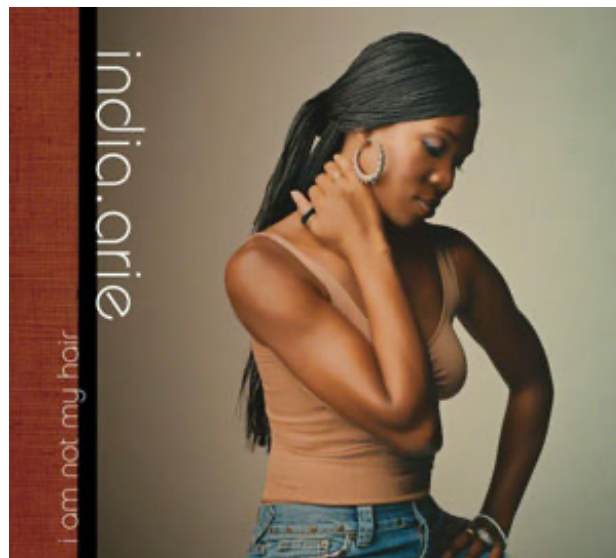


Exploring an “Alternative Way of Thinking” that Demonstrates How Singer/Songwriter India Arie is Using Her Song, “I Am Not My Hair” (2005) as a Tool to Show the Multitudes of Blackness in an American context.

1. **Research Interests:** Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies, African American Studies, Black Performance Theory, Postcolonial Theory, Black Feminist Theory
2. **Audience:** Interdisciplinary Africana Scholars
3. **Artistic Mediums:** India Arie’s song, “I Am Not My Hair” (2006)



INTRODUCTION:

In this paper, I will explore an “alternative way of thinking” that demonstrates “how” singer and songwriter India Arie is using the lyrics in her song, “I Am Not My Hair” (2006) as a tool to show the multitudes of Blackness in an American context. This paper examines a pop-culture moment that asks— how is “I Am Not My Hair” a potential case study

that can be investigated as 1) a contemporary rejection to the white gaze,¹ and 2) a “precursor” to the 2019 CROWN Act?² (“Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair Act). I will use Black feminist theorist— Audre Lorde, and her theoretical concept of “outsiderness” as well as Performance theorist— Nadine George-Graves, and her theoretical exploration of “Diasporic Spidering”³ to execute a linguistic and thematic analysis of the song, “I Am Not My Hair.” In doing so, I will show “how” Arie’s song explores the question— how is the Black female body constituted in response to outsiderness (as defined by Lorde)?⁴ Arguably, Arie is creating new forms of narrative agency and corporal representation (specifically for the Black female body) in theatricalized spaces.

When gathering materials for this research topic, the questions I had about race theory and African American history began to evolve: how can Black hair be used as a lens to understand the performance of race, gender, and one’s ability to confront their own external versus internal modes of expression? A potential thesis began to emerge: could there be a third avenue of expression which is then an internal push back on the external pressure of systemic formations of cultural identity? To this point, how can the materiality of hair act as an entry point to examine the various modes of expression throughout the African Diaspora? This question allows me to interrogate Black female corporality and constructions of identity that one may embody through their hair as a contemporary form of socio-political resistance. In this paper, from a Black Performance Theory⁵

¹ Becca Gercken, “Visions of Tribulation: White Gaze and Black Spectacle in Richard Wright’s ‘Native Son’ and ‘The Outsider,’” (*African American Review* 44, no. 4 (2011), 633–48. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23316247>.

² Torrie K. Edwards, “From the Editorial Board: Tangled Discrimination in Schools: Binding Hair to Control Student Identity,” (*The High School Journal* 103, no. 2, 2020), 53–56. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26986613>.

³ Thomas DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez. *Black Performance Theory*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 33-44.

⁴ Audre Lorde. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984), 113.

⁵ DeFrantz and Gonzalez, *Black Performance Theory*, Foreword.

(BPT) perspective, I will complete a lyrical and thematic analysis of “I am Not My Hair.” As a result, I will demonstrate the necessity of this production and examine “how” it is a tool that represents an “alternative space” needed to reflect on the multitudes of Blackness in an American socio-political context. The following sections of the paper demonstrate specific fragments of the song that offer three alternative ways of viewing the concept of Blackness in an American context. Ultimately, Arie is “doing” with hair the way Lorde is “doing” with her identities because (1) the song seems to challenge established ideas of beauty (rooted in a Eurocentric beauty standard), (2) it encourages listeners to engage in a paradigm shift about the stylistic elements of Black hair, and (3), it promotes a pluralistic perspective by recognizing the validity of multiple viewpoints (by including a diverse array of characters in the music video and Akon’s voice in the backdrop of the production).

In Lorde’s text, *Sister Outsider* (1984), she highlights the importance of identifying the personal as the political and its ability to illuminate our strategic choices of self-expression in a broader societal context. More specifically, Lorde heavily relies on signifying and generating new scholarship that disrupts the cyclical nature of racist patriarchal thought.⁶ After completing a textual analysis of *Sister Outsider* and *Diasporic Spidering, Constructing Contemporary Black Identities* (2014), this paper attempts to “do” with Black hair⁷ the way Lorde is trying to “do” with her identities as a Black, female and queer person in America— and— the way George-Graves is trying to “do” with the figures of her book as she experiments with “how” Black individuals are negotiating their spiritual identities internally and their physical bodies externally.

⁶ Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, 113.

⁷ Tameka N. Ellington, *Black Hair in a White World*, (Costume Society of America. Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 2023), xv.

Heavily leaning on Lorde's framework of outsidership and George-Graves research material on Diasporic Spidering pulls the song, "I Am Not My Hair" beyond spaces that solely celebrate its creation as an example of 21st century popular cultural phenomena. From a public policy perspective, it is pivotal to highlight "how" this performance medium echoes the mission of the 2019 CROWN Act;⁸ an act that bans race-based hair discrimination. The necessity of "I Am Not My Hair" (released in 2006) emphasizes the legislative need (and limitations) for policies that protect all Black people against race-based hair discrimination like the CROWN Act (established in 2019). Viewing the creation of the CROWN Act solely from a legislative standpoint, without considering an interdisciplinary lens, can have limitations which include: a lack of media representation, a failure to recognize the intersectionality of discrimination, and an absence of the historical and cultural factors that consistently contribute to biases against Black hairstyles.

This paper aims to provide intersectional case studies that are also interested in "doing" with Black hair the way Lorde is trying to "do" with her identities as a Black, female and self-identified lesbian person in America. My research in part will provide a scholarly basis for supporting and expanding the CROWN Act. This legislation has begun to recognize forms of self-expression that are neither made explicit nor addressed in the First Amendment. It is now up to scholars to study, expand and critique new formative spaces for identity. Based on an in-depth literary analysis of Fashion and Costume scholar, Tameka N. In Ellington's recent text, *Black Hair in a White World* (2023), it is necessary to contextualize the role of Black hair and its complexities within an African American historical framework. It is crucial to situate the

⁸ Senator Cory A. Booker S.3167 - CROWN Act of 2019. Introduced in Senate: 01/08/2020.
<https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/3167>

devaluation of Black hair as a point of analysis by first noting its direct ties to enslavement.⁹

Examining the consequences of slavery from a historical perspective have provided new archives that speak to the multiple ways in which Black hair is discriminated against and overly manipulated to adhere to white beauty standards. Scholars like Ayana Byrd, Lori Tharps, Cheryl Thompson, and Ingrid Banks have each examined the importance of redefining¹⁰ how Black hair is used as a tool to explore an alternative space of expression and the multitudes of Blackness. Ellington notes that discriminatory practices and policies against Black hair are a global problem, especially prevalent in America. Recent and contemporary Civil Rights Investigations documenting the repetitive nature of these discriminatory acts include: reports of Andrew Johnson¹¹ (a wrestler who was told by a referee to cut his dreadlocks off before a match), stories of Britney Noble Jones¹² (a news anchor who alleged that she was fired from her job for wearing braids), and equity initiatives designed for young girls like Faith Fennedy¹³ (a student who was sent home because her braids violated the school's dress code). The following sections of this paper indirectly uses the previously listed examples as legislative case studies that will move an analysis of Arie's performance work forward. In brief, my research employs Black feminist thought¹⁴ and key aspects of Black Performance Theory (BPT) to provide a more nuanced and

⁹ Shane White and Graham White, "Slave Hair and African American Culture in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," (*The Journal of Southern History* 61, no. 1, 1995), 45–76. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2211360>.

¹⁰ Ellington, *Black Hair in a White World*, (Costume Society of America. Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 2023), xv.

¹¹ Michael Gold, and Jeffery C. Mays. ("Civil Rights Investigation Opened After Black Wrestler Had to Cut His Dreadlocks." *The New York Times*, 22 Dec. 2018), *NYTimes.com*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/21/nyregion/andrew-johnson-wrestler-dreadlocks.html>.

¹² Charisse Meyer, Jones and Zlati. "What's in a Hairstyle? A Lot. New York City Bans Bias against Black Hair." (*USA TODAY*, 2019). <https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2019/02/18/black-hair-protected-same-laws-ban-discrimination-nyc-says/2906013002/>. Accessed 11 Dec. 2023.

¹³ Ileana Najarro, "'Our Hair Is Our Identity': What Educators Need to Know About Hair Discrimination Laws," (*Education Week*, 5 July 2022), www.edweek.org.

¹⁴ Ellington, *Black Hair in a White World*, (Costume Society of America. Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 2023), xx.

interdisciplinary understanding of the lyrical and thematic significance of the song, “I Am Not My Hair.”

Other potential research questions to consider in future iterations of this paper include: in what ways is Arie exploring how “hair matters?” What is the “third space” of “exploration” that Arie seem to be reflecting through their performances— that each step outside of two key societal tropes— 1) “natural hair equals authenticity” and 2) “straightening hair or wearing wigs equates one with subjecting to white standards of beauty?” To that same point, how can this paper begin to problematize the ways in which “the authentic” is conceptualized? For the purposes of this research paper, I will explore one key question— how is “I Am Not My Hair” a potential case study that can be investigated (from a lyrical and thematic perspective) as a contemporary rejection of culturally constructed Eurocentric beauty standards (light skin tone, straight hair, slim body type and a narrow nose) as well as an early indication to the establishment of the CROWN Act?¹⁵

II. AUDRE LORDE’S CULTURAL EMERGENCE & BLACK HAIR’S POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Lorde (1934-1992) was an African American civil rights activist whose scholarly and creative work has had a significant impact on the concept of intersectional feminism. As a New York City native, she was born to Caribbean immigrant parents and found innovative ways to explore issues related to race, gender, and sexuality. There are important conceptual and methodical intersections between Lorde’s literary interventions and the act of using Black

¹⁵ Edwards, “From the Editorial Board: Tangled Discrimination in Schools: Binding Hair to Control Student Identity,” 53–56. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26986613>.

Performance Theory (BPT) to explore Arie's performance as a key point of analysis. Leaning on other BPT scholars like Daphne Brooks, Kwame Anthony Appiah, Paul Gilroy and Nadine George-Graves helps me articulate the significance of Arie reimagining the role of Black hair through performance. From a methodological standpoint, this act of reimagining¹⁶ will be explored through a lyrical analysis of Arie's song. Conceptually, an examination of Arie's lyrical structure and word choice can contribute to Lorde's concept of outsidership.¹⁷ In *Sister Outsider*—Lorde seems to describe both a tone of hopelessness and a craving for scholarly transformation. For example, after attending a New York University Institute for the Humanities conference, Lorde states in her essay, *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House* (1984)—

“It is a particular academic arrogance to assume any discussion of feminist theory without examining our many differences, and without a significant input from poor women, Black and Third World women, and lesbians. And yet, I stand here as a Black lesbian feminist, having been invited to comment within the only panel at this conference where the input of Black feminists and lesbians is represented. What this says about the vision of this conference is sad, in a country where racism, sexism, and homophobia are inseparable.”¹⁸

It is evident that Lorde is “responding” to oppressive societal structures that limit her own (and others) access to self-expression. For instance, she writes, “it is a particular academic arrogance....” Exposing the institutionalized nature of academia as a whole provides Lorde a systematic basis to share her own personal experience as an “outsider.” Then choosing to strategically link the programmatic aspects of the institution to a descriptive quality like

¹⁶ DeFrantz and Gonzalez. *Black Performance Theory*, 35.

¹⁷ Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, 113.

¹⁸ Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, 110.

“arrogance” forces the listener to determine their own positioning in the dynamic. In very few words, Lorde is outlining the power dynamics as well as the superiority complex that exists between herself as a “Black lesbian, feminist” and the institution that organized the event— and most importantly— what is lost in the absence of these voices. Furthermore, associating a descriptor like “arrogance,” an inflated sense of superiority, to this idea of the “academic” provides context to its faults. These faults (rooted in exclusionary practices according to Lorde) may include a hindering of knowledge-production, creative intervention and social change. Calculatedly, Lorde notes the limitations of the academy’s “aspirations” as she questions: *“What this says about the vision of this conference is sad, in a country where racism, sexism, and homophobia are inseparable.”*¹⁹ Lorde developed a discursive contingency plan to address any seen and unforeseen ways in which academic institutions could begin to include “Black and Third World women.” In other words, her work of constructing narratives that prioritize the needs of Black women has resulted in a more complex understanding of Blackness as a whole. Examining Lorde’s methods of analysis through the lens of Black hair is necessary when attempting to explore other entry points into the historical significance of oppression. In brief, throughout her collection of essays, Lorde emphasizes the necessity of “seeing” more Black feminists and lesbian perspectives (marginalized perspectives) in elite and predominantly white spaces. As a result, and in a broad sense, this paper highlights the role of one singer (Arie) who actively “responds” to oppressive systems tied to some of the harmful aspects of America's political and cultural framework, with a particular emphasis on the role of the Black female body. More specifically, I am interested in examining “I Am Not My Hair” as a performance

¹⁹ Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, 110.

medium that attempts to explore the question— How is the Black female body constituted in response to “outsiderness?”²⁰

III. BLACK PERFORMANCE STUDIES & SOCIO-POLITICAL MOVEMENTS PREVALENT IN THE EARLY 2000s

Throughout African American history, oral, visual and embodied art were the main means of knowledge transmission accessible to enslaved people. It is crucial to situate this analysis in a historical framework of capital development because by the 1600s, enslaved African people became the primary commodity of trade. 400 years later, (in the 21st century), the financial legacy of the slave trade remains as Black Americans’ participation in the legal, economic and social paradigm of America has been systematically denied since the birth of this country. Due to this legislative exclusion, consequently, it is imperative to position their literary and visual narratives constructed both orally and creatively as legitimate forms of knowledge production. It is necessary to examine these concepts and methodologies as embodied responses to a history of colonization, enslavement, Jim Crow and racial inequity. Emphasizing the entangled nature of these political institutions through a performance studies framework will offer an alternative way to examine the historical complexities of conflict and memory with an equally multifaceted approach. Racial inequality is an integral part of American law and society. Therefore, it cannot be easily reversed through legislation. Through a series of theoretical analysis, we can explore other functions and patterns used to challenge oppressive (and exclusionary) practices, with the hope of achieving economic, social, and political progress for all people.

²⁰ Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, 110.

Critical scholarship documenting BPT²¹ exists as a literary account of expressive forms of the Black transatlantic and its African diasporic roots. Black performance scholars provide analysis and vocabulary to articulate the structural complexity and diversity that was at one point absent from Western practices of knowledge-making and preservation tactics. Black performance's disciplinary umbrella includes anthropology, musicology, dance, theater, visual arts and literary studies. In the late 20th century, black performance became a public discourse used to complicate and provide aesthetic and literary theory that counters Western perceptions of blackness; a subordinate concept wrongfully tied to fixed social practices that oppose Eurocentric conceptions of whiteness. Using BPT to examine African American cultural productions (including: the lyrical and thematic framework of "I Am Not My Hair") will allow a deeper analysis that highlights an "alternate way" of exploring the multitudes of Blackness in an American socio-political context.

Relevant early 2000s U.S. social movements that Arie may be responding to in her creative work include: the rise of Hip-Hop culture, post 9/11 Xenophobia and Anti-Immigrant Sentiment; the early 2000s also witnessed the rise of online feminism and social media activism. For instance, platforms like Twitter and Facebook provided a space for feminists to connect, raise awareness, and mobilize for various causes. Additionally, the early 2000s saw the United Nations adoption of the Millennium Development Goals, including a goal on gender equality. In sum, the post-9/11 world brought complex and contrasting dynamics to racial and feminist perspectives. While there were significant challenges, including increased discrimination and racial profiling, there was also a renewed feminist activism that sought to address the gendered

²¹ DeFrantz and Gonzalez, *Black Performance Theory*.

dimensions of conflict and security, as well as to promote social justice, equality, and the rights of marginalized communities. It is crucial to note that these issues continued to shape the discussions and activism of both racial and feminist movements in the years that followed.

III. LYRICAL ANALYSIS OF

“I AM NOT MY HAIR”

In Lorde’s text, *Sister Outsider*, she uses her personal and professional experience as a lens to critically assess the social issues most prevalent in America. Lorde compiled a collection of essays and speeches that examine topics like power, sexism, feminism and racism. Her discursive analysis focuses on society's impact on women and their relationship to society and between themselves. Lorde urges her readers to question the significance of the personal as the political and its ability to illuminate our choices in both a broader societal context as well as within a more specific racial and gendered sphere. To be more precise, in Lorde’s essay, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master’s House,” she asks her reader—

“What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy?”²²

As Lorde considers the consequences of using the “same tools” to “dismantle the Master’s house,” she seems to be making two key calls for action: 1) she is calling for an alternative use of “tools;” for the purposes of this paper, I will define tools as the lyrical and thematic performance practices organized by Arie, and 2) Lorde is calling for a new space to explore the multiplicity of

²² Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master’s House.”

Blackness and womaness; for the purposes of this paper, I will primarily focus on Lorde's indirect call for mediums that emphasize the multitudes of Blackness. In regards to Lorde's calling for an adjusted use of tools rooted in three key advocacy objectives: 1) transforming silence into action, 2) rejecting societal silence about discriminatory practices, and 3) increasing visibility for the Black queer women's perspective, I will argue that Arie's audio-visual medium effectively serves as one space to study these points of complication. In terms of Lorde's second call-to-action (creating a new space to explore the multiplicity of Blackness), it is evident that "I Am Not My Hair" uses its lyrical and thematic structure to challenge "old claims of blackness."²³ From a BPT framework, "old claims of blackness"²⁴ are rooted in a conceptual stagnancy; Arie's performance is a prime example of how this dormancy is filled with linguistic²⁵ and gestural²⁶ contingencies that are unable to be maintained. Arie emphasizes the importance and desirability of Black hair— and each of its complications as a historical form of corporeal representation. Based on this case study, complications that are most evident are based on the performances' depiction of diverse examples of Black hair styling, the mediums' indirect relationship to the birth of race-based policy like the CROWN Act, and Arie's choice to show the generational (and continuous) significance of navigating the concept of Black hair itself. As a result, there is a "shifting" taking place between the performance medium and the audience. Arguably, this shift in perception is uniquely accessed through the compositional structure of the song and (at the time) unconventional thematic nature of the performance itself. In simpler terms, Arie's song

²³ DeFrantz and Gonzalez. *Black Performance Theory*, Foreword.

²⁴ DeFrantz and Gonzalez. *Black Performance Theory*, Foreword.

²⁵ Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," (*Diacritics* 17, no. 2 1987), 65–81. <https://doi.org/10.2307/464747>.

²⁶ Brooks. *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound*.

creates the same space that Lorde “calls for” in her essay,²⁷ and that— allows a distinct reception to Black epistemologies in America to form. The thematic and lyrical nature of this performance medium will be further explored in this section of the essay.

Why is it necessary to demonstrate the importance of these productions and examine “how” they are tools that represent “alternative spaces” needed to reflect on the multitudes of Blackness in an American socio-political context? In 2006, Arie released the song, [“I Am Not My Hair.”](#) Written by Arie, Shannon Sander and Drew Ramsey, it was a single a part of Arie’s third studio album, “Testimony: Volume 1, Life & Relationship,”²⁸ which was also released that same year. The song version selected for this analysis features Senegalese-American singer, Akon, who contributes melodic vocals to the introduction as his soulful hip-hop beats are sprinkled sporadically throughout the track. Arie’s original song version was nominated for “Best Female R&B Vocal Performance” and “Best R&B Song” at the 2007 Grammy Awards, which increased Arie’s recognition and success throughout the music industry. The “3:52 mins” music video was directed by Barnaby Roper. Roper used the Knovict remix, featuring Akon, to conduct the music video. However, the camera’s focus and the song’s lyrics were primarily told from the perspective of Arie.

Ultimately the song itself, and more specifically, the song’s title (“I Am Not My Hair”) received positive feedback as its thematic significance is consistently referenced in recent publications ranging from major media outlets like *Essence* (2020)²⁹ to scholarly texts like Brenda Randle’s “I Am Not My Hair: African American Women and Their Struggles with Embracing

²⁷ Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master’s House.”

²⁸ Staff, Billboard, “India.Arie’s ‘Hair’ Regrows With Pink,” (*Billboard*, 6 Oct. 2006), <https://www.billboard.com/music/music-news/indiaaries-hair-regrows-with-pink-57036/>.

²⁹ “Do You Agree With ‘I Am Not My Hair’ Statements?” (*Essence*, 27 Oct. 2020), <https://www.essence.com/hair/relaxed/do-you-agree-i-am-not-my-hair-statements/>.

Natural Hair!” (2015).³⁰ It is crucial to highlight the significance of a song repeatedly being referred to—almost 20 years after its release date. Evidently, the song’s title: “I Am Not My Hair” is a key cultural reference (and signifier³¹) that is necessary to examine further. It is evident that “I Am Not My Hair” coincides with broader cultural conversations about beauty standards and self-acceptance. To move this conversation forward, it is necessary to execute a linguistic breakdown of the title of the song—“I...Am... Not... My... Hair.” The title is in itself a reflection of Lorde’s three calls for action, each identified in her essay, *Sister Outsider*. These three calls include: 1) rejecting societal silence about discriminatory practices, 2) increasing visibility for the Black women’s perspective, and 3) transforming silence into action. For instance, the song title’s double-use of the personal possessive pronoun—“I” and “My”—speaks to the agency that Arie describes throughout the song. In this example, Arie is increasing visibility for Black women by asserting “her” positioning as the main “decision-maker” in this process. In turn, she is both transforming silence into action (by making a choice) and increasing visibility for the Black women’s perspective (by using the terms: “I” and “My”). Furthermore, Arie’s listeners are forced to question—“*Who* is the “I” and “my” in this song? And “*What* is this person refuting?” Comparatively studying the “who” and “what” solely in the title of the song shows “how” Arie is able to reimagine³² her Blackness and womanness through performance. The title’s use of the term—“not”—serves as the adverb used to form a negative expression, indicating the absence or negation of something. In this instance, the title of Arie’s song is refuting the simplicity of *being* hair. Similar to Lorde’s act of identifying herself as a Black, queer and female scholar—she is

³⁰ Brenda A. Randle.. “I Am Not My Hair: African American Women and Their Struggles with Embracing Natural Hair!” (*Race, Gender & Class* 22, no. 1–2, 2015), 114–21, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26505328>.

³¹ Sut Jhally and Stuart Hall, *Race”The Floating Signifier*, (Media Education Foundation, 1996).

³² DeFrantz and Gonzalez. *Black Performance Theory*, 35.

also negating the simplicity of these terms. In other words, Lorde uses the terminology offered to describe her identity. However, the complexities of her personhood seem to come through her act of negation. Throughout the essays and poems compiled in *Sister Outsider*, Lorde details the specific pitfalls of monolithic entities and the societal consequences rooted in intractable ways of thinking. Some of these collective repercussions include: the increase of power and oppression, an oversimplification of one's identity (experienced in the absence of intersectionality), the silencing of marginalized perspectives, and a continuum of circumstances that exclude catalysts for social change.

To this same point, the title of the song, "I Am Not My Hair" echoes Lorde's personal and theoretical practice by using the terms accessible (to her) in order to stake a positioning in a broader societal conversation about social positioning and beauty standards. However, the multiplicity of Arie's political and personal identity (as defined by Lorde and) as a Black female performer becomes clearest when examined through the lens of negative expression. In other words, the "not" in "I Am Not My Hair" reflects Lorde's act of negating the societal implications of otherness; which identifies a collection of people who are on the outside of various social hierarchies in America (in regards to race, class and gender). Black hair must be used as a lens to study the complexities of Lorde's continuous negotiation with "self." The inherent intricacies of the materiality of Black hair itself add context to conversations interested in identifying Black feminist strategies. These styles of self-negotiation as identified in an African American context are foundational to BPT and specific theories like Diasporic Spidering.³³

³³ DeFrantz and Gonzalez. *Black Performance Theory*, 35.

Diasporic Spidering as defined by George-Graves assumes an individual with agency is a “performativity in flux.”³⁴ It is a term used to describe the unique experience of individuals as they begin to cultivate a life based on their own experiences. The “influx” aspect of this theory speaks to the diverse ways in which new information is continually incorporated. Moreover, Diasporic Spidering itself offers (specifically Black individuals) multiple points of intersection that George-Graves describes as being “woven together around a central core—the individual searcher/journeyer.”³⁵ In other words, George-Graves states that,

“Rather than describing a fixed moment in time, African diaspora (and black identity) in this sense becomes also a contemporary active process—an act, a performative.”³⁶

“I Am Not My Hair” speaks to the significance of the Black identity being referred to as “an active process.” The materiality of hair itself is another lens to view the concept of Diasporic Spidering through. The dynamic nature of Black hair includes: the historical overview of its development, its stylistic elements, and contemporary expressions. In various segments of Arie’s song, she references all three aspects of dynamism that I am interested in exploring further. These three elements include: 1) “the historical,” 2) “the stylistic,” and 3) “the expressive role of hair in its contemporary form.” One instance of Arie referencing “the historical” is depicted when Arie sings, “*Bad hair means you look like a slave (no).*” In this line, Arie references “the historical” as she

³⁴ DeFrantz and Gonzalez. *Black Performance Theory*, 37.

³⁵ DeFrantz and Gonzalez. *Black Performance Theory*, 37.

³⁶ DeFrantz and Gonzalez. *Black Performance Theory*, 37.

tangentially connects the concept of “bad hair” to the period of enslavement.³⁷ As explored further in articles included in *The Journal of Southern History*, Black hair has played a significant and complex role in the history of people of African descent. The treatment and perception of Black hair was deeply intertwined with issues of identity, cultural expression and resistance. I am interested in exploring how “I Am Not My Hair” both seems to negate the significance of “hair” at its highest value while also serving as a space to preserve one’s cultural and personal identity. The various uses of hair as both a concept and a methodology echoes aspects of Diasporic Spidering. Viewing Black hair as a “concept” allows me to study its potential coded messages when referenced in songs like “I Am Not My Hair” as Arie uses “hair” to seemingly mirror practices and patterns used in BPT (and further explored in this paper). It is also pivotal to note the “methodical” ways in which Arie uses Black hair and its material aspects to seemingly combat and contextualize Eurocentric beauty standards.

One example of Arie referencing “the stylistic” essence of Black hair in her song is shown when she sings, “*Little girl with the press and curl...Age eight... I got a Jheri curl....Thirteen, and I got a relaxer.*” In these lines, Arie refers to the aesthetic characteristics of Black hair as she gradually breaks-down the three *different* hairstyles she received between the ages of three (presumably three years old— as it is the time in which Arie was likely to be interacting with the world more acutely) and thirteen (as she clearly states in her song). In this 10 year time period, Arie lists three separate hairstyles that seem to have deeply impacted the ways in which she perceives herself, and begins to notice “how” the outside world interacts with different aspects of her body (note: the song is primarily focused on the materiality of hair). For the purposes of this

³⁷ Shane White and Graham White, “Slave Hair and African American Culture in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” (*The Journal of Southern History* 61, no. 1, 1995), 45–76. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2211360>.

paper, the song's reference to "the stylistic" aspects of Black hair will be explored in tandem with its historical and political symbolism (as "I Am Not My Hair" is a key example of "how" Arie is identifying the ways in which certain hairstyles have been associated with social movements, solidarity and cultural pride).

From a contemporary perspective, the expressive role of Black hair is noted by Arie when she sings, "*At the turn of the century... It's time for us to redefine who we be....*" Arie's direct reference to the "turn of the century" provides a political urgency to the tonality and messaging of the song. The tonality in music refers to the arrangement of pitches and chords around a central note. From a music theory perspective, "I Am Not my Hair" follows a harmonic progression (shaped by a predictable sequence of chords) and a brief shift in modulation (a change in tonality, shifting from one key to another) as Akon provides his own Rap and R&B twist to the track. Arie carries the tonic elements of the song by offering a sound that reflects the emotional character of the piece. The message of the piece itself emphasizes and conveys the expressive content of the music. In other words, as Arie makes reference to "*the turn of the century,*" she describes the historical, cultural and social changes that she would like to *see* occur during this transitional period. In many ways, Arie seems to be calling for a similar "shift" that Lorde is referring to in her text. This "shift" in perspective can serve as a key thematic aspect of "I Am Not My Hair" since it drives the overall complexities of the song's structural organization (as detailed above).

Additionally, it is crucial to further push the conceptual and methodological value of the song, "I Am Not My Hair," by mapping its complexities as an alternative space used to show the multitudes of Blackness. From an individual standpoint, I will examine "how" the song challenges societal norms and expectations through the lens of Black hair. From a collective perspective, I

highlight the ways in which Arie details her own and others' journeys towards self acceptance.³⁸ This idea of "collective acceptance" is shown as various "characters" (7 different individuals) join what seems like a dance party on screen. Arie stares directly into the camera as if her most prominent task (as the music video continues) is to connect with the viewer. Viewing Arie's efforts as the main performer "onstage" through the lens of a mission-oriented practice shows an alternate way of exploring "how" multitudes of Blackness are reconstructed on screen.



The lyrical analysis that I will conduct begins with an examination of the title, "I Am Not My Hair." Studying the linguistic formation of a negative expression through the use of the word, "not" resulted in a three-phase analysis. The three-phase investigation details important throughlines between Lorde and Arie's work. Most significantly, it shows the necessity of "I Am Not My Hair" as a visual representation of the way Lorde is trying to "do" with her identities as a Black, female and queer person in America. Breaking Lorde's scholarly endeavors revolving

³⁸ Ellington, *Black Hair in a White World*, xxi.

around outsidersness and intersectionality into three parts resulted in an in-depth exploration of “how” Lorde calls for: 1) rejecting societal silence about discriminatory practices, 2) increasing visibility for the Black women’s perspective, and 3) transforming silence into action. I then use “I Am Not My Hair” as a primary case study needed to deepen Lorde’s analysis and show its ongoing relevance within a contemporary socio-cultural context. In several instances, Arie’s song highlights the process of self-making, a negotiation of temporality, and the result of creating spaces of transformation from the perspective of the outsider³⁹ (someone with frequently marginalized and intersectional identities).

In **Phase 1** of the lyrical analysis (1:21-1:40), I will continue an examination of Arie indirectly responding to Lorde’s first call for: rejecting societal silence about discriminatory practices in an American context—

“Hey (hey)

I am not my hair

I am not this skin

I am not your expectations, no (hey)

I am not my hair

I am not this skin

I am the soul that lives within”⁴⁰

As previously noted, one way in which Lorde executes this “call to action” is through the active negation of the societally-accepted words used to describe her identity: “women,” “Black,”

³⁹ Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 113.

⁴⁰ “I Am Not My Hair (Official Music Video) ft. Akon.” Label: Motown 2006. India Arie...[Music \(Hip & R&B\): India Arie/Akon, “I am Not My Hair”](#)

“lesbian.” Using Lorde’s act of negation as a tool to further explore the complexities of Arie repeatedly saying she is “not...” provides further significance to the narrative of “outsider status” that Arie is also interested in detailing in her song. Arie uses the term “not” to negate adjectives and other adverbs like her “hair, skin, and your expectations.” It is pivotal to emphasize the use of “your” in this lyrical segment. Who is the “your” that Arie is referring to? The subject in which Arie is “speaking to” and “about” seems to be a figurative tool that encompasses the collective gaze⁴¹ of society. It is a gaze that Lorde is also confronting as she states: “What this says about the vision of this conference...” In sum, Arie uses “your,” and Lorde uses “the conference” as placeholders that seemingly reflect aspects of the white gaze.⁴² In their separate mediums, Arie and Lorde reject various factors upholding the white gaze (how the perceptions and values of white individuals shape and influence the way other ethnic groups are portrayed).⁴³ Lorde does this by questioning “the conference’s” values, and Arie directly negates “expectations” stemming from the “your” perspective. Lorde’s call to reject societal silence about discriminatory practices is fulfilled by using her identities to explore an alternate space of expression. Arie is echoing Lorde’s words by designing a creative medium that puts a particular emphasis on the “soul,” rather than “your expectations.” The “soul” in this case seems to describe Arie’s internal reflection being marked as an outsider⁴⁴ based on her external physical appearances. In other words, this is a prime example of how Black hair can be used as a lens to understand the performance of race, gender, and one’s ability to confront their own external versus internal modes of expression. “I Am Not

⁴¹ Becca Gercken, “Visions of Tribulation: White Gaze and Black Spectacle in Richard Wright’s ‘Native Son’ and ‘The Outsider.’” *African American Review* 44, no. 4 (2011): 633–48. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23316247>.

⁴² Gercken, “Visions of Tribulation: White Gaze and Black Spectacle in Richard Wright’s ‘Native Son’ and ‘The Outsider.’”

⁴³ Peter Kolchin, “Whiteness Studies: The New History of Race in America.” *The Journal of American History* 89, no. 1 (2002): 154–73. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2700788>.

⁴⁴ Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 113.

My Hair” represents an alternative avenue of expression which is then an internal push back on the external pressure of systemic formations of cultural identity. Sparking a discussion on the materiality of Black hair and its relationship to the “soul” shows how Arie is negotiating a sense of self throughout her performance. The emphasis of this paper is placed on examining “how” some African American writers and singers are reflecting on an ongoing negotiation of self, rather than the “final product” that *may* be achieved once that sense of self is attained— (*if* it is meant to ever be attained could be an important topic to further explore in future writings).

In **Phase 2** of the lyrical analysis (0:52-1:06), I will continue an examination of Arie indirectly responding to Lorde’s second call for action— increasing visibility for the Black women’s perspective in an American context. For instance, Arie sings,

“Little girl with the press and curl
Age eight, I got a Jheri curl
Thirteen, and I got a relaxer
I was a source of so much laughter
At fifteen when it all broke off
Eighteen and went all natural.”⁴⁵

In this section of the song, it is important to consider the topics and stories that Arie uses to carry the narrative. She bounces between the subjective use of “little girl” and “I.” The first use of the phrase “little girl” speaks to an omniscient character in Arie’s song. Seemingly, the use of “little girl” shows the strategic choice that Arie is making when addressing her audience; it allows

⁴⁵ “I Am Not My Hair (Official Music Video) ft. Akon.” Label: Motown 2006. India Arie...[Music \(Hip & R&B\): India Arie/Akon, “I am Not My Hair”](#)

multiple perspectives to form from the minds of multiple people. “Little girl” highlights the commonality of the experience that follows— *“Age eight, I got a Jheri curl...Thirteen, and I got a relaxer....I was a source of so much laughter....At fifteen when it all broke off.”* It is crucial to note the flexibility in storytelling that Arie uses by telling “her” (and many others’) experience through the omniscient narrator of the “little girl.” Similar to Lorde, Arie is indirectly calling for and fulfilling an increased level of visibility for the Black woman and her child-self. Arie’s authorial voice ruptures the continuum of race-based hair discrimination by breaking its presence into numbers. For instance, she states that there were four key indicators of self-making that occurred— once when she was a “little girl,” and again at age “eight, thirteen, fifteen, and eighteen.” Viewing the concept of self-making through the lens of Lorde reveals several key ideas— 1) the process of crafting a self-defined identity, 2) the importance of rejecting conformity, 3) navigating the complex interplay of intersectionality, and 4) the transformative nature of self-expression as a means of challenging systems of oppression. “I Am Not My Hair” is an audio-visual case study that shows the same process of internal and external transformation that Lorde is calling for in her research. Arie provides numerical context to Lorde’s “calling” by highlighting the different phases of self-realization, each expressed visually through the materiality of Black hair.

In **Phase 3** of this lyrical analysis (1:45-2:00), I will continue an examination of Arie indirectly responding to Lorde’s third call for action— transforming silence into action. In this lyrical segment, it is evident that both Arie and Lorde are simultaneously calling for and creating alternative spaces for self expression. For example, Arie sings—

“Good hair means curls and waves (no)

Bad hair means you look like a slave (no)

At the turn of the century

It's time for us to redefine who we be

You can shave it off like a South African beauty

Or get in on lock like Bob Marley

You can rock it straight like Oprah Winfrey

If it's not what's on your head, it's what's

underneath, and say: Hey!"⁴⁶

There are many intriguing aspects of this lyrical segment that can be examined from a historical perspective and BPT approach. For instance, one can explore the socio-cultural concept of “good hair” versus “bad hair” also explored in Ellington’s text (*Black Hair In a White World*). Or, the potential Black feminist and transatlantic throughlines that Arie may be referencing when she states that “you can shave it off like a South African beauty” (potentially making a direct reference to South African singer and activist, Miriam Makeba). Arie also makes indirect references to the fluidness of gender and self-expression by telling her listeners that “[you] can get in on lock like Bob Marley” (a male singer). However, the section of this lyrical segment that I am most interested in exploring (for the purposes of this paper) revolves around Arie’s act of stating the phrase— “at the turn of the century.” Similar to Lorde’s writings on outsiderhood, there is a temporal significance to Arie’s “call to action.” The unique timing of the music video itself speaks to the urgency that Arie is exploring in her lyrics. It is as if Arie is asking her listener, “if we refuse to accept ourselves *now* then will we *ever*?” Interrogating Black female corporality and constructions of identity that one may embody through their hair as a

⁴⁶ “I Am Not My Hair (Official Music Video) ft. Akon.” Label: Motown 2006. India Arie...[Music \(Hip & R&B\): India Arie/Akon, “I am Not My Hair”](#)

contemporary form of socio-political resistance also speaks to the concept of temporality. The consideration of time is crucial in understanding and facilitating social change for several reasons— it allows (me as the researcher) to identify trends and patterns, causality and impact, adaptability and policy development (like the CROWN Act). Moreover, the CROWN Act was passed 13 years after the release of “I Am Not My Hair,” and 35 years after the publication of *Sister Outsider*. Temporal considerations highlight the interconnectedness of these events, each influenced by a diverse combination of historical, cultural and political factors that have unfolded over time. The mass impact of these societal factors can be more closely explored through the lens of “I Am Not My Hair.” It is evident that when Arie states, “*it’s time for us to redefine who we be,*” she holds a similar hope of transformation that is also reflected in Lorde’s texts. Arie is negotiating figurative and literal aspects of space and time— as well as the ability to confront her own external versus internal modes of expression. She is using the concept of Black hair as a medium to explore an alternative avenue of expression which is then an internal push back on the external pressure of systemic formations of cultural identity. As a result, this alternative space of expression both accepts and plays with the continuous nature of temporality. Seemingly linking its temporal significance to internal feelings, rather than external “expectations.”⁴⁷ “I Am Not My Hair” shows the adaptable nature of social change while questioning “who” is in control of this iterative and dynamic process. Arguably, Arie’s song is a space that uses creative tools to refine and adjust strategies that reflect Lorde’s vision of social change. This vision of transformation can be rooted in a temporal urgency and an individual

⁴⁷ “I Am Not My Hair (Official Music Video) ft. Akon.” Label: Motown 2006. India Arie...[Music \(Hip & R&B\): India Arie/Akon, “I am Not My Hair”](#)

intersectionality that allows the public to voice collective experiences as marginalized people in America.

V. HOW DOES THIS SHOW AN “ALTERNATIVE WAY” OF THINKING ABOUT BLACKNESS IN AMERICA

In conclusion, based on Arie’s reference to “the historical” and contemporary expressions of Black hair, she is advocating for a more dynamic view of Blackness and a celebration of its stylistic elements. As a result, the importance of critically examining an alternate way of thinking about Blackness in an American context has become evident. As previously noted, when gathering materials for this research topic, the questions I had about race theory and African American history began to evolve: how can Black hair be used as a lens to understand the performance of race, gender and one’s ability to confront their own external versus internal modes of expression? Completing an in-depth linguistic analysis of Arie’s song has attempted to answer the question— Could there be a third avenue of expression which is then an internal push back on the external pressure of systemic formations of cultural identity?

To further contextualize my argument about the lyrical nature and stylistic elements of the song, “I Am Not My Hair.” I have used Tameka N. Ellington’s most recent research project, *Black Hair in a White World* (2023) as a launch-pad for this analysis. In a broad sense, I have examined articulations of power, colonialism and imperialism in a twenty-first century American cultural context. More specifically, I have used this text as a secondary source which can situate my academic engagement with Arie’s song. “I Am Not My Hair” also served as a case study which emphasizes the significance of Black feminism, class, race, anti-colonial politics, and aesthetics;

topics that are necessary to examine in order to fully contextualize the significance of the 2019 CROWN Act.⁴⁸

Examining the complexities of Arie’s song lyrics and the title of the song, “I Am Not My Hair” through the lens of Lorde’s research on “outsiderness” has pushed me to ponder a broader question— how can the materiality of hair act as an entry point to examine the various modes of expression throughout the African Diaspora? More specifically, further exploring the intricate concept of “expression” (both collective and self-expression) provides space to interrogate Black female corporeality. Lorde’s compilation of creative and scholarly works as part of *Sister Outsider* contextualizes the process of “constructing” an identity that one may embody through their hair. Most significantly, Arie’s song, “I Am Not My Hair” speaks to the ways in which the materiality of “hair” can be examined as a contemporary form of socio-political resistance.

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