***Other People’s Hair (pre-translation into French)***

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What can a lock of hair tell us? What relation does it retain to the person to whom it was once attached? Dead, yet seemingly alive; intimate yet detachable; personal, yet reducible to mere fibre, hair is conceptually ambiguous. Swept up on the salon floor it becomes just another form of waste, but preserved as relic, love token or scientific specimen it has the capacity to conjure up the presence of people and relationships. What sort of presence is this? What connections does hair kindle?

“The notion that a man may be bewitched by means of clippings of his hair or nails, or any other portion of his person is almost world-wide,” wrote the anthropologist, James Henry Frazer in 1890. At the very time that he was exploring this “sympathetic connection”, many of his professional colleagues were busy collecting and classifying samples of hair from people around the world. Poked into envelopes, glass tubes and boxes or mounted in small frames, these hair clippings today lie buried in the dark recesses of museum drawers and storage cabinets where snippings from aboriginal men, Bretton women and Egyptian children reside side by side. Lables suggest that some have arrived haphazardly through networks of travellers, anthropologists, colonial officers, doctors, scientists, traders and auctioneers. Others are the products of systematic programmes of research in physical anthropology at a time when hair was thought to be a key indicator of race. One might be forgiven for assuming that such hair collections have lost their power and interest except as evidence of earlier academic preoccupations. But the hair suggests otherwise.

In ‘My Grandmother’s hair’, the writer Elizabeth Alexander describes the curious sensation of visiting the archives of the Peabody Museum in the United States and seeing a curly lock of dark hair that had been clipped from her grandmother in 1927. Its classification as ‘ ½ Negro, ¼ Indian, ¼ White’ spoke of the racial pre-occupations of American anthropologists of the time but the feel of the hair offered something different – direct physical access, not so much to her grandmother’s past as to her future, for this was her grandmother at the age of 19, long before the birth of the writer or even her mother. What the hair enabled was time travel, igniting a new type of sympathetic connection to add to Frazer’s list. Kinship links were further re-established through the touching of this lock of hair by the fact that the anthropologist who had collected and classified it was in fact the grandmother’s sister.

Much of the hair that lies buried in museum collections today is unlikely ever to receive such intimate personal attention, although Tasmanian aboriginal groups are active in seeking the return of ancestral hair from museums with some success. Yet even when hair remains stuck in the museum closet, its emotive potential is not lost. In Vienna, amongst the 4039 hair samples stuffed in the drawers of the Natural History Museum, are over a hundred locks cut from Polish Jews just before their transportation to Buchenweld where most were killed. Sealed in semi-transparent yellowing envelopes, and accompanied by mug shots and anthropometric measurements, these delicate wisps and curls, each distinctive in their way, once served to contribute to classifications of Jewishness – modern proof perhaps of the persistent dangers of hair clippings getting into the wrong hands. Today they serve as personal and collective relics and as evidence of the active engagement of Viennese anthropologists in the Nazi eugenics programme. Like the mass of hair on display at Auschwitcz, theirs is a double haunting - conjuring up both the presence and absence of persecutor and persecuted.

Although the racial science pursued by early anthropologists has long since been abandoned, the hair samples they collected have, in recent years, attracted new attention from geneticists and paleantologists seeking to answer questions about nutrition, pollution and disease. Their pragmatic use of hair collections sometimes sits in tension with the attempts made by some contemporary museum curators to respect the moral and ethical concerns of source communities.. When the curator, Laura Peers from the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford consulted members of the Ojibwe Community in Red Lake ,Minnesota about hair collected from them in the 1930’s, she was greeted with reactions of anger, bitterness and sorrow by local elders. Not only did the hair bring back traumatic memories of the assimilation agenda in Government schools which had included acts of forcible hair cutting, but it also ignited fears that harm might still now be conducted through the hair clippings by strangers in far off lands.

Time and distance do not, it seems, annul hair’s capacity to retain an intimate connection to the people from whom it was once removed. To others it offers the possibility of memory and re-connection whether painful, harmful or sweet.. Anthropological ambitions to classify the world through hair may have failed but the hair samples in museum collections remain as ghostly reminders of their endeavers, conjuring up the presence, absence and mutual entanglement of those who once yielded samples of hair, often reluctantly, and those who sought to preserve them for posterity.

Bibliography

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Peers Laura, 2003, ‘Strands which Refuse to be Braided: Hair samples from the Beatrice Blackwood’s Ojibwe Collection at the Pitt Rivers Museum, *Journal of Material Culture* 8:75-96

2 possible illustrations sent: permissions to be obtained from museums

1. A drawer from the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford. [Emma Tarlo 2015]
2. Samples of hair clippings from Polish Jews, Museum of Natural History, Vienna [ Emma Tarlo 2015]