 1972). While the party structure is highly organized, legislators have the ability to act as individuals, especially regarding policy areas in which some have specialized knowledge (Smooth 2001). The 2009 study included 51 in-depth, semi-structured, and open-ended interviews that I conducted with Democratic Maryland state legislators. Because all the African American women legislators were Democrats, to control for partisanship I interviewed only members of this party. This restrained association of partisan ideologies, which are often coupled with a legislator's race and gender. The General Assembly includes 47 Senators and 141 Delegates elected from 47 districts. The multi-member districts are comprised of four representatives—one Senator and three Delegates. Maryland's short legislative session requires a structure that facilitates lawmaking at a relatively quick pace. Delegates are given only 90 days to act on over 2300 pieces of legislation, including the State Budget. As such, Maryland has a highly organized committee structure in which leaders in both chambers are responsible for assigning other members to committees.

4. In-depth, semi-structured, open-ended interviews were conducted with all 20 of Maryland's Black women legislators in 2009. I also conducted interviews with Anglo men, Black men, Latino(a)s, Asian American men, and Asian American women legislators. Because the interview questions provide for open-ended answers, the legislators were able to express themselves and narrate their stories freely. During the interviews, I utilized the so-called "soak and poke" method (Fenno 1978, 2003). This method allows me to delve deeply into legislators' responses to provide a thick description of their views on identity and representation. Inclusion of the 2011 feminist life histories helped to substantiate information provided through the 2009 elite interviews. Unlike the elite interviews, the feminist life histories are more in-depth and detailed. This method enabled the women to share their story as well as provide an in-depth view to who she is.
5. By removing the names and concealing some of the more personal narratives of the legislators in this study, the findings offer limited accessibility. I sought to carefully select the silences and chose how to present the legislator's stories in a way that presented them in a favorable light. Although all their interactions with me were on the record—indeed, I had a tape recorder and took copious notes—in the vast majority of my interactions with the legislators and their staff, much of what was shared with me may not have been meant for public consumption. While the legislators knew that I was working on a research project that would one day be published, their interactions with me were often relaxed, familiar, and personal. The hypervisibility of Black women—meaning the prominence of Black women on the national, cultural, and political landscape—pushes Black feminists to reimagine how we present Black female subjects and voices. I made the decision to combat the hypervisibility of Black women politicians by providing my subjects some anonymity in this study.
6. Because the delegate does not disclose the name of her malevolent colleague, we might assume but cannot confirm that both younger light skinned delegates identify the same Delegate Bella Campbell as their tormentor.
7. Natural hair refers to hair that has not been chemically altered. Natural hair among Black women is on the rise. In a study conducted by Mintal, a consumer spending market research found, Black women with natural hair has grown ten percentage points in a year, from 26% in 2010 to 36% in 2011. This report also documented that sales of relaxer kits have decreased by 17% between 2006 and 2011 (Healy 2011).

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