

**What Can We Learn From A Flawed Documentary?  
A Discussion of Chris Rock's *Good Hair***

WHO has “good hair?”

HOW are race,  
femininity, and identity  
articulated through  
hair?

WHAT does Hinduism  
have to do with  
weaves?

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**What Can We Learn From a Flawed Documentary? A Discussion of Chris Rock's *Good Hair***

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**Call For Panelists: 4th Annual Graduate Student Forum on Race and Ethnicity**



Sonja Thomas, a Graduate Assstant at the CRE, led the discussion following the screening

The Center for Race and Ethnicity hosted a documentary screening and discussion of Chris Rock's *Good Hair* on November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2010. Drawing over seventy people, the event brought together students and faculty from diverse disciplines at Rutgers University. In a robust and engaging conversation, facilitated by Sonja Thomas (CRE Graduate Assistant), it became clear that although deeply flawed, *Good Hair* provides an important vehicle for understanding race and ethnicity in the United States.

*Good Hair*, co-written, produced and narrated by the comedian Chris Rock, begins with a story: his young and innocent daughter asking him, “Daddy, how come I don't have good hair?” Rock's response, “I wonder where she got that idea,” launches the audience into a social critique of Black women's hair and its relation to class, femininity and standards of beauty in the contemporary United States. The documentary visits the Bronner Brothers' hair show in Atlanta, barber and beauty shops, and the Black-owned Dudley Hair Care factory, which produces relaxers, in order to demystify the processes by which African American women obtain “good hair.” Traveling to India to view tonsure ceremonies, *Good Hair* also reveals the Hindu practice of sacrificing hair, a symbol of vanity, to the gods. The narrator observes the cleaning, separating, and stitching of this sacrificial Indian hair into weaves, and its flow back into the U.S. As these weaves can cost upwards of \$1000, the documentary also discusses the costs associated with obtaining “good hair.”

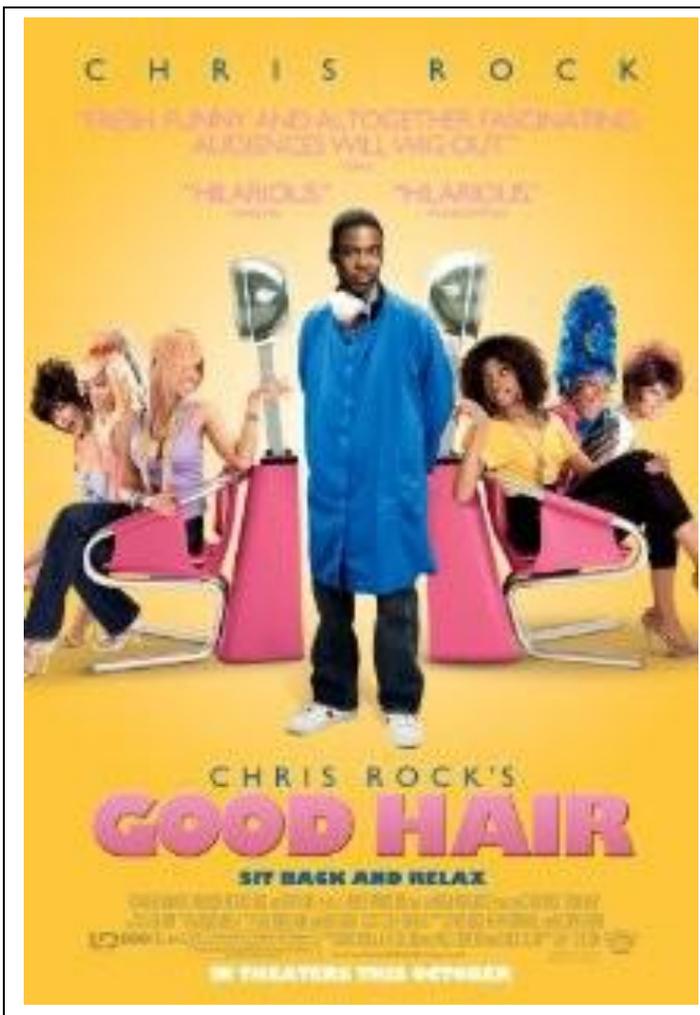
The discussion after the screening brought up many questions and critiques of the documentary: Why does Chris Rock focus only on women trying to obtain “good hair,” and not on African American women who choose to wear their hair naturally? Why does the film seem to blame Black women in their quest for “good hair?”

And why is there so little discussion of how the concept of “good” is related to Whiteness? These questions, raised by audience members, helped to situate the film within its broader set of cultural and political concerns—as well as to unpack the intersections between race, class and gender in America today.

**HAIR “MYTHS”**

Is it true that the more relaxed, straight, and “White-looking” your hair is, the better your chance of getting ahead?

According to an undergraduate viewer, “no matter what a Black woman does with her hair, it's gonna be politicized. What sort of choice do we have?” This



comment was a response to the dilemma the documentary highlighted of choosing between wearing hair naturally or enduring the chemical processes and/or weaves to obtain “good” hair. During discussion of the film it became clear that women of color are subjected to judgment and harsh critique no matter which choice they make.

Why do Black women invest in costly and potentially harmful beautification processes that can include hazardous, corrosive chemicals like sodium hydroxide in pursuit of “good hair?” The film highlights the fear of Black hair in its natural state imposed by society and internalized by Black woman. For example, the documentary interviews a group of Black high school students who admit to a fellow classmate, who wears her hair naturally, that her hair is not professional. They tell her that her competitiveness in the job market might be affected by the appearance of her hair, a comment that speaks to the potential consequences of choosing to avoid costly dangerous chemicals and/or expensive weaves. The discussion after the screening examined this scene and many women of color spoke about the links between racial markers and economic opportunities. A graduate student mentioned that in her student evaluations, she was once told by a male student to “wear your hair down more often because you look hot.” How can one be taken seriously in a job, she asked, when women of color are so often judged by their appearance?

Other audience members touched on how the film reveals the ways in which standards of beauty are determined by Whiteness. They described how the talking heads of the film—from

***“No matter what a Black woman does with her hair, it’s gonna be politicized. What sort of choice do we have?” – audience member, Good Hair screening***

Reverend Al Sharpton to acclaimed writer Maya Angelou—make the argument that White (and White-looking) hair is often placed at the top of the social hierarchy, as a status-conferral device in society, while Black hair is often at the bottom, associated with poverty and lack of sex-appeal. In other words, the more relaxed, straight and White-looking your hair is, the more likely you are to get ahead in life in a variety of settings such as job interviews and the dating scene. And these social norms are so powerfully imposed on women that they would go to any lengths to achieve this state of “Whiteness.”

To illustrate the power of these norms, at one point in the film Chris Rock steps into a weave retail shop in an attempt to sell Black hair. After being turned down he asks, “You think somebody will get sickle cell disease from getting Black hair?” The storeowner responds, “Yes!” In another scene mentioned during the discussion, a young Black girl is asked why she wants to relax her hair. “Because you’re supposed to,” she answers. Audience members agreed that in this and other scenes, the viewer is powerfully reminded that standards of beauty are determined by and policed in relation to Whiteness.

### **STEREOTYPES: PRO OR CON?**

Is *Good Hair* critiquing stereotypes or trafficking in stereotypes about Black women?

An audience member, disappointed by the film’s portrayal of African American women, rose and said, “The film *Good Hair* is like a bad essay, all the elements are there, but the story is not well told. It is a pity, really, because it is the only film on the topic of African American hair that will get this huge viewership. As a result, some of these stereotypes will be widely distributed. At least, when I write a bad essay, nobody else but myself and my professor have access to it.” As more than one viewer argued, “Rather than show the diversity of hair styles and costs in the Black community,” the documentary presents Black women as committed to expensive weaves and straightened hair. Another viewer added that the film completely ignored the widespread and growing natural hair movement among African Americans. Indeed, throughout the film, the women in *Good Hair* seem to sport nothing *but* straightened, woven and imported “good hair.”

According to a number of voices in the audience, *Good Hair* blames Black women for the expense and violence of an industry invested in creating an image of feminine beauty no woman can afford, achieve or have invented. In other words, the film identifies the *effects* rather than the *cause* of the quest for “good hair.” Indeed, rather than find fault with the male-dominated beauty industry, or men’s desire for

***“The film is like a bad essay; all the elements are there, but the story is not well told.” – audience member, Good Hair screening***

particular embodiments of femininity, *Good Hair* instead sympathizes with the sons, boyfriends and husbands enlisted to help pay for women’s weaves.

In a series of scenes at beauty and barber shops, Chris Rock engages a wide range of men in conversations about their role in paying for the hair. The men all admit that while they work to support the women in their lives’ hair, they rarely get to touch it, and that this feels like a loss. Together, they share intimate stories about having sex with Black women but not knowing whether or not their hair was “real.” Rapper, actor and self-avowed pimp, Ice T, offers his thoughts about women’s body parts as well as their hair saying “Women use weaves as a power thing, like I’m supposed to give you points for that hair. I’m not giving you those points, I’ll give you points for your ass, your legs, and your skin, but you don’t get points for the weave.” For many audience members, Black women seem to have somehow lost their role as the film’s subject and instead become its object. Though the film has carefully explored the problem of allowing Black women to be hair consumers, it seems to have little reservation consuming them itself.

The viewer is left with a feeling of racial outrage not only toward the White and Asian businesses that produce “good hair,” but also toward Black women for choosing “good hair” over natural. The film spends a significant amount of time explaining the gradual take-over of Black-owned and manufactured hair products by “White” corporations and the dominance of Koreans in the Black hair market today. What is particularly telling about these circuits of production and distribution is that they exclude African-Americans, the target population for these products. Similarly, the exoticization of Indian hair used in weaves, as racialized yet straight and ‘white-looking,’ leads to another form of White domination through post-colonial circuits of economic and cultural exploitation. For Chris Rock, this evokes a sense of loss. Reverend Al Sharpton echoes this loss in the documentary stating “we can’t control something as close to us as

our own hair,” to highlight the ways in which Black women wear their “class exploitation” on their bodies. An audience member familiar with the documentary touched briefly upon the issue of such “consuming” by mentioning that Rock was sued by Regina Kimbell, a Black female documentary film maker, for copyright infringement of her film, “My Nappy Roots: A Journey Through Black Hair-itage.” Apparently, and unfortunately, the audience concluded, Rock’s way of patronizing Black and middle-class women from his male, upper-class and super-star perspective reinstates all kinds of damaging hierarchies including masculine and upper-class privilege.

While the criticism of the documentary framed much of the discussion, Sonja Thomas asked the audience to try to reflect

on any positive interventions the film makes. Many audience members discussed how Chris Rock’s celebrity status helped to promote the documentary and lay out the varied ways African American women obtain “good hair.” For those unfamiliar with the realities of African Americans’ use of relaxers and weaves, the quest for “good hair” provides a framework to discuss the relationships between race, class and gender in America society. The screening and discussion of *Good Hair* was a success and reflects the Center for Race and Ethnicity’s mission to promote interdisciplinary engagements with issues of race, gender and ethnicity at Rutgers University.

### The Center for Race and Ethnicity

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### Mission Statement:

- Facilitating research and enriching education on matters of race and ethnicity in contemporary life in America, in New Jersey, and the world
- Promoting collaborations and fostering cross-disciplinary seminars and discussions on topics from immigration and work, to ethnic politics and racial classification, from preservation of cultural identity to its transformation, and including questions of poverty, discrimination, advancement, integration, and privilege
- Identifying critical areas for future research and supporting race and ethnicity research and policy development.



## Join us for our 4<sup>th</sup> Annual GRADUATE FORUM on RACE AND ETHNICITY Friday, February 25, 2011

The Center for Race & Ethnicity invites Rutgers Master’s and PhD candidates to take part in a cross-disciplinary conversation about graduate research related to the study of race and ethnicity. Students from all levels of study (from 1<sup>st</sup> year graduate students to ABDs) and from all schools at Rutgers, including Public Policy, Law, Social Work, Education, Business, and Arts and Sciences, are welcome! This event is part of the Center for Race & Ethnicity’s ongoing initiative to promote interdisciplinary exchange and collaboration.

**SHARE** your research and receive feedback on a course paper, dissertation proposal, chapter or poster in a casual and supportive environment. Well-developed projects and papers in progress are welcome. Panelists will provide a brief 5-7 minute presentation of their work. *Formal papers are not required for participation.*

**MEET** other Rutgers graduate students across schools, disciplines, and departments working on projects related to race and ethnicity. Each panel will be followed by informal, cross-disciplinary dialogue exploring future directions for research.

**LEARN** about fellowship resources and receive job market advice at workshops led by faculty and advanced grad students.

**Deadline for submissions: December 15, 2010. Send to: [CREgradforum@gmail.com](mailto:CREgradforum@gmail.com)**

Submissions should include: 1) your name, year in school, department, campus, and email address; 2) a 150-250 word description of your presentation and argument; 3) a brief 1-2 line biography. Notifications will be made at the start of the Spring semester.