

WHAT'S WITH BENEATHA'S HAIR?

From "Hair-Raising"

by Andrea Benton Rushing

From *Black Looks: Race and Representation*

by bell hooks

From "Oppressed Hair Puts a Ceiling on the Brain"

by Alice Walker

Vocabulary Warm-Up

Section A

1. Rushing is acting like an evangelist by trying to convert others to the belief that natural African-American hair is beautiful.
2. Walker marvels at her hair's unruly antics. She probably talks about how amazing and lively her hair is, how it stubbornly resists her attempts to comb or arrange it, and how it does its own thing, regardless of how she might want it to behave.
3. If someone had mahogany fingers, they would be reddish-brown and look hard and strong, and perhaps somewhat gnarled like tree branches.
4. Walker means that her hair looks different when exposed to moisture; her use of the term sensually responsive almost suggests that her hair has feelings of its own, particularly in relation to moisture. She certainly sees her hair as a living, feeling entity, almost like a person. My hair is definitely not sensually responsive; it is always fine and limp.

Section B

1. a
2. a
3. c
4. a
5. d
6. a

Section C

1. Nappy hair is fuzzy, like the short fibers raised up by brushing fabric like velvet or wool. The meaning of the word is related to its etymology.
2. Kinky hair is tightly curled or twisted. The two meanings could be related in the sense that something unconventional twists or turns away from what is considered normal. Kinky hair has come to be considered unconventional because American beauty norms value straight silky hair, so embracing kinky hair would be unconventional.
3. Cropping something means to cut it off or make it smaller in dimensions.

Section D

1. Given her poise, I would expect her to keep her head up and not show any emotion about the grade; she would accept it calmly.
2. The next generation will probably be mesmerized by wearable interactive technology, like glasses that can access the internet, or perhaps even by technology that directly connects our brains to the internet, so that we can message friends or watch videos just by thinking about it.

3. Diligence will result in success if it also allows time for relaxation; it can result in mental breakdown if it leads someone to obsess over how to use every moment of his or her day.
4. Hamlet finds his uncle less than kind because he murdered Hamlet's father and then married his mother. Kin are often kind by being supportive of each other no matter what, but they can also be less than kind when they think they have the right to interfere in their relatives' lives or judge them.
5. I think that scholars studying the aesthetics of early twenty-first century media would find that black people are represented and valued in diverse ways, but that white aesthetic values still heavily influence what is considered beautiful. There are some examples of prominent black people with dark skin and sometimes even natural hair who are considered beautiful and attractive, but studies have shown that American culture does confer advantages upon black people who have light skin and straightened hair.
6. We have clubs in our school – like drama and poetry – that give us space to express our playful behavior, and even cultivate such antics. I resist those who try to negate me by finding ways and places to express my ideas and energy to create new things.
7. My family affirms me by supporting who I am and what I strive to do with my life. People at school who are jealous of my determination and accomplishments try to negate me and thwart me from my goals.
8. I wish that people would be more self-aware about how they limit themselves by internalizing the values and expectations of others, rather than discovering and pursuing what is important to them. I wish people would critically examine the idea that money equals happiness rather than mindless internalizing the idea that they should pursue a career that pays a lot of money rather than something they care about and enjoy.

Section E

1. c
2. c
3. d
4. a
5. a

Check for Understanding

1. d
2. b
3. c
4. c, d, f
5. a
6. a
7. a
8. b
9. a
10. b

Writing and Discussion

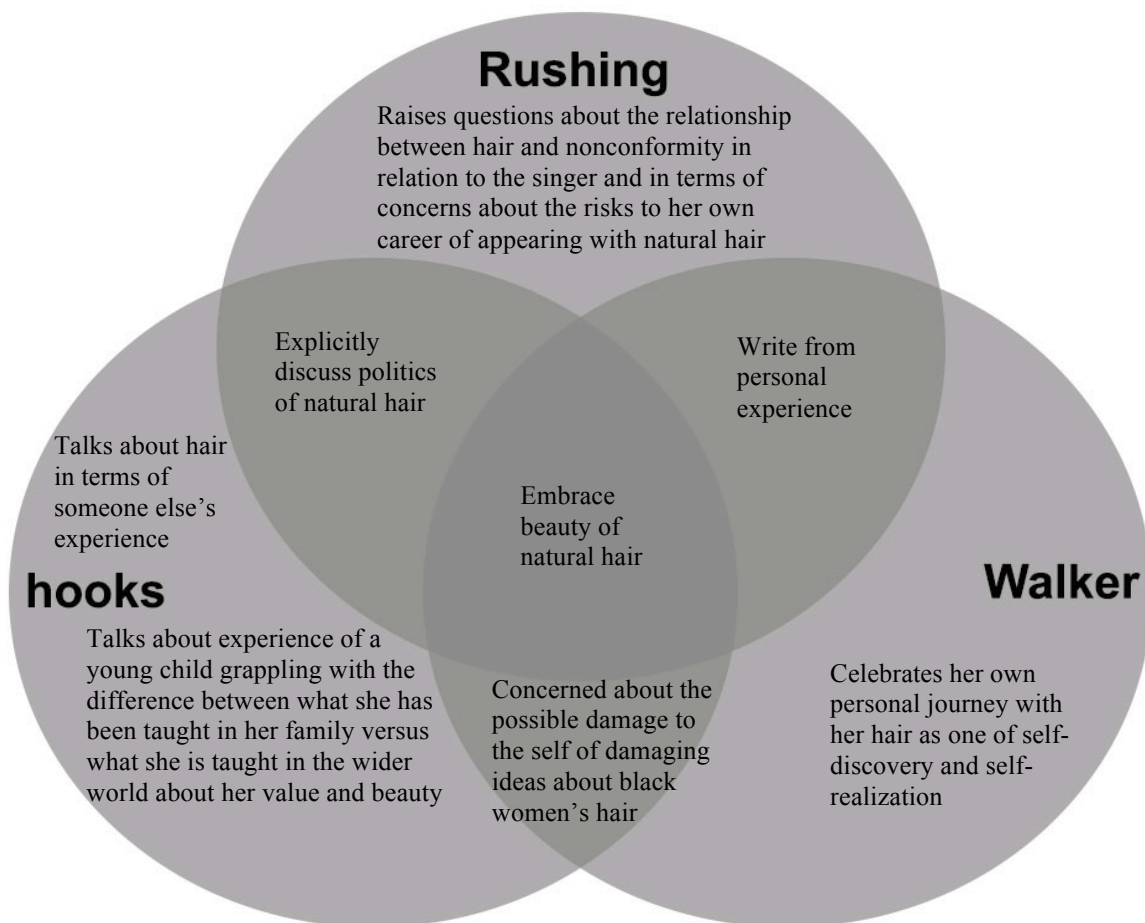
Section A: Why does hair matter?

1. Table A-1: Points of view about African-American hair

Excerpt	Points of view about African-American hair	Key rhetorical choices and pieces of evidence used to advance this point of view
Andrea Benton Rushing	<p>Rushing grew up with friends and family going to great lengths to straighten their hair</p> <p>Rushing thought Odetta’s natural hair was a key part of her “regal poise” that all the black women she’d seen with straightened hair had never achieved.</p> <p>Some people supported her bravery in wearing her hair natural, though her family didn’t understand.</p>	<p>Rushing quotes things she commonly heard: “Men like women with long hair.’ ‘Thank God the baby doesn’t have that picky nappy hair her mother’s daddy has.’”</p> <p>“She had a regal <i>poise</i> and power that I had never seen in a ‘Negro’“(as we called ourselves back then) woman before—no matter how naturally ‘good’ or <i>diligently</i> straightened her hair was.”</p> <p>“brothers I didn’t even know encouraged my heart, ‘Looking good, sister,’ ‘Watch out, African queen!’”</p> <p>“Grandmama Price shook her head and mourned what I’d done to ‘all that pretty hair’”</p>
bell hooks	hooks describes how a friend’s daughter internalized the idea that the straightened hair and lighter skin of more white-looking girls were more beautiful than her African-American looks, and was angry about this denigration of her own beauty, but didn’t know how to express the contradiction between her personal beliefs about her value and the cultural reality.	hooks imagines what the daughter might say if she knew how: “She was angry. And yet her anger had no voice. It could not say, ‘Mommy, I am upset that all these years from babyhood on, I thought I was a marvelous, beautiful gifted girl, only to discover that the world does not see me this way.’”
Alice Walker	Walker argues that deciding to wear her hair natural and embracing its beauty were key to her own freedom and spiritual growth.	Walker describes in detail the steps she took toward letting her hair grow out natural and finding the political and spiritual fulfillment she sought in doing so, first wearing long, braided extensions made from Korean hair: “I loved paying a young sister for work that was truly

		<p>original and very much a part of the black hair-styling tradition.”</p> <p>She then marvels at her natural hair once it had grown out: “My hair was one of those odd, amazing, unbelievable, stop-you-in-your tracks creations -- not unlike a zebra’s stripes, an armadillo’s ears, or the feet of the electric-blue-footed boobie - that the Universe makes for no reason other than to express its own limitless imagination.”</p>
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2. Figure A-2: Key similarities and differences in ideas about African-American women’s hair



3. Students can talk about how Rushing and Walker use personal narrative to explore their experiences of embracing the beauty of natural hair and their “coming out” process in terms of wearing their hair natural and the reactions they faced, while hooks writes more analytically in

order to reflect critically on how the internalization of society's preference for straightened hair (and light skin, white aesthetics generally) continues to impact generations of young black girls.

Section B: Beneatha's hair: natural and ugly or treated and mutilated?

1. Table B-1: Ugly hair?

Evidence/quotations/ language from hooks' writing on the idea of natural hair being ugly	What you think hooks means	How hooks' ideas can be applied to Beneatha	Evidence/quotations/language from <i>Raisin</i> reflecting Beneatha's ideas about her hair
<p>“Not only is she fundamentally convinced that straightened hair is more beautiful than curly, kinky, natural hair, she believes that lighter skin makes one more worthy, more valuable in the eyes of others.”</p> <p>“she has <i>internalized</i> white supremacist values and <i>aesthetics</i>, a way of looking and seeing the world that <i>negates</i> her value”</p> <p>“She was angry. And yet her anger had no voice. It could not say, ‘Mommy, I am upset that all these years from babyhood on, I thought I was a marvelous, beautiful gifted girl, only to discover that the world does not see me this way.’”</p>	<p>hooks means that the girl believes that she needs to straighten her hair in order to be considered beautiful in the eyes of society.</p> <p>hooks means that the girl has accepted the values of beauty that suggest that her own natural looks are not worthy.</p> <p>hooks means that the girl feels betrayed by the beliefs she has internalized but doesn't know how to challenge them.</p>	<p>Beneatha has been straightening her hair up until the time in which the play takes place.</p>	<p>“My hair—what's wrong with my hair?”</p> <p>“Oh, no—not ugly ...But it's so hard to manage when it's, well—raw.”</p> <p>“It's not mutilation!”</p>

2. Table B-2: Mutilated hair?

Asagai's view of Beneatha's treated hair	Evidence/quotations/ language from <i>Raisin</i> reflecting Asagai's view	How Walker might respond to Asagai's viewpoint	Evidence/quotations/ language from Walker
<p>Asagai thinks that the way Beneatha straightens her hair is an unfortunate dismissal of</p>	<p>“You wear it very well ... very well ... mutilated hair and all.”</p>	<p>She would likely agree that Beneatha was oppressing her hair, as she herself had done in</p>	<p>“I realized I had never been given the opportunity to appreciate hair for its true self.</p>

her natural beauty.	<p>“And so to accommodate that—you mutilate it every week?”</p> <p>“But what does it matter? Assimilationism is so popular in your country.” (I, ii)</p>	the past.	That it did, in fact, have one. I remembered years of enduring hairdressers - from my mother onward - doing missionary work on my hair. They dominated, suppressed, controlled.”
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3. Students can talk about how what’s at stake in this conversation is how Beneatha defines her own identity. As Walker notes, embracing the beauty of her natural hair was key to her own personal development. Asagai draws Beneatha’s attention to the way that she forces her hair to conform to American standards of beauty at the expense of her natural beauty. While Asagai does so playfully, hooks might more urgently argue that if Beneatha continues to treat her hair she is fundamentally negating herself in a harmful way.

Section C: Beneatha’s haircut: what does it mean and why does it matter?

1. Table C-1: Beneatha’s haircut

Ruth’s view of Beneatha’s haircut	Evidence/quotations/language from <i>Raisin</i> reflecting Ruth’s view	How Rushing might respond or suggest that Beneatha respond to Ruth’s viewpoint	Evidence/quotations/language from Walker
Ruth thinks that Beneatha’s hair shameful and ugly.	<p>“Girl, you done lost your natural mind!?! Look at your head!”</p> <p>“it’s what aint’ been done to it! You expect this boy to go out with you with your head all nappy like that?”</p>	Rushing might suggest that Beneatha try to persuade Ruth to consider her natural hair as beautiful and that she should be proud of it.	“I talked about how the personal is political and kinky hair was beautiful enough to jump out in public without a straightened disguise. Like an <i>evangelist</i> , I tried to convert shocked <i>kin</i> , bored friends, and folk on picket lines with me to the wonders of our natural hair.”

2. Table C-2: George versus Beneatha on the haircut

George’s response to Beneatha’s haircut	Evidence/quotations/ language from <i>Raisin</i>	How hooks’ ideas can be applied to George’s views	Evidence/quotations/ language from hooks
George thinks that Beneatha is just trying to be different to seem more educated than others, and that there’s nothing about their African heritage worth embracing.	<p>“Oh, don’t be so proud of yourself, Bennie—just because you look eccentric.”</p> <p>“That’s what eccentric means—being natural.”</p> <p>“Let’s face it, baby, your heritage is nothing but a bunch of raggedy-assed spirituals an some grass huts!”</p>	hooks might argue that George has internalized cultural standards that oppress him.	“Not only is she fundamentally convinced that straightened hair is more beautiful than curly, kinky, natural hair, she believes that lighter skin makes one more worthy, more valuable in the eyes of others.”
Beneatha’s response to George/defense of her haircut	Evidence/quotations/ language from <i>Raisin</i>	How hooks’ ideas can be applied to Beneatha’s views	Evidence/quotations/ language from hooks
Beneatha now embraces the beauty of her natural hair and refuses to be ashamed of it.	<p>“That’s up to George. If he’s ashamed of his heritage—“</p> <p>“How can something that’s natural be eccentric?”</p> <p>“Because I hate assimilationist Negroes!”</p> <p>“It means someone who is willing to give up his own culture and submerge himself completely in the dominant, and in this case <i>oppressive</i> culture!”</p>	hooks would applaud that Beneatha no longer internalizes standards of beauty that negate her own.	“she has <i>internalized</i> white supremacist values and <i>aesthetics</i> , a way of looking and seeing the world that <i>negates</i> her value.”

3. Beneatha’s decision to cut her hair is a perfect example of how the personal is political. Beneatha is both attempting to express herself and her beauty in ways that make sense to her as an individual, but she is also trying to stand apart from the dominant ideas of

beauty that privilege a white aesthetic (light skin, straight hair). Students will obviously want to discuss the strong and vehement opposition that Beneatha immediately encounters from many sides. They might use hooks to note the ways in which Beneatha's attempts to determine how to express herself are fraught with struggle because they run counter to dominant ideas of beauty shaped by a white aesthetic. Walker might encourage Beneatha to keep going, to keep discovering the wonders of her natural hair, while Rushing might argue that the opposition she has encountered shows how important it is for her own sake and that of the generations to come that she maintain her determination.