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## “I’m Sorry My Hair Is Blocking Your Smile”

A Performative Assemblage and Intercultural Dialogue on the Politics of Hair and Place

Bryant Keith Alexander, Ayshia Elizabeth Stephenson-Celadilla, Katty Alhayek, Porntip Israsena Twishime, Timothy Sutton, Carmen Hernández Ojeda, and Claudio Moreira

**Abstract** This performative essay is an instance of embodied writing, an assemblage by seven individuals responding to a shared moment from different perspectives on the politics of hair. In the process we engage the sociological imagination as we turn private troubles into public issues, or better yet, we collectively show how public issues are our private troubles.

*Keywords:* politics of hair, embodied writing, assemblage, autoethnography, performative intercultural engagement

There are many ways we encounter theory and the occasion of theorizing, sometimes in those academic places that seem to herald theorizing as professional practice and disciplinary obligation. D. Soyini Madison (1999) tells us that sometimes we encounter theory “with affection and sometimes forced down our throat with shouts or a switch. This theory makes body contact. Bodies that most often look like yours . . . Theories come from everywhere” (p. 109). And sometimes, we encounter theory and the occasion of theorizing in the everyday practices of being/living, where theory is born out of a necessity to articulate experience for the sake of self and others.<sup>1</sup> Maybe at a table in a diner among friends over a shared breakfast—some bodies that most often look like yours and sometimes not. In which case, theorizing is articulating bodily experiences differently and writing becomes a performative praxis, an intercultural dialogue about the presumptions of shared experience that resonates personally when something triggers or teases at a memory, or a scab. Then we (re)perform *theories of the flesh*,

where the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings—all fuse to create a politic born of necessity. Here, we attempt to bridge the contradictions in our experience. . . . We do this

bridging by naming our selves and by telling our stories in our own words.  
(Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981, p. 23)

And yes, this theory also makes body contact—because it emanates from the body.

What follows is both an instance of embodied writing (Madison, 1999) and what some might call an *assemblage*, a collaborative theorizing of experience by seven individuals responding to a shared moment from different perspectives. It is an assemblage in which each participant reflects and recognizes a “certain tension, balancing, and tentativeness” between a present moment and individual histories in and around hair (Marcus & Saka, 2006, p. 102). Gale and Pineau (2011) invoke the assemblage as a performative writing aesthetic through which the becoming—that is a desire to write—“provides the possibility of intersubjective communion” (p. 330). This emphasis on becoming also is found in Gale and Wyatt’s discussion of material bodies “writing in relation to each other; distant, separated, singular their voices distinct and sometimes dissonant, writing apart but with each other” (2012, p. 472). The becoming of collaborative autoethnographic assemblage operates in and through the in-betweenness of the creative and diffractive possibilities that are present when people write of experience to share.<sup>2</sup> Hence, through the sociological imagination we turn private troubles into public issues or, better yet, we collectively show how public issues are our private troubles (Mills, 1959). Thus, through an autoethnographic impulse and “through love . . . and through theory, we come to viscerally inhabit and embrace our between identities” (Diversi & Moreira, 2018, back cover). Each participant teases at lived experience, and together we build a praxis of performative intercultural dialogue responding to a common trigger: “I’m sorry my hair is blocking your smile.”

### **Bryant Keith Alexander: “Continued (Non) Apologetics for Appendages of Culture”**

The prompt of our engagement is both powerfully political and playfully polemical: Powerfully political because Black hair has always been reflective of the governance, regulation, and social negotiations of people from the African diaspora. Texture, maintenance, and style of Black hair reflects the entanglements of race and the cultural practices of doing hair, sometimes fashion, but always evidence of origins.<sup>3</sup> To wear it natural is in fact to both claim the roots of our identity and to talk back to those who name us “other”; to wear it like a crown of thorns means to denounce those who would mock or demean our royalty. And we dare those who want to

touch it as an experience with the exotic—sometimes without our permission as a violation of our persons. And we question White folks who want to wear it as evidence of their liberal alternative nature, an appropriation of our dreaded struggle. We ask them gently, and sometimes violently, *to check themselves*, to check their privilege *to be or not to be*—to wear the politics of Black hair like fashion, like a hat that they can take off when needed. And for some. Only a few. We come to understand the politics and polemics of their being and becoming through the performance and performativity of their hair. A different struggle. A different lesson—to be taught and learned.

For Black people to process Black hair with perms and straighteners is not necessarily a disclaiming of identity but an embodiment of beauty standards in which we must examine the double consciousness of our enslaved minds in relation to the presumptions of social mobility, acceptability, and beauty. But for those who go natural saying, “I’m sorry my hair is blocking your smile,” could be a coy nonapology, an unabashedly engaged stance that recognizes the presumed privilege of the other and intentionally trumps their smile with the politics of our being (her hair, his hair, my hair, Black hair).

The phrase “I’m sorry my hair is blocking your smile” is also a playful polemic because in its utterance, the phrase is not delivered as an argumentative or dispositive gesture to an indifferent or defiant other in which *smile* becomes metonymy to someone else’s privilege or pride. In this case, it is a playful apologetic for a big bang (hair that is) that literally covers the smile of an/other ethnically specific person in a group selfie (see Figure 1). And at first blush, the phrase invokes a ticklish laughter as practical apology, while at the same time invoking in me a tensiveness held in the moment. You see, for me, Black hair is a smile, an ebullient presentation of the cultural self to the world:

Black hair as performance.

Black hair a performative.

Black hair as performativity.

My own dreads [now gone] grew out of deep places beneath the surface of my self-image, racial consciousness, and the politics of blackness; deep places beneath the scalp, in the deep subcutaneous pores, where the conception of self-image meets and resists the politics of the expected and the politics of representation in the multiple places where I circulate. The phantom sensation of their absence and presence lingers; nothing is loss, and all is gain [from the wear]. (Alexander, 2014, p. 415)



**Figure 1.** The inspired image: Left moving up and round: Carmen Hernández Ojeda, Porntip Twishime, Claudio Moreira, Timothy Sutton, Bryant Keith Alexander, Katty Alhayek, and Ayshia Elizabeth Stephenson-Celadilla.

There is a history of Black hair, in its natural state or dreaded configuration, as being critiqued by or through whiteness as unattractive, placing notions of beauty over the politics of being and resistance to which Black hair always signifies.

But in this case,<sup>4</sup> hair was literally covering a smile, a visual access to another's joy, blocking the memorializing of a photographic moment that was critical—critical as a representational politic linked to the celebration of diversity and intellect as copresent on the occasion. You see, the two women engaged in the hair-smile dialogic were both doctoral students, women of color (Ayshia, African American, and Katty, Syrian), whose very presence in higher education (via the gender and border politics in their cultures of origin in the United States and between) is an act of resistance and persistence to/of/for their own possibility, positionality, and potentiality. Each was copresent and fully alive at the table. And each was, with adjustments, fully visible in the photograph. Hair and smiles became visible as a documentation of the moment and their significant role in history (as each writes a *herstory* of her own), along with the other distinct women of color (one, mixed race Asian American,



**Figure 2.** Left to right: Claudio Moreira, Carmen Hernández Ojeda, Timothy Sutton, Porntip Twishime, Bryant Keith Alexander, Katty Alhayek, and Ayshia Elizabeth Stephenson-Celadilla

[Williams-León & Nakashima, 2001] and the other from Spain), who were also graduate students, sitting and smiling across the table in the company of the African American man currently writing, the Euro-American/White male, and the Brazilian male at the table, a bald head and a ponytail, each with stories to tell.

Each made adjustments to accommodate and celebrate the particularity of the other/s. All were on an equal playing field, now standing beneath an ethnic sun (See Figure 2.);

smiles fully visible;

man-woman,

man-woman,

me,

and then the two particular others engaged in the literal,

now made metaphorical,

hair-smile cultural dialectic,

to which we were all implicated.

No apologies needed!

## Ayshia Elizabeth Stephenson-Celadilla: "I'm Sorry My Hair Is Blocking Your Smile"

I say this because I enjoy your smile, Katty; you are my friend and ally, and we worked very hard to bring Alexander to UMass. I also say this because you are not White. Immigrants aren't the problem unless they become White. If you ever become White, then I cannot feel regret about blocking your smile. You see, I'm not sorry about my hair. I wear my hair big because I can, because I want it everywhere. I want to push it into White people's faces. I don't want them to be able to get away from it. I want them to know I won't hide it even though they've repeatedly expected me to do so. White people must face their insecurities. Because White people are threatened by my beauty, my hair used to be illegal. During the late 18th century, Black and Creole women in Louisiana were forced to wear head wraps, or tignons, because they wore their hair in such elaborate ways that it attracted the attention of White men. The tignon laws were meant to prevent Black women from getting attention from White men and to reduce White women's jealousy.

There are remnants of this in the 21st century. The caricature of Michelle and Barack Obama on the July 21, 2008, cover of *The New Yorker* says that natural Black hair is criminal. The magazine presented President Obama (presidential candidate at the time) as Osama bin Laden and his wife as an Al Qaeda militant. The scheming couple set the American flag to burn, and with her afro and gun, she is ready to terrorize. Evidenced by myriad photographs in the media, Michelle Obama wears her hair straightened. So why represent her with an afro in this context? Because the afro cannot be American. It breaks the rules we've established for what's beautiful, good, and moral. The afro exposes old, yet still tender wounds of America's morbid fascination with color; it reminds us of civil rights, Black power, police brutality, hate crimes, and guilt. The criminalization of Black hair does not stop with *The New Yorker*: little Black girls across the country are dismissed from school for wearing their natural hair; the Rutgers women's basketball team was called "nappy headed hoes" (Chiachiere, 2007); and the Obamas' youngest daughter is publicly criticized for her cornrows and how they don't "represent the U.S." (Saint Louis, 2009). For Americans, hair isn't dead, it raises a social justice issue.

Malia Obama, the eldest daughter, is consistently the target of America's morbid fascination with color and sexuality. She faces international scrutiny for wearing braids, showing that even a child cannot evade American cultural contempt for the Black woman. Malia has been attacked for her braids, and they were called

"inappropriate," but where is the cultural awareness of those making such comments? She's a little Black girl; little Black girls wear braids. It grows their hair and keeps it manageable so that parents don't feel the need to chemically straighten it. Highly textured hair such as Malia's is actually quite fragile because it spirals, making breakage easy if manipulated too often. Above all, braids have long been a part of a proud and creative African tradition.

I remember when I was teaching my "Women and Fiction: Interracial Dating in the U.S." course, one of the students commented on what he had learned from a documentary (and how it was "confirmed" by his professor). The student claimed that cornrows were invented through prison culture because African American males had to figure out what to do with their hair. This assumption horrified a couple of the Latin American female students in my class who both loved to wear braids and did not want to be associated with prison culture. This misinformation about the roots of cornrows couldn't be farther from the truth.

Cornrows in particular are a longstanding African tradition and, for many, an art form that dates as far back as the Stone Age. Tewodros II of House of Solomon was known to wear cornrows (Abebe, 1998). Even Ethiopia leader Atse Yohannes IV, known for sacrificing his life to safeguard Ethiopia's independence, wore cornrows (Kiros, n.d.). It isn't up for debate whether cornrows became a practical or even cultural style for prison inmates, but the tradition dates much farther back and has a history of being worn by prestigious figures in African history.

Ricky Sherover-Marcuse, a Jewish American civil rights activist, explained that racism is a mystified consciousness that perpetuates misinformation about those who are not in power (Sherover-Marcuse, 1988). In American culture, hair is alive. Black hair may speak loudly, but its language goes misinterpreted. It is one of the most misunderstood and miscommunicated symbols of race and beauty in American popular culture.

They ask me how much more do I want?

I want to walk  
into a store and not be followed.

I want to walk  
on campus and not have White people  
give my hair dirty looks.

I want a world  
where I don't fear

for the lives of children  
 I don't yet have.  
 I want Black to be fucking normal.

You see, I'm not sorry about my hair. I wear my hair big because I can, because I want it everywhere. I wear it big because I can't get enough of it. I wear it big because I want my Black sisters and brothers to know that our hair is our history and our choice.

### **Katty Alhayek: "I'm Sorry *Your Hair Is Blocking My Smile*"**

You say, "I'm sorry my hair is blocking your smile."

I say, "I'm sorry your hair is blocking my smile."

My smile has been precious in the last six years. Today is May 31, 2018. An ironic date that coincides with my six-year anniversary of not seeing my family. It was May 31, 2012, when I left Syria. I saw my "big" family for the last time. My grandmother, the person I love most, had a hunch. The woman who raised nine children and endless number of grandchildren cried anticipating my long exile. She feared, "I will die before I see you again." I smiled knowing I was her favorite. At the end, I was named after her. I assured her "we'll meet again." But a scholarship to the United States turned into an asylee story (Asylee, n.d.), a prisoner of borders' story. One among many stories in the age of the travel bans and what the United Nations describes as "the largest refugee and displacement crisis of our time."<sup>5</sup>

You say, "I'm sorry my hair is blocking your smile."

I say, "I'm sorry smiles are not passports."

I say, "I'm sorry smiles cannot erase the racial mark on our bodies."

I say, "I'm sorry smiles cannot erase the colonial borders and violent policies."

### **Porntip Israsena Twishime: "My First Haircut"**

I watch my mother pick up hair from the kitchen floor. Her shoulders rise and fall as she breathes. With every inhale, she slowly collects pieces of my *straight black hair*. She uses her fingers to brush out the disheveled hair. Thin strands slip through her fingers. And she repeats. I stare fixated on her ritual, and this takes me in and out of the moment.

It is January 1993, only weeks before Mom will give birth to her third child. I am her second. I hear she would always work right up until she gave birth and would return to work immediately. I believe it. Two weeks ago, I told her, "You're an overachiever, and you're addicted to work." I almost wish I never said that. My parents own a franchise of a local Chinese restaurant chain. Mom runs the show. In the morning she left for work. Dad stayed home with us—my older brother and me.

Moments ago, Mom walked through the front door. When she entered the apartment, she found my older brother and I sitting on the stairs and my father drinking in the living room with friends. After Mom closed the door, the room fell silent. A friend spoke up telling Dad in Thai, "She hasn't noticed yet." Silence told me something was wrong. They are waiting for her reaction. We are all waiting for her reaction.

In the kitchen, I stand behind my mother. I don't quite know if she knows that I am here. I follow her every chance I get. I am almost 3 and my love for her is unwavering. My hands shiver uncontrollably, resting over my mouth. There is little hope left that her tears are tears of joy. I am afraid I have upset, disappointed, hurt my mother. The dark hair against the discolored, white linoleum floor is jarring to me now.

Where is my older brother? This was his idea. He suggested we play a game called barbershop. I had never been to a barbershop or knew what one was. But I agreed. My love for him is unwavering as well. He told me, "if you let me cut your hair, I'll let you cut mine." Of course, what a brilliant exchange. We played barbershop.

My hair grows like weeds. The kind you think is beautiful, tall green grass until one day it has grown out of control. Our mother loved my *straight black hair* and let it grow. Her hair is a feathery light brown and brings out the green and blue in her eyes. My *straight black hair* comes from my father. By the age of 3, my hair would have reached my height and then the floor. The fun my older brother offered was much more important to me than my hair. At least, it was. It was more important to me until now. Now, my mother's love, approval, happiness is most important.

My older brother is someone I trust. I am unaware of the histories, politics, and morals that are tied to hair. I now also know that my older brother was unaware too. I laugh with joy as he brings the scissors to my *straight black hair*. Nine, 10, 11, 12 inches of my hair fall to the kitchen floor. Bolts of lightning shoot through my body as my hair drops. He leaves a long strand of hair on each

side of my face. I turn to my older brother. Standing on the tips of my toes, smiling, I grab a chunk of his *straight black hair* with my little hands and cut with one smooth motion.

I watch Mom slowly, deliberately bend her knees and reach down to the kitchen floor for my hair. She picks up all that remains. Her mouth contorts, unsure whether she should smile or frown. She moves across the kitchen floor like a paper boat floating down a barely flowing river. My mother is in no rush to reach her destination. Decidedly, her mouth widens, and she smiles. When she gathers two handfuls of my *straight black hair*, she brings her hands to her face and buries her face into my hair. "I'm sorry, Mom that my hair is blocking your smile."

My mother twists the fallen hair into one long braid and ties it at both ends. She weeps and I do not comfort her. Perhaps, this is the best way to comfort her.

### **Timothy Sutton: "Crazy Baldheads"**

Hair takes hard work. It is work I've never been willing to do. Maybe that's why I dreaded my hair. Maybe that's why I shaved it all off.

"My body makes language. It makes language like hair," writes Craig Gingrich-Philbrook (2001, p. 3). But my body makes hair like language. It says this is who I am. What do you read there? It's certainly not what I had in mind. I tend to disagree with what it has to say.

Dreading my hair was not something I thought out, or spent time researching. I think I probably came up with the idea while hanging out in my dorm room listening to Peter Tosh and Funkadelic.

I want to emphasize here, that I am not a White guy with dreads.

We're going to chase them crazy baldheads right out of town.

I think I was 21 when I noticed my hairline receding.

I want to really emphasize here that I am not a bald, White guy with dreads.

"Chase those crazy baldheads out of the town" (Marley & Ford, 1976).

I don't know what I am more ashamed of, being bald now or having dreads in my past. And this shame is real, even as I tell myself I enjoy being bald, even as my phantom dreads still bring me pride, still inform who I am, still have things to teach me (Alexander, 2014).

I find myself tangled in a weave of resistance and appropriation, locked into racialized hairstyles and cultural ideas of what is appropriate and what is attractive, which I've never been able to live up to.

Growing up in Southern California in the 1980s, I wanted to be a surfer. Or maybe it wasn't until after I left that I did what I could to look the part. When I was 16, the summer between my sophomore and junior year of high school, my dad's job transferred us to Overland Park, Kansas. I grew my hair as long as I could before my parents said something. I thought I had some kind of Patrick Swayze thing going on, but it was more like Jeff Spicoli. The humidity in Kansas meant my hair had some new curls that weren't there before. One friend from high school in Kansas still tells me how alien I looked. I had come from a different world.

And so, I cut my hair.

I was greeted with generosity and kindness when visiting my friends' houses. Their parents' Midwestern hospitality would invite me to stay for dinner, and then tell racist jokes from across the table. I began to realize that I was exactly who they wanted their children to bring home. I fit the image.

My decision to dread my hair was to say, "No. Not that."

I did no research.

I was not careful.

I just wanted to distance myself from the culture I was immersed in. The culture of whiteness and segregation. The well-meaning advice from my parents to be careful when crossing the (color) line into Kansas City, Missouri (KCMU).

Troost Avenue in KCMO acts as a dividing line. To the west lies downtown, the Plaza, Westport, and Johnson County (where I lived) across the state line. East of Troost, it is Black. According to the 2010 census, KCMO's population is 30% African American, well above the national average. But decades after segregation in housing and schooling was made illegal, Kansas City remains one of the most segregated cities in the country.

Back then, the big KC Blues and Jazz Festival was held at the WWI Memorial downtown. It brought headliners like Herbie Hancock, McCoy Tyner, and Etta James. It was also one of the few times White and Black communities got together. But I remember a much smaller Jazz Heritage and arts festival at 18th and Vine. It featured mostly local jazz and blues musicians, and, except for me, the audience was nearly entirely Black. This was exactly the neighborhood my parents told me never to go. In the early '90s, most of the shops were boarded up at 18th and Vine, but they were covered in murals depicting all the greats to come out of Kansas City: Jay McShann, Count Basie, Charlie Parker, Julia Lee, Big Joe Turner, Ben Webster, Andy Kirk, Bennie Moten, Coleman Hawkins, and Lester Young.

But here, I need to pull back from implying that by rejecting the White mainstream of Kansas City, I somehow encountered Black culture and was met with

a truer, authentic self, like the White protagonist of a movie that overcomes some obstacle with the help of a “magical negro.” I did not build relationships. I did not visit 18th and Vine, except for the music.

I wasn’t ready for what my dreads had to say. I wasn’t prepared for the truths they told. I wasn’t prepared for who they revealed me to be. In trying to disconnect, I was tangled up even more than before. In trying to break free, I was locked into others’ perceptions of who I should be. Of what my dreads said to them.

At worst, I was a cultural voyeur, exploring otherness for a time, knowing that all it took to get back was a pair of scissors.

At best, I was articulating through how I wore my hair a critique and rejection I did not yet have any other language to verbalize. I let my dreads say for me what I could not say any other way.

I used them like a litmus test. How people reacted to my dreads told me what I wanted to know. I hid behind my dreads. Let my beard grow. Hid my face, hid my smile. I couldn’t be seen behind my hair. Of course, in trying not to be seen, the more people looked. I could not avoid the disapproving glances.

My dreads were teachers. They were guides. The decision to grow dreads was not made rashly, but it was in ignorance. Four years later they reached the small of my back, they comforted me in my isolation. They reached out for connection but did not make contact. They tied me up with history; they tied me to cultures not my own.

Around this time, my best friend and roommate posed for a poster promoting the theater department’s production of the musical *Hair*. She sat cross-legged, facing away from the camera, showing only her impeccable posture and long, straight hair draped over her shoulders hanging down to her waist. The photographer manipulated the photo using dayglo colors and added psychedelic lettering announcing the show, dates, and times, making it resemble a ’60s era rock poster.

That spring, my roommate’s hair was posterized all over Lawrence, KS.

Her hair, long, straight, brown, was once a symbol of youthful rebellion for White hippies, dropouts, and protesters, but by the 1990s had been sold back to us as retro, ’60s nostalgia. A decade later, a mother of two, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. She shaved her head bald to disguise the hair loss from chemotherapy. After a single mastectomy she is, today, a breast cancer survivor. I see, from photos on Facebook, her hair cut in an asymmetrical bob.

My dreads were unruly.

They didn’t look “good.”

They stuck out where they shouldn’t.

They did not belong.  
They were not a "hairstyle."  
They were not in "style."

Once I learned their lessons,  
Once I read their stories,  
Once I realized it is not enough to just say, "No."  
I shaved them off.

"Chase those crazy baldheads out of town, now."

Baldness is no less political,  
no less commodified,  
no less.

All performances are political and pedagogical. The key is to unlock the layers of history, power, and privilege matted together with cultural scripts of beauty and dread, self-worth and self-loathing.

Being bald is so much easier; I should have shaved my head long ago. But that's not what popular culture says about bald men. I am comical, an object of ridicule, emasculated, past my prime. Or am I an action hero, like Bruce Willis, Vin Diesel, or Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson? Or am I commanding and suave like Patrick Stewart?

As a White man, I get to have it all ways.

Virile and sexless.

A lying comb-over (Trump) and proudly shorn (Prince William).

"Chase those crazy baldheads."

And yet, with whatever relative privilege I get as a bald, White man, I still consistently feel inadequate. I'm given the illusion of choice, like the supermarket cereal aisle, where all choices support the edifice of patriarchy and White supremacy.

A columnist in *The Guardian*, Tom Usher (2018) wrote: "Ultimately, balding is a part of life, because it's a part of death. Hair-loss treatments and replacements speak to a grim side of us that seeks immortality, of wanting to be young forever."

I run my hands over my smooth scalp, fingers catching, pulling, and tugging to disentangle my past from my future, but they are dreaded together in locks that flow from racial diaspora, colonization, slavery, and redemption.

I listened to what my dreads had to say. Having them was an honor I wore with pride. The roots of my dreads reach back to before I began to knot them together, and

they continue to tangle me up in our common history. At a point in time when I had forgotten how, they taught me to smile.

## **Carmen Hernández Ojeda: “I’m Sorry My Hair Is Making You Smile”**

“I’m sorry my hair is blocking your smile,” she said  
 A Black young woman said  
 Casually  
 To another woman  
 A spontaneous comment smelling of coffee, pancakes, and scrambled eggs  
 While staring at a smartphone, that tiny digital scribe of quotidian life  
 Amid a soundtrack of forks caressing plates, waiters’ rushed steps, *murmillos*,<sup>6</sup>  
     customers’ laughs, and outside, the beating heart of a small college town in  
     New England.  
 So White  
 So white  
 And cold  
 Like its frigid winters.  
 And for one second, that utterance, that apology  
 Takes me to my own hair  
 Not my head’s hair  
 But my body’s hair.  
 I am not Black.  
 I can barely imagine what it is to live and resist and thrive in the guts of  
     a white supremacist society that despises everything about Black human  
     beings.  
 Including their hair.  
 Yet I know a couple of things about white supremacists and how they despise my  
     first language, Spanish, and my thick accented English. How they diminish my  
     culture and heritage.  
 How they see me as a thief, as somebody who wants to take their jobs.  
 How they see me as somebody who should exist only to clean their shit—wash my  
     hands—pick up their organic produce—wash my hands—cook their meals—  
     wash my hands—and take care of their kids and elders.  
 For less than \$5 an hour.

With only the right to shut up and not complain.  
 Yet, I cannot compare my situation with most people of color in the United States.  
 Even though my identity is questioned at U.S. customs, like any other  
     Hernández and Fernández and Rodríguez coming from Latin American  
     countries  
 Even though my Spanish accent, culture, and history is closer to many  
     Caribbean countries—as a Canarian Islander, daughter of a 500-year  
     colonized land  
 Because I carry a European passport and a pile of diplomas. I teach American  
     college students in English. My neighbor is a judge. My 2015 leased Subaru  
     holds a parking tag that says “UMass.” And I am not Black.  
 I am not one of them, White and wealthy  
 But cultural capital and origin build me an armor that protects me from white  
     supremacy  
 And makes me an accomplice of their racist and classist regime  
 As long as my FICO credit score doesn't turn red, though  
 As long as my VISA doesn't expire, and I let myriad companies leech on my  
     cultivated body.  
 And as long as I keep my body and facial hair under control.  
 Because letting your armpits, moustache, or legs unshaven is not a woman  
     of color's right in the U.S. Not even for a privileged documented body  
     like mine.  
 Not even in Spain, my home country.  
 Since I was a teenager, I have spent my existence policing my body and facial hair.  
 Like a poisonous bush that needs to be constantly surveilled and controlled  
 Waxing, shaving, trimming, tweezing  
 My poor performative hair, so innocent and persistent  
 Fucking class and gender norms  
 Causing disgust, anger, and laughter around me  
 All my life  
*Las mujeres no tienen pelo en el cuerpo!* [Women don't have body hair]  
*Ese bigote, pareces un macho!* [What a moustache! You look like a dude!]  
*Y no te depilas las cejas?* [Why don't you wax your eyebrows?]  
*Guarra!* [Dirty woman!]  
 I think of my friend's words,  
 Apologizing because her hair is blocking another woman's smile in a picture  
 And I realize

That despite all my resistance, half-compliance, and reinforced self-esteem  
 Shaving here, waxing only there, loving every inch of my body  
 I have spent my life apologizing as well  
 In silence  
 Embarrassed because my body and facial hair acted as an uninvited and  
     uncontrolled buffoon  
 Making other people laugh at me  
 Pointing at me  
 Marking me  
 Questioning me  
 Pushing me to erase parts of myself  
 And torture my body  
 Self-torture  
 In silence.  
 Compliance.  
 I am an accomplice of my own oppression.  
 My own brutal police officer  
 On duty 24/7  
 And I feel sad. Nauseous.  
 Resisting patriarchy and white supremacy is not an easy task  
 Surviving oppression is not clean, spotless, heroic  
 It is not.  
 It is messy, fetid at times. Incoherent. Imperfect. Painful.  
 Impassive to well-reasoned theories and analysis.  
*Siendo feminista y lesbiana, te depilas?* [You say you are feminist and a dyke, and  
     you wax?]  
*Nepantla*, at least my *nepantla*, smells like shit, no roses.  
 Smells of burned skin, hot wax, trimmed and shaved hair, sweat, tears, betrayal,  
     shame, blood, scars.  
 And the scent of apologies that shouldn't exist.  
 That is the price some of us pay, will remain paying, to exist in a world that was not  
     designed to include certain accents, bodies, shapes, skin colors, desires,  
     kinesics, or hair.  
 Those parts of ourselves that sometimes spark disgust, anger, or laughter in others  
 Whose reactions provoke shame and/or anger in us.  
 In our oppressive societies, some bodies were not supposed to exist.  
 Or if they did, they were only confined to certain spaces

Serving, giving pleasure, entertaining, doing undesirable tasks, reinforcing values  
and scripts.

Yes, Sir.

No, Sir.

For free, or almost for free

At whatever time.

Mine should be one of them.

But it resists the best it can. The best it knows. My body.

Oppressing others, oppressing myself

Yet resisting.

Hoping.

What do you expect me to do?

To become your marching flag, your faultless heroine?

I am not.

Most likely, I will continue apologizing when I shouldn't

And clean others' mess

And wax, and shave, and dye my white hair

And avoid walking alone at night.

Trying to make sense of this world

And transforming it, transforming me, the best I can.

## **Claudio Moreira: "I'm Sorry My Hair Is Blocking Your Smile"**

That's our writing prompt!

Hair and smile, one covering the other.

I wonder if my hair may cover my smile in what Wallace Bacon (1979) called a tensive relationship, where each is at odds with another, a push and a pull, from different parts of the same body. In what situations is my hair blocking my smile? Should my mouth flex my lips, parting them in a smile, in defiance of my hair?

My family often complains that I don't smile enough. . . . Could my hair be the invisible block holding my lips closed? Some of my internal answers, thoughts, are in the lines that life is hard, that my childhood days were short . . . that life (and writing) contains only one certainty: the struggle.

However, if that's the case, my hair and smile are not in a tensive relationship but in an intimated complicity with another . . . trying to help me to forget, or as Bryant

said, playing with the words and title of Dillard's (2011) "Learning to Remember the Things We've Learned to Forget,"

that at times in my scholarly writing, I work towards learning to un/  
(re)member the things I need to forget, strategically un/(re)/member/ing  
those things that I can't afford to replay over and over and again in my  
memory and in my body as an act of resistance that is also a part of the sacred  
nature of research that Dillard writes about, in which we strive to open  
possibilities by reckoning with lived and cultural memory. (Alexander,  
Moreira, & Kumar, 2105, pp. 248–249)

Hidden smiles, or not smiling at all, help me with the vulnerability of a smile.  
The smile of seeing mother, and or father, just knowing they wouldn't stick  
around . . . the smile of after a good dream that only rests for some seconds after  
waking up.

A protection for "those things that I can't afford to replay over and over and again  
in my memory and in my body."

And the fear of what comes next.

And the belief that happiness is an overrated ideal possible only in the end of fairy  
tales and Disney movies.

As I've been told by a former advisor: "Not everybody is out there to get you!"

And my body screams that yes, they are out there to get me.

As my partner told me with love after I was awarded tenure: "Maybe the attitude  
that you have of needing to kill a Lyon [lions] everyday helped you to get here, but  
you don't need to have this anymore."

And my body reacts . . . Lyons [lions] are real.

Growing up in poverty, in violent neighborhoods, in what some sociologists  
called a broken family, gave me wounds that never heal.

They, the wounds, may not be visible anymore, but they are there.

Here

Hairs and smiles

I'm getting bald and still have a ponytail

To preserve the ability to cover my mouth?

To prevent the muscles of parting my lips in a . . . smile

Not being able to take for granted the good I have in my life because consciously  
I know, I am aware of my good life, of my children, of Dani, of my house, of my job  
security, the same way that I am consciously aware of the violence on our planet, of  
the rise of a politics of hate and fear.

And yet, only last night at Francisco's eighth-grade band concert, Dani asked: "Why are you smiling? You are always smiling in public functions. . . . I wish you would smile more in our house when it is just us." I am probably opening a Pandora's box between the concepts of our public and private persona, a task for another time, or just performing a nice foreigner in a very White and conservative town of 14,000 people in the middle of nowhere in western Massachusetts. I don't want to be perceived as a foreigner threat, especially in our current political climate, but specifically in the school that my son is enrolled. I want to be the target of comments such as "I like foreigners, see? I like you." Maybe it is the smile of many historically oppressed people who want to be a friend of the elite in power, common in many situations, but more explicitly when one does not really believe in their right to be physically there, to inhabit that geography, to belong to that physical space, to breathe the same air.

Be nice and they may let you stay.

A docile being showing gratitude, and they don't send you away!

A smile that I instinctively learned to use as a child and often used on the fourth Sunday after Mass, where I would go to the church's office to receive used clothes and free bags of rice, dry beans, flour, occasionally some pasta and tomato sauce to bring home. I always had my better smile for the nice ladies from middle-class families doing their charity work. But you see, the smile had to have an undertone of sadness so you could maybe get more food or better clothes, or the best prize, a pair of sneakers that have some wear on them.

Be nice and they may let you come back.

A docile being showing gratitude and they don't send you away!

I hated those Sundays, those well-intentioned ladies from good families. I hated Father and Mother for not being present. . . . I am ashamed to say that I even hated Grandma. And deeply I hated myself. I hated myself for not yelling to the world that I don't want the clothes, the food, even the possibility of a pair of shoes. For not shouting to all of them that they know where to shove their goods, their charity, their pity, and, yes, their God!

I not only needed but wanted the food, the clothes, and, yes, the sneakers.

So, I performed the child with a bright smile with an undertone of sadness!

However, if that's the case, my hair and smile are not in a relationship at all because I only wrote about my smile and use my hair only in a fictional way, a kind of an invisible block to my smile, and there is always a possibility that all I wrote here are simple excuses to my inability of feeling at home with my lovely family in my own house.

Hairs and smiles

Is my own hair blocking my smile?

Are yours?

## Hair Tales: A Found Poem as Conclusion

A found poem is one way of more deeply engaging a text, of interweaving your feelings/thoughts with the original author by pulling lines that draw you in like lifelines, making you spend time, to think, to pause, to call and respond. A found poem emerges in an intersubjective communion between author-reader/listener/respondent-author. It has also been described that “found poems take existing texts and refashion them, reorder them, and present them as poems” (Found poem, n.d.). That is the case of this particular found poem; actual lines from the preceding seven coauthors are drawn in close relation to each other to establish another level of performative intercultural dialogue written between the lines of the primary text.<sup>7</sup>

“I’m sorry my hair is blocking your smile”

I wasn’t prepared for the truths they told.

My family often complains that I don’t smile enough . . . could my hair be the  
invisible block holding my lips close?

It isn’t up for debate

policing my body and facial hair

I don’t want to be perceived as a foreigner threat

Black hair may speak loudly but its language goes misinterpreted –

A prisoner of borders’ story.

Be nice and they may let you stay.

Nine, ten, eleven, twelve inches of my hair fall to the kitchen floor

I’m getting bald and still have a ponytail

I wasn’t ready for what my dreads had to say

I want to push it into White people’s faces

Chase those crazy baldheads out of the town

My dreads were teachers

if you let me cut your hair, I’ll let you cut mine

My dreads were unruly

Waxing, shaving, trimming, tweezing

My baldness is no less political

It is messy, fetid at times. Incoherent. Imperfect. Painful.

*Theories of the flesh*

(her hair, his hair, my hair, Black hair, too much hair).

"I'm sorry smiles cannot erase the racial mark on our bodies."

It grows their hair

Hairs and smiles

You see, I'm not sorry about my hair

*My own dreads, [now gone] grew out of deep places beneath the surface*

My smile has been precious

She brings her hands to her face and buries her face into my hair.

So, I performed the child with a bright smile with an undertone of sadness!

"I'm sorry *my* hair is *making* you smile"

Most likely, I will continue apologizing when I shouldn't.

"I'm sorry smiles cannot erase the colonial borders and violent policies."

I listened to what my dreads had to say.

Shaving here, waxing only there, loving every inch of my body

"I'm sorry, Mom, that my hair is blocking your smile."

I have spent my life apologizing as well.

I only wrote about my smile and use my hair only in a fictional way, a kind of an invisible block to my smile, and there is always a possibility that all I wrote here, are simple excuses . . .

In our oppressive societies, some bodies were not supposed to exist .

"I'm sorry *your* hair is blocking *my* smile."

## Notes

1. E. Patrick Johnson (2001) says that everything he knows about queer studies (theory), he learned from his grandmother.
2. This particular expression is drawn from Alexander's recent collaborative work with Michele Hammers in an earlier draft of Hammers & Alexander (2018).
3. See my series on the politics of Black hair, barbershops, and salons (Alexander, 2003, 2006, 2008, 2014).

4. These pictures were taken on the morning of Monday, April 23, 2018, at a diner called Lone Wolf in Amherst, Massachusetts, the morning of a public lecture presented by Bryant Keith Alexander at the University of Massachusetts for the Comm Graduate Student Association. All women at the table were graduate students, with Ayshia Elizabeth Stephenson-Celadilla having recently defended her dissertation, as had Timothy Sutton the year before. Claudio Moreira is an associate professor in the Department of Communication, which hosted the visit. Carmen Hernandez Ojeda has since successfully defended her dissertation, and Porn-tip Israsena Twishime who was a master's candidate at the time of this writing, is now a PhD student in the same program.
5. See, for example, <https://www.munuc.org/committees/who/>.
6. Spanish for "whispering."
7. See how Weems (2017) as well as Weems and Alexander (2017) engage and embody the found poem. Also see Prendergast (2015).

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