

ISSUE 1

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# THE FORUM NEWSLETTER

PHI SIGMA IOTA INT'L FOREIGN  
LANGUAGE HONOR SOCIETY

**Welcome to the first issue of The Forum Newsletter**



Headquarters, Allegheny College



## **2024-2025 Executive Board**

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## **2026-2027 Executive Board**

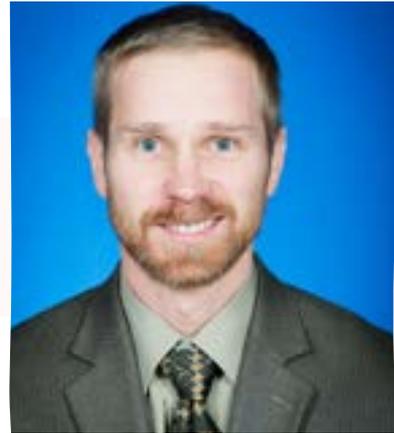
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Our executive board commits their time and expertise to Phi Sigma Iota, managing all operational facets of the organization. The board meets several times a year via Zoom, with each term spanning two years. If you're interested in becoming a member, please contact the Administrative Director at [contact@phisigmaiota.org](mailto:contact@phisigmaiota.org).

WHAT YOU'LL FIND IN THIS NEWSLETTER

MESSAGE FROM CODY HANSON, PRES. 23-25  
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STUDENT SCHOLARSHIP STATEMENTS  
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## A Message from Cody C. Hanson President 2023-2025



Dear Members and Advisors:

It has been an honor to serve Phi Sigma Iota on the Executive Board for the past three years (2023–2025), first as President-Elect and then as President. These years have brought extraordinary challenges and opportunities to higher education. The arrival of the “demographic cliff,” uncertainty surrounding international student enrollment, the reorganization of the U.S. Department of Education, and sweeping state-level legislation have reshaped priorities across campuses in ways that we could not have imagined a few years ago. Added to these changes is a renewed emphasis on professional education in higher education—all of which have had a profound impact on the study of Foreign Languages and the Humanities.

Throughout this period, Phi Sigma Iota has remained steadfast in its mission while adapting to a shifting landscape. In 2023, we hosted our first-ever virtual triennial convention, as outlined in our bylaws. This innovative format allowed chapters from across the country to gather in a shared space of collaboration and support. Two keynote speakers offered compelling perspectives on the value of language learning. Dr. Lucinda Crowe, Assistant Professor of Spanish at the University of Evansville, spoke about the transformative role of community-focused service-learning projects and their ability to meet real-world needs. Dr. Yun J. Kim, Associate Teaching Professor of Linguistics at Emory University, explored the cognitive benefits of foreign language acquisition, including its positive neurological effects on mental health and its potential to help prevent dementia.

The convention also highlighted the achievements of two collegiate members whose experiences abroad were made possible through our scholarship program. Their creative video presentations illustrated the life-changing opportunities that language study can provide. Additionally, a chapter advisor shared practical strategies for fostering vibrant and active chapters—reminding us that engagement at the local level remains the heartbeat of our society.

Our commitment to supporting language learners continues through nine annual scholarships, enabling members to pursue study and projects around the globe. After a brief hiatus, our long-standing publication, *The Forum*, will return in 2026 as the official newsletter-journal of Phi Sigma Iota. Membership initiation numbers, which declined during the pandemic, have rebounded—a testament to the resilience and dedication of our chapters. We are also proud to remain an active member of the American Council of Honor Societies (ACHS), whose advocacy helps preserve the integrity of all honor societies.

Looking ahead, Phi Sigma Iota is in excellent hands. In January 2026, Dr. Kristi Bond of Harding University begins her two-year term as President of the Executive Board. Her history of active involvement and her vision for the future will guide the organization forward. She will be joined by experienced and dedicated board members who share a deep commitment to our mission. As for me, I look forward to continuing my service on the scholarship committee, supporting the next generation of language scholars.

Serving as President has been one of the greatest honors of my professional life. I am grateful for the opportunity to work alongside so many passionate individuals who believe in the transformative power of language and culture. Together, we have faced challenges, embraced innovation, and strengthened the foundation of Phi Sigma Iota for years

to come. Thank you for your trust, your dedication, and your shared commitment to advancing the study of languages and cultures.

I hope you enjoy this edition of The Forum!

Cody C. Hanson, Ph.D.  
2024-2025 President  
Phi Sigma Iota

# *Welcome* New Chapters

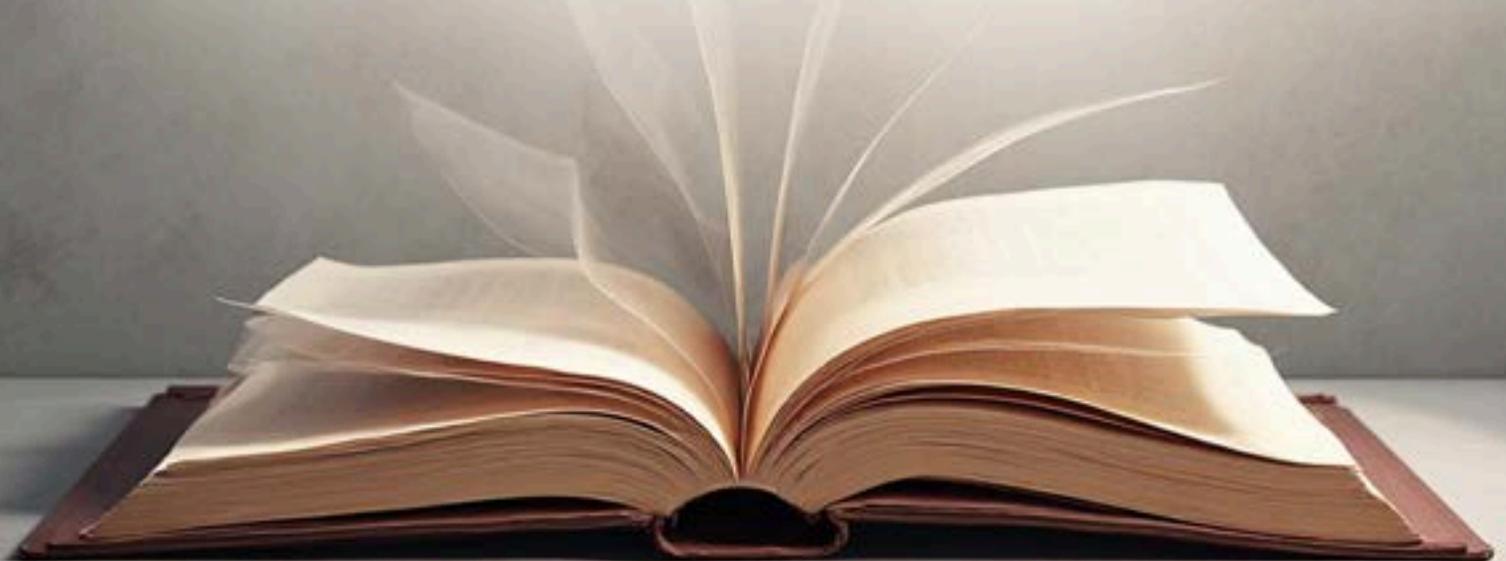
*We very happy to welcome the following new chapters  
to Phi Sigma Iota:*

Bethel University  
St. Paul, Minnesota  
Zeta Iota, Chapter #282  
Mark Lindberg, Advisor

University of South Mississippi  
Hattiesburg, Mississippi  
Mu Eta, Chapter #281  
Laurel Hodges, Advisor

University of Wisconsin, La Crosse  
La Crosse, Wisconsin  
Omega Tau, Chapter #280  
Antonio Martín Gómez, Advisor

*We have observed and are receiving feedback from numerous institutions that had  
been inactive in recent years now making a comeback.*



# Small Grants for Chapters



**Phi Sigma Iota offers four one-time chapter grants not to exceed \$150./application on a first-come, first-serve basis. Email application to [contact@phisigmaiota.org](mailto:contact@phisigmaiota.org), application available on our website. The Administrative Director will act on applications in the order they are received and will continue to award grants until funds run out.**



## We Need Your Help

**We need your help to showcase student work and are accepting articles for publication in our newsletter. If you have a student whose work you want to showcase, please submit to [contact@phisigmaiota.org](mailto:contact@phisigmaiota.org). We are always interested in events your chapter holds and would be delighted to post photos in our newsletter and on social media. Please send us pictures, photo consent (available on our website), or written permission for us to use your photo and work on our website or newsletter.**

## New Phi Sigma Iota Stickers

**3 x 3 Round Stickers available online .75 Each**



A decorative scroll graphic with ornate flourishes at the top and bottom, containing the text "Scholarships Recipients 2025".

# Scholarships Recipients 2025

Dr. Cleon Capsus Award - Katherine Garcia  
Caldwell University

Dr. Santiago Vilas - Bailey Key,  
Northern Kentucky University

Dr. Anthony S. Corbiere - Milena Mata  
South Alabama University

Dr. Henry Ward Church - Kaitlyn M. Aarons  
Jacksonville University

Dorothy I. Mitsifer - Anna Stein  
Mercer University

Dr. Marie-France Hilgar - Jenna Johnston  
Gonzaga University

Phi Sigma Iota - Cheyenne Drake  
Indiana State University

Phi Sigma Iota - Scott Lancaster  
University of California, Chico

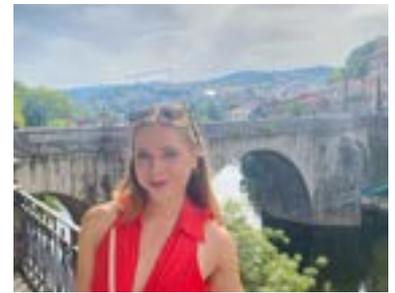
Phi Sigma Iota - Landon Hill  
University of North Alabama

Phi Sigma Iota - Matthew Sprague  
Salem University

# SCHOLARSHIPS

- Application deadline is March 13, 2026
- Send applications to [contact@phisigmaiota.org](mailto:contact@phisigmaiota.org)  
(Administrative Director)
- Current members only; alumni welcome to apply
- Find forms at

<https://phisigmaiota.org/scholarships>



## DR. SANTIAGO VILAS

Dr. Santiago Vilas passed away June 16, 2025. Born in Vigo, Spain he began working for a local newspaper when only 14 and by 16 was publishing articles as a young reporter. His distinguished professional journalistic career included vice editor-in-chief at age 20, radio anchor newsman at age 22, and correspondent of several Spanish national newspapers and international news agencies. He was awarded several Spanish journalistic awards. He earned two degrees in Spain: Business Administration from the University of Santiago and Journalism from the National School of Journalism in Madrid. Fleeing the regime under dictator Francisco Franco, he emigrated to the US as press correspondent, but within the year began a career in teaching Spanish language and literature at colleges in Spartanburg, South Carolina, the University of North Carolina, and University of Georgia.

In 1964 he came to Louisiana and pursued his PhD. In 1966 he began teaching Spanish language and culture career that spanned 18 years as part of LSU's graduate faculty. He was a member of three honor societies: Phi Kappa Phi, Phi Sigma Iota and Sigma Delta Pi. Elected president of the national foreign language honor society Phi Sigma Iota in 1977, and frequent guest lecturer at several universities in the USA, Mexico, and Italy. In 1980, he was appointed by the National Endowment for the Humanities to serve in Washington, DC as an advisor, panelist and examiner of fellowship and national grant candidates. He most enjoyed leading a foreign language instruction delegation to China as a member of US People to People Citizen Ambassador Program in 1997.

Santiago published seven books in Spanish and English including *The Louisiana Professional Real Estate Manual*; he was also a Notary Public Real Estate broker and businessman.

This year's recipient of the Santiago Vilas Scholarship Bailey Key, Northern Kentucky University.

The following is Bailey Key's Response to receiving Dr. Vilas's Scholarship:

# Scholarship Statement

**2025 Dr. Santiago Vilas Scholarship  
Bailey Key, Northern Kentucky University**

I received the Dr. Santiago Vilas scholarship through Phi Sigma Iota for my study abroad in Japan that took place during the summer of 2025. Thanks to awards like this scholarship, I was able to spend a full month traveling across Japan, taking courses with the KIIS program that broadened my knowledge of both the Japanese language and their history as a country. In my application for PSI scholarships, I wrote an essay that explained how I wanted to broaden my perspective of the world and connect with different cultures that inspire my work as a writer. Through studying abroad, I was able to accomplish that goal and have an unforgettable experience that I will remember for the rest of my life.

During my study abroad, my group visited several locations across Japan. Nara, Gifu, Nagoya, Osaka, Kyoto, and Tokyo were all locations that I was able to visit during my stay. Most days, there would be excursions to different places of interest within these cities, and I would have the opportunity to learn more about Japanese culture through hands-on learning. In just two days in Nara, I would visit residential districts and famous shrines such as the Tōdai-ji Temple, the largest wooden temple still standing today, and the historical Nara palace grounds. I was surrounded by buildings with histories that date back to before the founding of my home country. And as the excursions continued as we explored Japan, I was able to learn about Japanese history from both an American perspective and a Japanese perspective. This experience helped shape my understanding of why I found myself so interested in Japanese history to begin with. Being able to get a first-hand perspective as to how the films, literature, and mythology that I had grown up with had come to be was exactly the experience I was hoping for to help me develop both my understanding of Japan, which I could combine with me development as a Japanese speaker and a writer.

The course I took during my study abroad was Women in Japanese Literature. It was during that course that I was exposed to Japanese literature in a way that changed my perspective for the better. The readings of the course were far from the popularized Japanese works that are advertised in the United States, and their subject matter was a painfully real insight into the history of how women have been treated in historical and contemporary Japanese society. I carry this insight with me into my writing as I seek to draw from multiple cultures and perspectives with my work. The course also helped me develop my skills as a Japanese speaker. Assignments could require me to speak to Japanese citizens for their thoughts on literature, which gave me the perfect opportunity to utilize my previous study of Japanese and have these conversations. I was able to converse with Japanese citizens on a casual level, something that a

language barrier has always made exceedingly difficult for me. I was able to learn about aspects of American culture that are popular in Japan through these conversations, as well as combine what I learned with my own thoughts to deepen my perspective. The course was not only a fantastic learning experience, but also one that showed me how much I had developed as a writer and Japanese speaker, while also showing me how I can still improve.

My experience with my study abroad was wonderful, and I owe that to the scholarships I had received. Financial issues were the prime reason I was hesitant about studying abroad in the past, but assistance from groups such as PSI made my goal of studying abroad a reality. Upon learning that Dr. Vilas was an accomplished author with works in both English and Spanish, I felt pride in the fact that I was the recipient of an award named for someone whose accomplishments mirrored what I want to achieve with my own work. I feel honored to be able to say I wish to follow Dr. Vilas' example and create opportunities for others to have an understanding of different cultures that transcends the language barriers that people face. I will forever be grateful for the opportunity I was given, and the experiences I've had because of it. Thanks to being able to study abroad, my perspective on the world is more complete.

# Scholarship Statement

**2025 Dorothy Mitstifer Scholarship  
Anna Stein, Mercer University**

I am so grateful to have received the Dorothy Mitstifer scholarship this year. It allowed me to participate in an exciting academic program studying Spanish in Seville, where I took courses on Spanish history, arts, and culture.

While learning about artists, I got to see Velázquez's "Las Meninas", Goya's "Saturn Devouring His Son", Picasso's "Guernica", and visited the former monastery Museo de Bellas Artes. After studying the successive occupations of the Iberian Peninsula, I visited the Roman ruins of Italica and Seville's judería (former walled-off Jewish quarter). Seeing Christopher Columbus's remains in the Cathedral of Seville and visiting the former Royal Tobacco Factory brought to life Spanish-American history, and entering the Plaza de Toros – where bullfights still occur – was a memorable experience.

Along with my knowledge of Spanish history, I also gained confidence in my Spanish-speaking abilities in this program. I grew comfortable ordering in stores and restaurants, held valuable conversations with my host family, and made friends in a church, where I once was able to translate the sermon for a visitor who spoke no Spanish. The trip broadened my horizons in terms of possible future careers, opening my eyes to the possibility of translating and teaching positions, and new people. It was rewarding to chat with an Uber driver and get book recommendations, trip suggestions, and life stories.

I learned new vocabulary from each aspect of the program, and I have already been able to put this growth to use: in a music festival shortly after the program in Spain ended, the Venezuelan cellist in my string quartet didn't know the word 'decay', and I was able to translate for him ('decadencia'). That moment, using the language I love and have worked on for so long to help someone, felt so good. It would not have been possible without the Dorothy Mitstifer scholarship from Phi Sigma Iota, which allowed me to attend this program in Seville and has both benefited me so much and opened opportunities for me to help others in my community.

# Scholarship Statement

**2023 Anthony S. Corbiere Scholarship**  
**Michelle Holland, Harding University**

Languages have been a part of my life for as long as I can remember. I chose to study them voluntarily in junior high, took every language class available to me in high school, and traveled overseas whenever I had the opportunity. By the time I reached college, languages had become my major and ultimately the inspiration for my career.

For more than twenty years, I've been teaching Spanish, sharing my love of language and encouraging students to recognize and nurture their own linguistic abilities. I have a few phrases that I repeat often to my students. First, I remind them that speaking another language is a gift that they should be proud of and willing to use. Like any skill, it requires ongoing effort to maintain, and I encourage them to stick with it. Second, I tell them that once people know they're bilingual, they will be asked to translate. Our school registrar, for example, frequently stops by our offices to ask for help deciphering international transcripts.

Requests for translation helped me discover that I genuinely love the challenge of translation, so much so that I pursued a degree in translation studies. That passion eventually led me to start a translation program at Harding University, where I teach today.

One of the most exciting parts of our program is our community service center. The Harding University Center for Translation provides translation and interpreting services in French and Spanish to the Searcy community and the broader Harding family. In our center, our students can practice their translation skills under supervision as a service to their community. Our goal has always been twofold: to teach students another language and to show them how to use that language in meaningful, practical ways that benefit the communities where they live.

To help bring this vision to life, we applied for a Phi Sigma Iota scholarship to support the launch of the Center. The application process was very straightforward: an application form, a bilingual personal statement, a project description with anticipated expenses, information about past and future funding, transcripts, and a letter of recommendation. After receiving the award, the committee asks for a follow-up report describing how the project was carried out.

We were incredibly grateful to receive the scholarship. With the funds, we were able to host our inaugural event, complete with multiple ceremonies and a guest speaker. It was an exciting and affirming moment for our students, our program, and our community.

If you have an idea that connects language learning with real-world impact, I wholeheartedly encourage you to apply for one of the Phi Sigma Iota scholarships. We are deeply grateful for PSI's commitment to promoting languages and for their generosity in helping projects like ours

come to life. The opportunity to elevate the importance of language study while serving others is both affirming and rewarding.

--Michelle Holland, Associate Professor of Spanish and Director for the Harding University Center for Translation

# Scholarship Statement

**2024 Phi Sigma Iota Scholarship**  
**Gaetan Jean Louis, SUNY-Geneseo**

Thanks to the generous support of the Phi Sigma Iota scholarship, I was able to participate in a six-week Spanish language immersion program in Peru, an experience that profoundly shaped my academic and professional trajectory. During my time there, I not only strengthened my Spanish skills through formal classes and weekly cultural excursions but also deepened my cultural awareness of Latin America through daily immersion and a 50-hour volunteer placement teaching English to children at the Yakari Foundation. Working closely with local communities and educators was both humbling and inspiring, and it allowed me to connect language learning with service and social responsibility. That once-in-a-lifetime experience played a decisive role in clarifying my future goals. After returning home, I chose to take a gap year to teach elementary school students in New York City, where I continue to work with children from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This spring, I will apply to master's programs in international relations in France and Spain, with the goal of beginning graduate studies next fall. I hope to pursue a career in international public organizations (such as the United Nations or UNICEF) focused on Latin America or the Caribbean. I can say with confidence that I would not have taken my current teaching position, nor envisioned a future in international relations and politics, had I not spent time learning directly about Latin American culture, politics, and foreign policy through the Peru program. The Phi Sigma Iota scholarship was instrumental in helping me discover my path and move forward with clarity and purpose. I am deeply grateful for the support that made this journey possible and for the role Phi Sigma Iota has played in shaping my future professional goals.

Submitted by Gaetan Jean Louis and Dr. Cynthia A. Klima, Associate Professor of German and Humanities at SUNY-Geneseo

# SUBMITTED PAPER

## **“4, 24”, and 4c”: The Shared Knowledge of Hair Terminology and Cultural Pride Among Black Women**

Aliya Claiborne

*University of Mary Washington*

This paper aims to explain the significance of hairstyles and terms used by black women to reflect upon their own identities. It also seeks to explore how these choices can sway the perceptions given to them by forces stemming from both outside and within the community. Past research has shown that what is “just hair” to others serves as a statement piece and an overall representation of black women. These findings scratch beneath the surface of the intersectionality between black women and identity and, therefore, have been conducive to this research. By observing and recording naturally occurring conversations in black hair salons and conducting interviews with black women, I was able to answer my inquiry of “How do black women use specific terminology to discuss their hair while also constructing identity and reflecting on societal views?”. I determined that black women’s use of word choice and diverse lexicon to describe their hair emphasized the topic’s overall importance. Through the expansive vocabulary used by black women, we can see the weight carried by hair alone respective to beauty, identity, and perception.

Other terms, such as those included in the title of this paper, “4, 24” and 4C,” do not automatically denote any affiliation with the current beauty standards. Such terms can be used to describe the many categories within hair, including, but not limited to, color, length, and texture. Though not directly used to indicate beauty, these terms can be applied for classification purposes. However, the availability of a wide array of descriptors is often used to construct varying perceptions of identity. The goal of this paper is to consider these ideas and re-construct meanings of interpretation through the facilitation of conversations in sites of shared knowledge (i.e, black hair salons and conversations between black women). Through collecting data via interviewing and conversations with black women, I delve into how black women’s understanding and conceptualization of hair reflect cultural pride and the significance of one’s “crown.”

### *The Importance of Black Hair & What It Means to be Done*

Hair for black women has held cultural significance beyond a simple look. Varying hairstyles suitable for the extensive range of hair textures support the representation of a black woman. The evolution of black hairstyles, meanings, and the conversations that co-occur have developed throughout history from West Africans in the eighteenth century wearing their hair to indicate status to black women gaining confidence and embracing their natural curl patterns as a consequence of 2016’s Natural Hair Movement (Nabugodi, 2022). From this, it is clear that black women have always made a statement with their hair. These statements are essential in these current times, as black women’s hair was once seen as unprofessional, undesirable, and unkempt.

With hair that grows upward and presents itself in an array of shapes and patterns, the power attached to hair was once suppressed by the norms set by Western beauty standards. This was especially prevalent and ongoing between the 1990s and mid-2010s. Black women would assimilate to these themes by pressing their hair,

sometimes using chemical treatments to increase “acceptance within a white society” (Hopson, 2009:32). Around this time, hair was less of an empowerment tool and more of a professionalism element (Dunahoo, 2023). Hair that did not mimic that of a “bone straight-to-deep wave” texture affected one’s ability to be taken seriously in business and education. However, in 2022, the CROWN Act was passed in California to combat the wrongful discrimination of black women’s hair in both professional and academic environments. This act and the Natural Hair Movement of 2016 represent a significant shift in the narrative around black women’s hair, from one of conformity to a state of embrace and pride. Since then, there has been a surge of women wearing their natural hair, increased protective styles, and overall innovation in the community. This progress is not just a trend but a powerful symbol of resistance and self-acceptance. To further this information, Hopson asserts that “choosing to wear afros, naturals, and braids symbolizes non-compliance with oppressive structures” (Ebong, 2001:32, as cited in Hopson, 2009). This statement serves to amplify the movement that caused withdrawal from acts of conformity and instills hope for a future where black women’s hair is celebrated and respected.

The evolution of treatment, styling, and attitudes towards black hair has significantly benefited from the social and legal initiatives previously mentioned. Measures of status have also resurfaced to “indicate social and economic status” (Bankhead & Johnson, 2014:90), and overcoming societal conflicts adds significance to the importance of black hair care and acceptance within the community, regardless of outside opinion. This reinstills the emphasis on the connection between hair, identity, and perception. Bankhead & Johnson also argue that a woman's hair can reveal her “character and personality” (p. 90). They reinforce this by adding that “hair is emotive, symbolic, and an inseparable part of their identity” (p. 89). This close-knit relationship between hair and identity is also discussed concerning everyday styling choices. It is mentioned that these grooming choices stem from a “fixation” on hair intersecting with perceptions of identity (Majali, Coetzee, & Rau, 2017). The consideration in deciding on certain style factors is how black women assert and control their reputation, thus implying that these grooming choices are deliberate and strategic and influence how others perceive them. Because most black women make these decisions, hair discourse can be seen as “a space of connection, intimacy, community, and comfort” (Hooks, 2001:111-115 as cited in Rowe, 2022). The connection truly lies between identity, perception, and community. The content of the following excerpt upholds these assertions.

#### *Excerpt 1: An Interview with a Salon Owner*

**Owner:** We do our hair a lot, so when it came to our hair...it’s number one. It’s number one ...even can go with African kinky, but if you don’t take care of it, you can’t go anywhere. We can’t go to work not taking care of our hair.

Let’s imagine you are in office then you look bad, you know? You have to look good all the time...gotta get our hair done at least always. It’s very important ‘cause our hair is different from white hair. ‘Membra that.

If you don’t take care of it- hair is everything. It’s our face.

In this interview, the owner’s word choice (such as labeling our hair as “number one”) paired with the exaggeration of one’s inability to present themselves in an outside environment without having their hair done, accentuates the significance of self-perception and identity for black women concerning hairstyling. She further emphasizes this by saying that “it’s our face”, thus demonstrating a direct intersection between hair and identity.

#### *The Diversity of Black Hair (and Terminology)*

Contrary to the hair of other racial groups, black hair presents itself on a spectrum of textures, maintenance techniques, and styling. Black hair, known for its malleable consistencies, allows for the creation of differing shapes and styles. With this diverse landscape come the tools that aid in the styling, preserve the styling, and

even describe it. This all results in a wide array of lexical items associated with black hair. While describing hair color can be done with a simple term, such as “black,” black women may use the terms “1” or “1b1”. One could say that they “just have curly hair,” or they might use the typing system created to categorize hair texture by “letter and number designations” (Neil & Mbilishaka, 2019:161). Throughout the sphere of black hair terminology, there are terms of this specificity for almost every category (i.e, length, shape, and technique).

Regarding styling, styles can be protective, aesthetic, and chosen for fitting in, though most styles can combine these aspects. Protective styles, as in the name, are meant to keep the hair in place while offering protection from excessive manipulation (Neil & Mbilishaka, 2019). However, they can also be worn for purely aesthetic purposes. Protective styles include locs, twists, and braids. Hair that encourages fitting into a particular group or environment depends on that. To demonstrate agreement with the aura of a professional environment, individuals choose styles perceived as more relaxed (Opie and Phillips, 2015). Relaxed styles include straightened hair, neat buns, and pinned-back strands.

Black hair also comes with strict routines and products for assisted maintenance. Such routines include washing, detangling, and styling (Neil and Mbilishaka, 2019). Washing and detangling come with a range of hair care products used to expedite and properly carry out both processes. These products encompass many items, including butters, oils, creams, and sprays (p.167). Each product has a significant purpose, such as protecting follicles, defining curls, and maintaining health.

### *Semiotics of Black Hair Terminology*

Sociolinguists have studied shared understanding within cultures for decades. Many have limited their focus to smaller subsections of cultural groups, such as communities of practice. A community of practice is a gathering of people who participate in a specific engagement, for a

1 The numbers serve to designate colors for hair, particularly for matching extensions. For instance, “1” typically represents black, while “1b” denotes a slightly lighter shade of black.

specific purpose, while sharing a repertoire (McConnell and Eckert, 1992, as cited in Ahearn, 2016). Members in communities of practice demonstrate shared repertoire by sharing language ideologies- acceptable use of language that is collectively agreed upon within a group (Ahearn, 2016). For example, a common language ideology regarding black women includes an aggressive tone. This is an oppressive ideology born from stereotypical, media conversations. However, these ideologies are lesser known in the sphere of hair discourse, and many stem from within the community. These ideologies relate more to the interpretations of beauty and acceptance. This idea can be further explained using the process of indexicality, a term closely related to semiotics, which is the study of signs relative to their interpretations (Ahearn, 2016, p. 28). *Semiotics* is a term coined by Charles Peirce in the nineteenth century. Peirce divided his study of signs into three parts: the sign, the object, and the interpretant. A sign is “whatever stands for something else,” an object is “whatever a sign stands for,” and the interpretant is “whatever a sign creates insofar as it stands for an object” (Kockelman, 2005). Applying Peirce’s theory to hair may seem implausible, but I believe it is necessary to fully understand the ideologies that lie within the hair discourse shared by black women. To fully apply this theory to hair, this paper assigns terms and phrases to Peirce’s semiotic triad. They are applied as such: sign=term and object=category. The input of the interpretant will be explained in the sample.

One could apply this to a quote from Kristen Rowe’s “Unmanagable”, where she discusses the descriptors used for black hair. She writes that “the given attributes of our hair are often referred to by descriptions such as ‘woolly,’” and “tough” (2022). The terms (or signs) “woolly” and “tough” represent the texture and appearance

(the object) of black hair. Rowe uses these terms to emphasize the assignment of black hair being of a “bad” nature according to societal standards. The opposing description of one’s hair, “good” signifies that “one’s hair is closer in texture to that of people of European descent (Bankhead and Johnson, 2014, p. 90). The interpretant would be the understanding that the invocation of natural, black hair texture reflects a bias per Eurocentric beauty standards, which can lead to internalized perceptions of disapproval of one’s hair.

### **Setting, Participation, and Data Collection**

For three months, I collected data in black spaces to obtain the insights needed to contribute to research goals. The main field site was a beauty supply store owned by a Black-African woman. This store was not only a supply store but also included a hair salon in its anterior. The beauty supply portion contained a range of supplies such as hair care products and extensions, jewelry, and clothing. The hair salon layout included two stations for hair styling and drying, as well as a sink for shampooing (see Figures 1 & 2). Secondary settings included other black-owned hair stores, participant’s homes, and school grounds.

*Figure 1*



An Interior View of the Shop

*Figure 2*



Salon Station A

This research involved black women between 18 and 55 years old. To guarantee a varied range of data, I approached participants regardless of hairstyle, state, or texture. Participants from hair supply stores predominantly comprised stylists and customers, whereas those from secondary locations were everyday women engaged in their routines.

I used two processes to collect data: (1) interviews and (2) observation. Both processes involved live audio recordings. I positioned my laptop on my person and used a computer application for audio recordings of observing naturally occurring conversations. Any audio recordings of interviews were done via smartphone recording to ensure that the audio lacked distortion due to the proximity of the recording device. While recording conversations in the hair salon, I would note any interesting or recurring phenomena I noticed. Notes taken from interview recordings were made while relistening.

Observing and recording naturally occurring conversations in the hair supply store was to observe the comfortability and openness in the dialogue between black women in a space revolving around hair.

Interviews were conducted to prompt discourse that included greater terminology and ideologies about hair reinforced by black women. Participants were asked to discuss their hair journeys, describe their styles, and include any opinions or feelings regarding them (see appendix).

## ***Data Analysis***

I organized hair terminologies into nine distinct categories (see appendix tables 1-9).

Each term is accompanied by a gloss titled, shared knowledge, for reader comprehension (except the styles category). The possibility of this careful arrangement highlights the variance of the lexicon within black women's hair discourse. Because many words (or signs) are commonly known (i.e. "clip-ins" and "blonde"), only a few will be selected for analysis. The main goal, by the application of semiotics, will be to explore the interpretants noted by each participant. This will be based on the participants' word choice and reactions. All signs selected for the analysis will demonstrate the collective understanding shared by black women in conversations involving hair. For the proper analysis of the interpretation of select terminology, I have divided the analysis into three subsections: (1) non-literal terms, (2) esoteric terms, and (3) phrasal terms.

### ***Non-Literal Terms***

There is a handful of terminology that appears to be straightforward and clear in print.

However, many of these "normal" terms require pre-existing exposure and comprehension for a complete grasp. Take, for example, the term "bald". The object is technically its state (see Table 8 of the Appendix). Ordinarily, one would understand this word to mean a complete lack of hair atop one's head. However, this common interpretation is not carried over in discourse within the black women's hair community. An occurrence of the term "bald" is shown in the following excerpt from a conversation with Tylan, a 22-year-old black woman.

<i>Set 1</i>		
1	Tylan:	Every time we'd go to a restaurant, they would think
2		she was a little boy.
3	Angel:	[-@] <muffled>
4	Aliya:	[oh-]. Not the chuckle.
5	Tylan:	They would be like: whatchu- what [would you like]
6		sir?
7	Aliya:	[no I <u>do</u> remember]
8		that one time we were at the restaurant and th-
9		@@@@@.
10	Tylan:	And I didn't think you looked like a little boy
11		until like I looked back at pictures and i'm like(.)
12		[#####]
13	Aliya:	[She didn't look like a little] boy, her hair was
14		just sho↑↓rt] <raised volume>.

--	--	--

In many cases, used within the data, “bald” refers to a woman with shorter hair or one who has a smaller amount of hair. This definition heeds negative ideologies (or interpretants), one of which suggests that black women sporting shorter hair are less feminine. This is apparent in *Set 1* where the participants are discussing the short hairstyle worn by Angel in the past. In line 11, Tylan upholds this interpretation by admitting that Angel resembled a boy, while I attempt to dissent by rejecting the raised notion (lines 13-14).

The other interpretant of the term “bald” is the perception that it diminishes the beauty and attractiveness of a black woman and her hair. This ideology is mostly a reflection of opinions stemming from the black, male community. This is demonstrated in *Set 2* (a continuation of *Set 1*) where Angel explains remarks made by their male stylist before he cut their hair.

### *Set 2*

1. Angel: Um: when I was in: the: the- barber shop, this- the
2. dude was gaslighting me into like not doing it.
3. 'Cause I came in with like a:ll my hair(.) a:nd it
4. was like late at night and like no one was in there.
5. we- not really late at night but whatever. <mumbled>
6. Um: but he was like <vox> are you really sure?
7. </vox> And
8. I was like yeah that's why I came here. And he just
9. kept on like saying like <vox> you have beautiful
10. hair? though. You have beautiful hair.</vox> And I
11. was like oh my god. Like literally, dad is sitting

12		right there and he's like fine(.) most[ly.]
13	Aliya:	[@@@]
14	Angel:	Um: but like we were just like shaving off and he
15		just on saying it during the-(.) the shaving off [#]
16	Aliya:	[While he was doing your hair?]
17	Angel:	-yes, he was like <rapidly> (.) <vox> I don't know?
18		you have beautiful hair</vox> and I was like <u>dude</u> .

In this transcript, all statements made by the male barber are done to sway Angel's decision. In lines 6, 9, and 17, the barber is quoted with the same questioning tone when commenting on Angel's pre-cut hair. Angel's repetitive and consistent use of mockery toward the barber demonstrates the stylist's indirect attempts to make his client reconsider. This becomes even more fascinating when considering the reasoning behind Angel's decision. At the time, their hair had been damaged due to years of perms (chemical straightening), though it had retained its length. A common interpretation is that hair that is damaged and long is more appealing. Hair that is short, but healthy, is the opposite.

### *Esoteric Terms*

Esoteric terms refer to those that are likely to allude to interpretants only understood by people within the same group. Out of the 110 or so terms collected during my research, I noticed around 17 that required both context and a pre-set understanding for correct interpretation. In *Sets 3* and *4*, I want to focus on the term "day" paired with numbers "1, 3, and 4".

*Set 3a* April 11, 28:00-28:06

1	Aliya:	Why:?(.) You didn't eat it- like- you just don't
2		like twist-outs? It didn't work out?
3	Angel:	That was like the first time [I-]
4	Tylan:	[I didn't like] my

1. twist-out 'til like(.) da:y three, four
2. Aliya: Oh my god me too <rapidly>.

Being presented with this unfinished section of data allows for there to be a lack of understanding of the significance associated with each day. Let's continue in a later section of this set.

*Set 3b* 28:31-28:44

1. Aliya: But yeah I would put it in the pineapple: for both
2. the twist-out a:nd(.) my wash and go:s and day like
3. three would be the be[st]. day.]
4. Tylan:[mhm]
5. Aliya: 'cause that's when all the volume was there:.
6. Tylan: [Yeah like it's not the fresh-]
7. Aliya: [it wasn't as structu-](.)
8. yeah it [wasn't like all-]
9. Tylan:[I wanted it a lil messy:.]

This section of the data aids readers in understanding the meaning of the specific day that hair is worn. In lines 23-24, Tylan agrees with my assertion that both natural, loose hairstyles look better on the third day by saying "mhm". I explain the meaning, in line 25, by insinuating that hair appears more voluminous on "day 3" meaning that the object is its stage or development (see Table 7 in the appendix). The underlying interpretant within this data selection lies within the belief that hair when given a few days to settle, gives it a better appearance. This is, at times, favored over hair that is freshly styled, hence lines 26 and 27. This is also supported in line 28 where Tylan says that she prefers her hair "a lil messy".

This is also shown in *Set 4* where the interviewee differentiates between her hair on days one and three.

*Set 4*

Abril 18, 02:04-02:22

1. Tia: Uh: wash and go's: and I probably wash my hair about
2. once a week:(0.2)um: you know, I don't really like
3. the first day curls but, I think day:(.) three: is

4. when my hair has more bo:dy a lo- sti- have a lot of
5. shrinkage but it has more body.

Tia's understanding of these terms coincides with that of the participants in *Set 3*. This participant, though not directly mentioning the term "volume", opts for the use of the synonym "body."

### *Phrasal Terms*

Throughout the process of data collection, participants would use entire phrases (the object) while discussing hair. Throughout the use of these phrases, women were able to communicate steps in their hair journeys and techniques used to adjust and conform their hair. The remainder of the phrases used words that nodded to the state or texture (objects) of hair based on preconceived notions. In *Set 5* all three participants, who have locs (formally dreads or dreadlocks), discuss their "Lociversaries".

### *Set 5*

April 11, 49:32-49:55

1	Aliya:	When's your first year Lociversary?
2	Angel:	August.
3	Aliya:	August what?(.) That's close t[a] mi:ne!
4	Tylan:	=really?
5	Aliya:	[Did-you-?](0.2) oh yea:h.
6	Tylan:	[Let me see]
7	Angel:	Hm?
8	Tylan:	let me see(0.3)da:y two:. I got them on:(.) August
9		second.
10	Aliya:	Twenty:? Twenty [tw-]
11	Tylan:	[twenty twenty-three] <rapidly>

The term *lociversary* is both a play on words and a blend combining “anniversary” and “locs”. The conversation starts with me asking about the date of Angel’s lociversary to which she replies “August”. I then, in search of more details, repeat her answer as a question (line 3). The hope was that Angel would answer with a more specific date. Unfortunately, she was not able to answer due to my lack of hesitation (caused by excitement) in stating that our lociversaries are close in date (line 3). In lines 5-8, I question Tylan on whether or not she has found evidence of her lociversary on her social media. It should be mentioned that she had a social media page dedicated to the progress and overall journey of her hair. Once she found the first post, she was able to offer the exact date that her “loc journey” began.

The interpretant of a “lociversary” lies within the connection and importance that black women have on their hair. Black women have created a new term to celebrate the development and progression of a natural hairstyle. The participants in the data can either directly state the date that they chose their style or easily access information regarding it. The fact that Tylan had dedicated a public social media account to document the process amplifies the emotions tied to hair. The public broadcasting of a style-based decision and the offering of personal progress to an online audience illustrates black women’s commitment to control perceptions and maintain the loyalty they have to their hair.

In the examination of hair terminologies within black women’s discourse, nine distinct categories were identified, showcasing the diverse language surrounding hair within the community. Through the application of semiotics, select terms were analyzed to explore the interpretation noted by participants. Non-literal signs, such as ‘bald’, challenge traditional definitions, reflecting societal ideologies about femininity and beauty. Esoteric signs, like ‘day 3’, indicate stages of hair development and reflect beliefs about hair settling and looking better over time. Phrasal signs, like ‘lociversary,’ blend words to celebrate the development of natural hairstyles, showcasing black women’s emotional connection to their hair and their commitment to controlling public perceptions.

## **Conclusion**

This research emphasizes the significance of hair, as supported by discourse provided by black women, which is reinforced by the selective usage of lexical terms. This lexical usage then reflected the shared comprehensibility between participants. All of the terms documented and grouped into defining categories were analyzed through the semiotic lens by Peirce. I assigned all terms to represent a “sign,” followed by their categorization (the “object”), and explanations of the analyzed terms were the “interpretants”. The analysis is in three parts that all demonstrate the shared knowledge of black women and their hair: non-literal terms, esoteric terms, and phrasal terms. Non-literal terms are those not meant to coincide with their literal, dictionary-given definitions. This is the result of pre-set ideologies within the community. The participants understood the implications of the terms used and chose to either linguistically support or reject these ideologies. Esoteric terms require previous, extra discursual experience within the community. Terms such as these mostly present themselves to be numerical and code-like. Phrasal terms, as in the name, are elongated terms functioning as a link between other terms and shared knowledge. Black women create phrasal terms as a way to further connections made between innovative terminology and pride. This can be said for each part of the analysis.

While black women use diverse terminology to talk about their hair, it is not only a representation of their knowledge but of cultural pride. The uninterrupted flow of conversations is thanks to their mutual understanding. They have all, either consciously or subconsciously, taken the time to learn and comprehend these terms and the significance they hold.

The application of Semiotics, which delineated varied explanations for each term, stresses the importance of hair for black women by showing that each individual interpretation holds the key to unlockable knowledge that lies within the domain that is black hair.

## **Appendix**

### **Table 1**

Sign	Object	Shared Knowledge
4	Color	Dark, medium brown tone. Usually referring to weaves.
Blonde		Hair Color

**Table 2**

Sign	Object	Shared Knowledge
Activator	Product	Styling product used to define curls.
Durag		Headwear made of protective material. Used to maintain texture.
Bonnet		Headwear made of protective material. Used to maintain a style. Mainly used for sleeping and or/traveling.
Scarf		Headwear used to maintain hairstyle. Can also be worn for fashion purposes.
Extensions		Added hair. Can be faux or human of human origin. Can be sewn-in, braided-in, twisted-in, etc.
Clip-ins		A form of extension using a clip or comb end.
Marley Hair		A type of kinky hair extension
Leave-in-conditioner		Conditioner not meant for washing out.Used to maintain moisture and hydration of hair.

**Table 3**

Sign	Object	Shared Knowledge
Nappy	Texture	Kinkier texture of hair. Often carries a negative connotation.
Rough		Negative descriptor. Used to refer to hair that is hard to comb and/or detangle.
4C		One of the kinkiest textures of hair on the scale of textures.
Curly		Descriptor for “s” shaped curls to “z” shaped curls.
Thick		Hair that is high in density.
Easy		Used to refer to manageable hair; requires little struggle.

**Table 4**

Sign	Object	Shared Knowledge
Retwist	Techniques/Actions	Maintenance technique for the upkeep and renewal of locs.
Retie		Maintenance technique for the upkeep and renewal of locs by interlocking.
Interlocking		Method of a retwist where hair is pulled through the root.
Twist		The act of twisting sections of hair for styling purposes.
Cut		The act of cutting hair.
Flat-iron/straightening		Technique used to straighten

	hair into a non-natural state.
Braid	The act of joining three sections of hair for styling purposes.
Sweat-out	Pressed hair reverting to its natural form due to sweat.
Going natural	The act of allowing hair to be presented naturally; usually after the act of a chemical treatment.
Blow-dry	The use of a blow dryer to give hair a smoother texture. Usually in preparation for styling.
Shrinkage	The natural process of natural hair decreasing in length due to the removal of water.

**Table 5**

Sign	Object	Shared Knowledge
Waist-length	Length	Hair length that reaches the waist. Can be used to refer to extensions or grown hair.
24"		Hair length using a specific measurement. Usually used to differentiate the lengths of faux hair or packs of extensions.
36"		Hair length. Usually starting at fully shaved length and stopping at the shoulders.
Short		

**Table 6**

Sign	Object	Shared Knowledge

Bad	State	(Negative) descriptor of hair. Mostly used to refer to hair texture that requires extra maintenance (i.e. tighter curl pattern).
Neat		Descriptor of a hairstyle. Usually refers to the sharpness of style and neatness of hair parting.
Too big		Descriptor of hair. Referring to extremely voluminous and thick hair.
Fits		Refers to hair being able to fit into common headwear (i.e. hats, beanies, etc).
Damaged		Refers to hair that has been negatively affected by a style or chemical.
Messy		Descriptor of hair. Can be negative or positive depending on interpretation.
Too fresh		Descriptor of hair commonly referring to a style that is “too neat”. Utterers of this usually prefer a messy look.
Crazy		Refers to hair that is not presented according to beauty standards.
Done		Hair that is styled neatly; kept
Natural		The hair that naturally grows from one’s scalp.

**Table 7**

<b>Sign</b>	<b>Object</b>	<b>Shared Knowledge</b>
Budding	Stage/Development	Stage 2/4 of locs. Occurs within the first year of locking hair.
Day 3/4		Usually the day of a natural style (i.e. Wash N'Go, twist-out, etc) when the hair has more body/volume.
1st-day curls		The day of curls when the hair is (usually) the least voluminous and more defined.

**Table 8**

Sign	Object	Shared Knowledge
Braid Journey to Naturality	Phrases/other	Often, black women, after the big chop, (cutting off (usually) damaged hair) choose to wear protective styles (i.e. braids, faux locs, wigs, etc) to allow for longer natural hair growth.
Bald to Braid Pipeline		Refers to a looser texture of curls (usually associated with lighter-skinned individuals).
Lightskin People Hair		A play on the word “anniversary”; referring to locs.
Lociversary		Used to refer to having short hair and at times, actual baldness.
Bald-Headed		Technique used by those with voluminous hair to secure the typical graduation headwear.
Headband Hack		Personified reference to locs in stage ¾.
Teenagers		

Girls	Personified reference to locs.
Two heads	Mostly used by stylists to refer to “heads” of hair.
Faux	French word meaning ‘fake’. Usually used to refer to extensions and/or weave.
Bubble	State of a piece of hair. Used to refer to locs or bubble braids style.
Fast Growth	Refers to the speed of hair growth.
Loops	Refers to tangled pieces of hair in locs.
Pineapple	Hairstyle (used mostly for sleeping) where hair is placed atop of the head using a scarf.
Leave-out	Refers to the section of hair that is “left out” to cover extensions. Done to achieve a more natural look.

**Table 9**

<b>Styles</b>
Perm, Mullet, Wash N’Go, Line up, Crocheted, Finger waves, Two-strand Twists, Flat Twists, Wicks, Pixie, Bob, Ropes, Straight-backs, Braids, Bald, Taper Fade, Blow-out, Freeform, Twist-out, Bantu Knots, Cornrows, Jheri curl, Butterfly Locs, Bangs, Locs, Dreadlocks, Twists, Box Braids.

## Interview Questions

1.

1. What does black hair care mean to you and is it important?
2. What does it mean to have good hair? Bad hair?
3. Do you think that your hair defines you or contributes to your identity?
4. Does your hairstyle choice provide a representation of your identity or come with preconceived notions?
5. Can you tell me about your hairstyle?
6. Can you describe your hair journey?

## Transcription Conventions

SpeakerAngel:

Line Numbers1

2

Utteranceokay.

Unintelligible Speech# (per syllable)

Elongation:

High Rising Intonation?

Falling Intonation.

Up-down town (sing-songy)↑↓

Non Verbal Sound<pop>

IPA (if applicable)<[a]>

Speed, voice quality, etc<rapidly>

Emphasisdude

Voice of Other<vox/>

Raised VolumeWHAT

Laughter@ per chuckle

Gesture<claps>f

Overlaps and Interruptionover[lap] [interruption]

Pauses(.) shorter than 0.2s

(2.5) longer than 0.2s

False Startbut I thi-

Latching=really

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