

# Hurricane Katrina Hair: Rereading Nineteenth-Century Commemorative Hair Forms and Fragments Through the “Mourning Portraits” of Loren Schwerd

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**Abstract:** This article examines sculptural portraits by artist Loren Schwerd. Fashioned from hairpieces discovered in the 2005 wreckage of Hurricane Katrina, they are memorials to the African American victims and evacuees of the storm. Their title, *Mourning Portrait*, recalls nineteenth-century traditions of mourning and commemorative hairwork in which the locks of living and dead loved ones were manipulated into intricate fashions and home décor. They also incorporate African American hairstyling techniques to interpret the flood-ravaged homes of local residents. Thus, on one hand, they take inspiration from Victorian hairwork traditions, which channeled the talismanic power of hair fragments to evoke absent bodies and memory. On the other hand, they expand and politicize the meanings of commemorative hair forms and fragments toward evoking collective histories, memories, and larger social issues, bringing new urgency and immediacy to fashion-related material cultures of mourning. Exploring the interlinked narratives of Schwerd’s “mourning portraits” and Victorian hairwork, this article uses cultural theory, material culture studies, archival research, fashion theory, and African American studies to broaden critical insights into state-sanctioned racial and class-based violence, and modes of resistance that take shape through aesthetic and representational forms.

Keywords:

African American Hair Cultures  
Black Lives  
Contemporary Art  
Mourning & Memorialization  
Social Change

“By documenting private homes [with found hair], I venerate the city’s losses, both individual and collective.”

– Loren Schwerd, “The Rights of Culture/The Culture of Rights” (2008)<sup>i</sup>

In the artist statement for Loren Schwerd’s installation series *Mourning Portrait* (2007–2009), viewers are invited to gaze upon “commemorative objects... made from human hair extensions of the type commonly used by African American women.” These extensions, the artist states, were “found on the curb beside the flooded St. Claude Beauty Supply Shop” in New Orleans, in the notoriously poor, mostly Black, Lower Ninth Ward neighbourhood — the area most affected by the federal levee failures that accompanied Hurricane Katrina in 2005 (Schwerd 2007; Landphair 2007). The Lower Ninth Ward’s levee was shoddy and thus unable to handle the catastrophic deluge. Paired with the US government’s mismanagement and delay of relief efforts deemed an unworthy expense, and the poverty of residents preventing their escape, poor infrastructure led to the deaths of at least 1,836 people (Cha-Jua 2006, 2).<sup>ii</sup> Seventy-two residents of the Lower Ninth Ward perished in the floodwaters and over half of its population either lacks the means to return to their homes or have no homes to return to.<sup>iii</sup>

Moved by these facts and numbers, and inspired by photographs Schwerd took of houses and buildings destroyed in the storm, the New Orleans-based artist collected deserted hair for weaving into portraits based on her photographs. Reusing debris is typical of Schwerd’s creative practice, which transforms mundane and discarded items and materials into mixed-media installation, imagery, garments, and sculpture. Much of her work recreates or relates to sites of natural and man-made disaster and decay, and deploys fibre to explore the complexities of these phenomena and her chosen materials. In *Mourning Portrait*, Schwerd redeploys found hairpieces to depict the material ruins of Katrina as evidence of former life. The three-dimensional objects of this series form frayed house facades, slanted street lamps, broken beams, corroded roofs, flagging telephone poles, and tufts of overgrown grass that spill from their frames to suggest a place overrun and reclaimed by nature. Each portrait acts as a memorial to absent victims and draws on the nineteenth-century traditions of hairwork in which the tresses of living and dead loved ones were fashioned into jewellery and other decorative objects symbolizing memory and eternal life.

For Victorians, whether hair was left raw or worked into intricate fashion and decorative forms, it was used for remembrance. It was considered precious, like a relic, allowing intimacy and establishing physical communion with the donor. Severed locks represented the substance of the body therefore connecting corporeality, memory, and emotion. For a particular social group – white middle-to-upper-class women, who worked the hair of loved ones into domestic objects and framed keepsakes – it was an integral part of memorial culture, used to crystallize and conjure intricate if also private webs of connection. As I will go on to explore in this essay, however, Schwerd's knits are fashioned from commercial hair, grown by anonymous donors for global sale including for use in African American beauty culture. The ambiguous origins of this hair and, more pointedly, its use in African American hairstyling practices, and discovery in the wreckage of Katrina, adds complexity to how and what the hair signifies in the face of historical trauma.

Like the ribbed chunk of levee concrete that resides among various Katrina artifacts in the collections of the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History (NMAH), the fragments of hair that make up Schwerd's portraits are relics of disaster. Their sentimental quality derives from their real ties to the event and their imagined ties to demolished and dilapidated spaces: homes and the St. Claude beauty shop, which sold African American hairstyling products and which, despite the odds, once bustled with life and energy. They are thus evidence of the vibrant cultural practices and social bonds that materialized within these spaces, making them more than mere evidence of the hurricane: they are both relics of everyday resistance and "material witnesses of the truth of historical narratives" (Pearce qtd. in Lutz 2015, 25). These include the interlocking mechanisms of oppression – specifically, racism and classism – that ensured economically disadvantaged African Americans in New Orleans were disproportionately harmed by the storm and its aftermath. Furthermore, Schwerd's reconfiguration of Victorian memorial hairwork with African American weaving and braiding techniques evokes the racism that was prevalent at the height of hairwork's popularity in nineteenth-century mainstream American culture. Styles like the beaded cornrows of *1317 Charbonnet St.* (Figure 1; Schwerd 2007), along with Black hair more broadly, were demonized as ugly entities distinct from the European fibres imported lovingly into gems and mourning keepsakes across the country. Therefore, while Schwerd's portraits refer to the techniques and meanings of Victorian hairwork for private mourning and remembrance, they also deepen these associations in conjuring historical memory and making "Black lives matter" in public mourning and memorial.



**Figure 1:** Loren Schwerd. *1317 Charbonnet St.*, 2007. Human hair, mixed media. 19" x 23" x 3.5". Courtesy of the artist. Photo by the artist.

This essay takes as the corpus of its analysis the power of severed hair to do deeply personal and political work. Concretely, it explores the symbolism of commemorative hair forms and fragments, and Schwerd's conversion of African American-style hair extensions into mourning relics — secular but sacred artifacts instead of washed-up debris. This not only gives value to an underrepresented artifact in mainstream American memorials and collections but also calls viewers into a place of mourning: for the individual losses of the Ninth Ward and the real and social violence daily enacted upon this marginalized and underrepresented community. As the epigraph to this essay suggests, Schwerd's knits work commemoratively on both individual and collective levels. Ultimately, therefore, they expand the power of the secular hair relic toward social change, commemorating personal bonds and networks and advancing the ethical commitments of mourning and memory at the level of political community (Butler 2004).

## It's Alive: Nineteenth-Century Commemorative Hair Forms and Fragments

Today, a severed lock of hair embodies many things, from the abject to the sentimental. As Emma Tarlo (2016) points out in her cultural study of hair and hair trading, many contemporary Westerners save snippets of hair from their family members and keep pieces clipped from their infancies, filing them away in envelopes, albums, and drawers, never to see the light of day (260). This would have been a peculiar thing to the Victorians, who not only exchanged locks of hair as tokens of love, friendship, and memory, but also incorporated them into everyday fashions and home décor, which I explore further below. At the turn of the century, cut hair began to lose its fetishistic power for reasons associated with commercialization and the relocation of death and dying from home to hospital. With this, remnants of the dead were handled by professional practices, and the corpse and its materials became strange and odious. Deborah Lutz (2015) confirms that when “death is figured as beautiful [and normal], the detritus of that end becomes beautiful, too — objects to be pinned over...[and] treasured” (37). This was the case for Victorians like American poet Lydia Howard Sigourney (1860), who felt that hair salvaged from a lifeless child radiated eternally with her memory. Addressing “the sever’d tress,” she proclaims: “How full thou art of memories...[with] thy talismanic touch” (100).

Hair’s commemorative charge is grounded in a long history of the severed lock as a sacred and animate object commensurate with a talisman or precious relic. These are cognate objects that, in many cultures, provide a way of maintaining a relationship with the deceased by invoking and substituting for absent bodies, while also materializing memory in the form of physical remains. The history of hair as a fetish object assigned vibrancy and personality is too vast and variegated to account for here. However, it is useful to note that scraps of hair were central to the relic cultures of the Western world well before the Victorians began imbuing them with fetishistic value and vitality. Early Christians, for example, collected snips and strands of hair believed to be the erstwhile property of saints and martyrs (along with other bodily bits and pieces like organs, digits, teeth, skin, bones, and clothing impregnated with blood, sweat, and tears). “What would appear to be lifeless remains,” writes Lutz (2015), “maintained a kind of numinous vitality” (19). These “talismans” were believed able to resist mortality and remain inspirited both by the souls of saints and the “precise locations” in which they or their relatives perished (ibid.). Thus the Virgin Mary’s hair allegedly discovered in eleventh-century Jerusalem at the location of the Crucifixion, and presumably torn out in grief and despair, was believed to be charged with this location, including its violence and its miracles (Madigan 2015, 113).

Hair is categorically absorbent. Porous, it is always soaking up its surroundings and for this reason can come alive with moisture on a humid day or turn limp and encumbered by the oils of our bodies. It thus contains biological and environmental residues, as well as forensic ones, which it leaves on the things it touches. An 1825 family album from Sterling, Vermont, which lives in the Warshaw Collection of the NMAH, illuminates this point.<sup>iv</sup>One of its pages contains three pressed “flowers” of hair, representing three sisters — a common practice of the era before the advent and diffusion of photography. The youngest of the sisters died in 1818 at age eight, and the whorl of her hair leaves a ghost-like imprint on the page, a remnant of its oils, which bring out the visceral qualities of their medium. Remarkably, all three locks are glossy and lifelike despite the passage of time and their being composed of dead skin cells.

Hair is made up of the durable protein of keratin and it is this that makes it resistant to death and decomposition. The physical qualities of the hair fragment shaped the symbolic meanings of commemorative hairwork, a European craft well established by the nineteenth century, involving the manipulation of hair into various cherished objects. Jewellery made with the hair of dead loved ones was a popular output of the art form and has been studied widely (Pointon 1999; Holm 2004; Sheumaker 2007; Harmeyer 2012). Its designs vary and survive today in private, municipal, and museum collections. More than a fashion statement, it marked milestones, commemorated friendships, and memorialized the *lives* of ancestors (not solely their deaths, a common misconception).

Encapsulating private and familiar relationships and memories, hair jewellery thus also crystallized a desire to represent and visualize one’s own grief and emotion openly/in a public way. Philippe Ariès ([1981] 2008) suggests that Victorian material cultures of mourning, including dress, were symptomatic of an age when the presence of death was exceedingly public (461). This, he opines, is unlike our present time, when death has become private and does not “exten[d] to include the entire community” (Ariès 1981, 105). Ariès perhaps chose not to consider public visibility of the dead in twentieth- (and now twenty-first) century photographs of American violence and disaster casualties, becoming especially apparent when the waters of Katrina receded to expose the bodies of African American flood victims. Their images were snapped up by photojournalists and circulated by media outlets, which afforded them a public spectacle not typically allowed to white corpses. Nevertheless, the observation made by Ariès is pointed and apropos in highlighting that in the nineteenth century death was all around in epidemic diseases and fevers and bodies expiring in the home, and was thus woven into the fabric of the everyday.

Given these grim realities, it follows that cherished hair remnants buoyed spirits by cheating death. In the words of Annabel Jane Wharton (2006), they “postpon[ed] oblivion,” keeping their mortal caretakers hopeful (9). The hair relic’s impervious charm was imported into North America via the hairwork of Northern European settlers, growing in popularity in the early nineteenth century (Sheumaker 2007, 77), especially the weaving of human hair into elaborate floral wreaths for decorating the home and commemorating family (Figure 2; Victorian hair wreath c. 1880–1890). A single wreath would be made with the hair of multiple loved ones, living and dead, their variation made obvious simply by looking at the different hair colours populating the petals and flowers. It is this particular form of hairwork that informs Schwerd’s contemporary iterations/portraits, which are framed and mounted on the wall recalling domestic objects and familial place.



**Figure 2:** Victorian hair wreath, c. 1880–1890. Human hair, glass beads, wire. Oval wooden shadow box, 24" x 24" x 3.9." Courtesy of the Annunziata Morant Collection. Photo by Paul Hillier Photography.

Victorian hair wreaths were considered a form of commemorative portraiture, and wreath making was performed by middle-class white women who had the time and the means to craft meticulously at home and whose social location denied them the opportunity to circulate meaningfully within the male-dominated public sphere. Hair was coded feminine for its association with bodily hygiene and grooming in the domestic realm. It was gathered, washed, boiled, combed, separated into individual portions, and then combined in dozens of intricate braiding and weaving patterns. Wreaths typically included other media such as wool, glass beads, multi-coloured stamens, and pistils (Figure 3; Victorian hair wreath c. 1860s), and many incorporated photographs; however, it was hair's direct link to the biological body, coupled with the labour of the memorial, that loaded wreaths with emotional potency. Geoffrey Batchen (2004) explains that "[t]hrough this skillful act of remembrance, this labour of respect, history is made personal, and an otherwise banal portrait [is] made to seem like a sacred relic" (87). Batchen draws attention to how the process of making was as valuable as the final product, with weaving and braiding different locks of hair together symbolic of eternal entwinement and thus suggestive of working through grief and emotion to represent and rebuild connection — a task for women, who were permitted and expected to emote.



**Figure 3:** Detail. Victorian hair wreath, c. 1860s. Guelph region, Ontario. City of Toronto Museums & Heritage Services, 1981.49.1. Courtesy of the City of Toronto Museums & Heritage Services.



The intimacies of the medium of hair and the action of working it came together to produce artifacts that were “emotional records of women’s [personal] lives” (Sheumaker 2007, 18). With this, wreath makers “continued the movement of modernity toward privatization...and individualism, with relics of [everyday people] treated as shrines at which only a few might worship” (Lutz 2015, 51). Put differently, weavers produced and participated in “hidden intimate network[s]” of private historical memory sustained in the home (Holm 2004, 140). As they worked and then daily gazed at the outcome of their labour — the hair memorial affixed to parlor walls — they could be transported into private memories that only their keepers could know. Furthermore, hirsute flourishes signified at more abstract levels, evoking beyond the body to spaces inhabited by the body and cultural practices performed by the body. Lutz (2015) confirms that Victorians charged all sorts of death-related objects, places, and ephemeral events with “magical vigor”: from “first-class” bodily relics to secondary material and textual relics (things worn, touched, or made), to spaces (homes, rooms, haunts), all of which felt unceasingly “infused with [the] corporeality” of their former inhabitants (9, 51). Hair was no exception. It sheds itself all over this planet, constantly making its mark, and thusly its significations wandered and moved from bodies to their biddings and through their spaces. A good example comes from a diary entry by New England’s Mary Elizabeth Browne (1862) in which she explains that a chestnut flower on her most recent creation evokes the garden in which its donor, her mother, had spent so much time, and the vanity at which she had daily preened.<sup>v</sup>

Although professional services for making hair wreaths and flowers proliferated toward the end of the century, many women preferred to make their own memorial hair artifacts, as the mass production of hair keepsakes and jewellery led to fears that unscrupulous hairworkers would replace the precious hair of loved ones with hair from stock used to make wigs and hairpieces (Zielke 2003; Sheumaker 2007, 152). Although commercial hair was considered impersonal, it still contained the physical imprint of donors as it was traded and travelled across borders. Returning to the post-Katrina Victorian-inspired memorial artworks of Loren Schwerd, which begin this essay, how might commercial hair in contemporary mourning aesthetics act as lively talismans of memory? How do they fuse the roles of the hair fragment as memorial and market commodity? And how do they enliven the politics of “the severed tress” toward ethical engagement and social change? To begin to answer these questions we must first consider the social importance and political dimensions of hair and hair extensions within African American beauty cultures.

## Hair and Hair Extensions in African American Beauty Cultures

At the same time as hair was being worshipped and immortalized in loving memorials, its styles and textures were being vilified and eradicated as part of a wider culture of nineteenth-century American racism, slavery, and colonialism. Specifically, the hair textures of African Americans were classified as “strange” and “ugly” by those invested in systems of racial classification. Black hair was seen as something alluring yet threatening, something white people sought to collect not for memorial but for racial study and display. Referencing the period from 1850 to 1910, Sarah Cheang (2008) suggests “hair possesse[d] an almost talismanic quality of authenticity lacked by other nonbiological forms of collecting ‘race’” (27). It was pronounced capable of evoking human essence and value, with samples deemed animal/wool-like justifying othering, subjugation, and enslavement (Byrd and Tharps 2002, 14; Browne 1851). Black hairstyles were also imbricated in colonial mechanisms of social control and oppression. In sync with middle-class white ladies decorating wreaths in glass beads, beaded hairstyles of free and enslaved African women were being outlawed in the state of Louisiana (see Cocuzza 2000, 81-2). Hair’s deployment as a vehicle through which to enforce state racism and social violence is ongoing with natural hairstyles and braids causing stigma from employers and state officials (in the United States, cornrows continue to influence police bias in arrests of young Black men and braids are discriminated against in professional contexts, recently by the fashion brand Zara) (Dabney et al. 2017, 1317; Lee-Shanok 2016; Opie 2018).<sup>vi</sup>

However, just as Black hair has been a place for domination to manifest and multiply, so too have its strands and styles been sites for culture, community, and resistance to play out. Consider that Black hair has served historically as a material for survival and a cultural metaphor for political subversion, from curls embedded with rice grains to ensure sustenance during and after the Middle Passage, to styles associated with the civil rights and Black Power movements of the 1960s and 1970s, representing “politicized statements of pride” (Carney 2004, 1; Mercer 1987, 38). Today, hairstyling is a way for African Americans of all genders and socioeconomic backgrounds to refashion bodily identity, celebrate beauty, fierceness, freedom, and solidify social bonds.

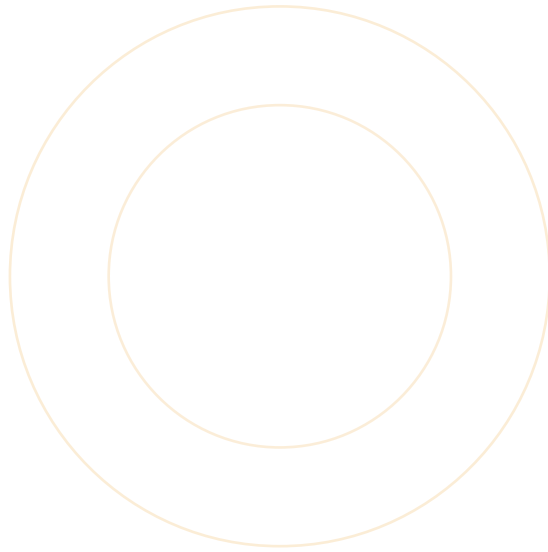
Hair extensions have become central to hairstyling practices within African American beauty cultures and have a long and complex history of uses and meanings. Like hair oils, straightening pomades, and hot combs, extensions were born of “syncretic” influences that include “African, [Indigenous], and Euro-American cultural forms” (White and White 1998, 49; Byrd and Tharps 2002, 13). Traditional African styles of braiding, which were part of “proud hair cultures,” survived the first stages of abduction and bondage through tactics of “reinvention” (Jackson 2000, 183). Male slaves in the late eighteenth century wore detachable braids tied back in a queue and also styled natural hair in the shape of European periwigs imported into the American cultural landscape as colonial signs of social and economic arrival (ibid). Shane White and Graham White (1998) write that Black slaves were “*bricoleurs*” drawing from their own traditions and “the American present to create... style[s] that were new” (49). Because expressivity connotes freedom and resistance, however, the interlocking power structures of colonialism and slavery gradually enforced cropped hairstyles for racialized persons in everyday life and institutional settings like plantations and residential schools.<sup>vii</sup> The legal abolishment of slavery in 1865 brought with it new forms of hair-related subjugation;<sup>viii</sup> however, it was also accompanied by the proliferation of creative African American hairstyling trends, which put their own spin on classic hairdos like the pompadour, pageboy, and croquignole curl. These styles both engaged and refused straightening methods and products including human hair attachments. Hairpieces, wigs, and toupees circulated as part of the era’s wildly popular commercial hair trade and expanding Black hair-care industry, and were marketed to African Americans by actors in both spheres.<sup>ix</sup>

Responsive to economic globalization, the hair trade has undergone considerable restructuring since the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, while its imperialistic and global capitalistic imperatives remain. Thus the trade repeats many of its old ways, including reliance upon “gap[s] in wealth” between women who grow and produce hair and women who consume it for everyday wear (Tarlo 2016, 46-7). However, as Nadège Compaoré (2011) observes, “the transnational power relations between [non-Western] hair suppliers and African American women involved in the human hair industry goes beyond a mere rich woman *versus* poor woman issue” (157, italics in original). Socioeconomically diverse Black women in the US continue to participate in sustaining the global hair industry and in benefiting from its products. At the same time, they also navigate complex “local power structures” that endorse and reward the purchase of long, wavy, or straight hair as signs of “successful” femininity, and that exclude non-conforming Black women from normative domains of beauty and belonging (ibid.).

For these reasons, the global hair extensions industry is the source of significant tension and dispute within the African American community and in communities across the Black diaspora. Chris Rock's documentary *Good Hair* (2009), about the US\$9 billion Black hair-care industry, explores some of these tensions and pivots on concerns around Black women's consumerism of hair additions. These concerns are longstanding in the African American community and stretch back to the 1920s activism of Marcus Garvey, who advocated racial pride through natural hair, and 1960s and 1970s Black nationalist and "Black is beautiful" activisms, which protested the global wig industry's steady monopolization by white-owned corporations reliant on outsourced product and labour (Gill 2010, 57; Ford 2015, 46-51). Hair companies saw in Black women a lucrative market desiring of wigs as "markers of modern sophistication and style" (Ford 2015, 44). Yet, while selling them their products and profiting in the process they also propagated white beauty ideals in marketing and media materials, thereby diminishing Black women (45). Furthermore, they kept Black-owned businesses and African American hairworkers out of the market (48). This exclusion, says civil rights activist Reverend Al Sharpton, continues to affect the economic and political progress of the African American community. To wear hairpieces, he suggests, is for Black women to symbolically wear "our economic exploitation on our heads" (qtd. in *Good Hair* 2009).

While both Sharpton and Rock call attention to how structural racism and classism operate through hair as a mass cultural and representational form, their perspectives are infused with racism and misogyny. That is, they position Black women as vain, unthinking, materialistic hair addicts suckered into white supremacist capitalistic notions of beauty, who, in the act of hair consumerism, let the Black community and Black men down. This is a heteropatriarchal approach that underplays and dismisses the complexities of hairpieces within African American women's beauty cultures. It relies on a narrow range of aesthetic, economic, and embodied meanings, namely, large investments of time and money, painful installation, resultant hair loss, rejection of natural hair, and male allure, glossing and obscuring more positive associations for consumers, such as economic and sexual autonomy, healthful protective styling, cultural self-expression and diversity, and identity formation.





As Tanisha Ford (2015) suggests, hair extensions and related styling “have a place in the [African American] community- and identity building process” (50). Their involvement in diverse Black hairstyling cultures recognizes hair enhancements as mediums through which women can draw communal strength and form meaningful relationships (Harvey 2005; Gill 2010). bell hooks (1988) writes that Black hairstyling practices and materials belong to a “culture of intimacy” in homes and beauty parlors, which act as refuge from social barriers and bigotry outside their walls (33). The hair salon, writes hooks, can be a space for “black women [to bond] through ritualized, shared experience... a space [to share] life stories — hardships, trials, gossip” without judgment or societal surveillance (ibid.). Hairstyles serve as important cultural artifacts of these exchanges. Although they are always visible/public, they congeal in them the daily interactions, truths, and secrets that preserve peoples and cultures under siege.<sup>x</sup> Integrated into hairstyles, extensions are part of these embodied pathways of cultural transmission. Likewise, they are malleable to suit personal ideals and therefore they also express the individual personalities of wearers.

Still, human hair extensions, like those discovered among the ruins of St. Claude Avenue in post-Katrina New Orleans, originate on the bodies of other women who grow and sell their hair for income or donate it in religious contexts in other parts of the world (Berry 2008). Turned over to trade, this hair seems to lose its immediate human connections. Recalling the active and affective qualities of the hair fragment, which allow for an afterlife in aesthetic forms, another approach is to consider how the hairpiece is impressed with personal and cultural identities that afford it the ability to conjure absent bodies. For example, weaves, which are a type of hair extension popular in Black beauty cultures worn loose or “to emulate braids,” are either sewn or glued onto existing cornrows and then interspersed with natural hair (Byrd and Tharps 2002, 119). They thus become part of wearers’ bodies and merge also with hands that stitch and braid them into place to produce desired looks. Social practice and fibre artist Sonya Clark (2015) conceptually fuses hands and hair when she suggests that “the hands” of Black “hairdressers” are “[r]ooted in a rich legacy,” a statement also suggestive of the action of handing something down (91, my emphasis). In African American beauty cultures, traditional and modern hairdressing techniques and aesthetics are passed on and survive intergenerationally. Artist and synthetic hair braider Shani Crowe explains that she “picked up the... skill of braiding by watching [her] aunts and cousins braid hair, and from the feeling of having [her] hair braided” (qtd. in Bongela 2016). This practice, she continues, with roots in African and Caribbean hair cultures inclusive of extra fibres, “connects not only client and braider [but also] generations of displaced people” to traditional ways and lands, evoking ancestors (ibid; Mercer 1987/42, 44).

To fully consider how hair extensions can function to revive absent bodies and lives, I turn now to their vivid relocation in Loren Schwerd's commemorative hairwork depicting the ruins and realities of Hurricane Katrina in the New Orleans neighbourhood of the Lower Ninth Ward. After the storm, clearance companies in the area were hired to empty the contents of besieged businesses (Fletcher et al. 2007), including wet and moldy beauty merchandise. Schwerd washed the hairpieces she found with industrial shampoo, also in the rubble, and dried it on clotheslines in her studio, finally brushing out the tangles that had accumulated from the tumult (MacCash 2009). Then, she transformed them into commemorative architectural shapes, "draw[ing] on...eighteenth- and nineteenth-century tradition[s]...of hairwork," which she first saw at the Charleston Museum, South Carolina, with its vast collection of hair-rendered mourning jewellery (Hansell 2008). Techniques for making these objects can still be learned from the pages of surviving and digitized Victorian hairwork manuals.<sup>xi</sup> Schwerd's inspiration from Victorian practices and solo method of "interweaving...and sewing...tiny braids" can be seen to differ from the social and communal experiences of Black hairstyling (ibid.). However, she also works with hairpieces and weaves intended for African American women and repeats styling techniques reminiscent of those used to install wefts onto bodies. Stitching hairpieces onto mesh frameworks evocative of hairnets used for sew-ins, Schwerd creates embodied structures that draw on historical hairwork and contemporary styling to evoke real people and the intricacies of the Katrina crisis.

## Reenter Mourning Portrait

With the traditions of nineteenth-century hairwork elicited by Schwerd's hair formations, it is useful to think back to how the Victorians took an expansive approach to what could evoke the physical presence of ancestors. Likewise, the hair of Schwerd's memorials evokes physical presence through a range of associations, beginning with the fact of extensions as bodily traces: objects worn and handled by people thus containing physical evidence like sweat and fingerprints. Cognate body parts such as scalps, heads, and hands therefore spring to mind. As Sigmund Freud ([1899] 2003) contends, the dead and repressed have various modes of revival, including the resurrection of parts possessing independent activity: "severed limbs, a severed head, a hand detached from the arm...that [all move] by themselves...have something highly uncanny about them" (150). With the plaits of *1317 Charbonnet St.*, it is as if the artist is asking her viewers to conjure hands and breathe life into fingers by imagining the actions of braiding. For some viewers the braids might even elicit a tactile memory of their own hair being braided, as Crowe earlier described.

Not as palpably, the presence of the body can be felt through the hairpiece's association with physical space, which is marked by bodies and their social interactions. Whilst not of the bodies of the Lower Ninth Ward's hurricane victims and evacuees, and therefore not literal bodily remains, the hair of *Mourning Portrait* embodies cultural remains: remnants of cultural life, vital to community survival. This includes the "life stories — hardships, trials, gossip" of individual women in beauty contexts, which act as lifelines, and beauty contexts as means of launching local women's entrepreneurship, linking to a long history of Black hair-care entrepreneurship on St. Claude Avenue and in the region (beginning in the late nineteenth century with the inventions of Madame CJ Walker, whose hair business thrived during the worst of Jim Crow segregation) (Rooks 1996, 5-6; Harvey 2005, 792; Gill 2010, 18-31). Hairpieces in *Mourning Portrait* are thus both human and humanizing elements in the depiction and evocation of the lives and deaths of the Lower Ninth Ward, lacking in mainstream visual representations of Katrina casualties, earlier described.

Material culture scholars and archeologists have shown how ordinary accessories can be records of humanity and life in the face of trauma, violence, and death; for example, hair beads dug up from plantation sites and concentration-camp artifacts, namely, combs, hairbrushes, and razors (Yentsch 1995; Carr 2017). Hair discovered in Katrina's wreckage can also be entered into the language of the secular relic, in general, and commemorative hairwork, in particular, as material witness of living moments: evidence that what is now abandoned once stirred with people who had/have blood in their veins. The Lower Ninth Ward Living Museum (2017) confirms that "[o]nly one in five residents has been able to return to their homes," a statistic made more shocking by estimates that the overall population of New Orleans has bounced back to at least 80 percent of what it was before the storm (Park and Tse 2010). The Lower Nine has taken longer; the neighbourhood was deserted in the months that followed the storm (Allen 2015). There was no electricity and many Black-owned homes and businesses in the St. Claude neighbourhood could not afford to stay afloat for the three months it took the City to return power to the area, leading to the liquidation of home and store contents (ibid.; Sontag 2005; Hansell 2008).

People were also evacuated from familiar spaces and households into sports arenas, commercial buildings, tents, and state-owned trailer homes, while others built encampments in low-income housing nearby with the intention of returning to and rebuilding their homes (Verderber 2008, 369, 375; Johnson 2006, 148). Without government help, people came back to reclaim the leftover bits and pieces of their houses such as doorframes and shutters for possible reuse (Sontag 2005). This “taking back” demonstrates resilience and is signified by the absence of such architectural features in Schwerd’s works (ibid.). There are no trimmings, for example, on *1317 Charbonnet St.*, modeled after a shotgun-style house typical of the area. Associated with strained circumstances and material vulnerability, these homes “didn’t stand a chance with the water,” says Schwerd, who chose two-toned ombré hair for the sculpture (qtd. in Hansell 2008). This aesthetic choice evokes the waterline that stained houses after Katrina receded, marking the area with evidence of muck and submersion (see Johnson 2006, 143). It is no coincidence therefore that the artist represents this particular style of home to evoke these particular losses, doing so in miniature form with each structure sized like a dollhouse (Hansell 2008). This design functions aesthetically and symbolically to compress meaning and is the reason behind the miniaturization of other styles of portrait from earlier eras. Notably, Georgian and Victorian “painted miniatures” depicting loved ones or parts of loved ones, such as hands and eyes, whose purpose was to make emotion tactile and compact while reminding bearers of the presence and absence of their beloveds (Lloyd 2006; Schindler-Lynch 2019).

Still, Schwerd’s miniatures are of private homes and not of people. In this way, they both link to and diverge from wreath-based Victorian hairwork portraiture, which characterized and immortalized persons through the celebration of inhuman forms, specifically, nature. Recall that for this type of hairwork people were prepared into floral formations evocative of tribute gardens and funeral arrangements. Flora, including flowers, buds, and foliage, is suggestive of life and community in that it takes root and reseeds, regenerating in the right conditions. Unlike the magnolias of New Orleans and other local plant life that died from prolonged exposure to the saltwater that breached levees, wreaths portray flowers in bloom and are never shown wilting or without nourishment (Gabour 2017). Indeed, flowers and gardens are things that can be tended to as flourishes on properties and in houses. They signify the luxury of being able to care for the domestic environment, something that was afforded to white upper-middle-class wreath makers but denied to African American Katrina victims. The latter were expected to stay ejected from their houses and thus remain isolated from the daily activities people perform to conserve their homes. Barbara Bush, US First Lady at the time, memorably commented that evacuees were better off residing permanently in precarious emergency lodging than returning to homes in disrepair.<sup>xii</sup>

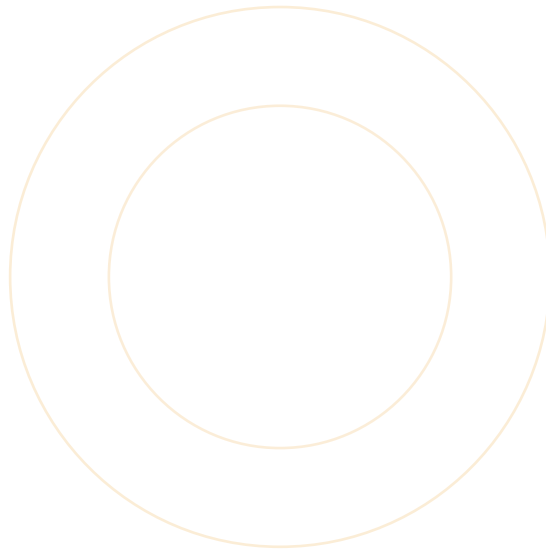


It is architectural disrepair that Schwerd deliberately interprets, fusing the trace and matter of the human body with decaying homes instead of fashioning them into verdant shapes that never spoil. It is a melding that elicits mutual ruin of residence and resident, but which also resurrects both, using one to support the other. Situated within Schwerd's broader oeuvre, which explores the ambiguities inherent in found media and material ruins, the hair of these structures thus plays on interlinked fragility and endurance: architecturally destroyed and decaying but also persevering. It mirrors the wider picture and people of the Ninth Ward post-Katrina and the subsequent artistic choice to conceive opaque structures like *1317 Charbonnet St.* whose thick knit atop metal armature symbolizes fortitude and impenetrability, as well as structures like *Arc* (Figure 4; Schwerd 2008), a house stripped down to its wire frame. In *Arc*, the only traces of life are five braided ponytails and one multi-plaited braid, dressed with a ribbon and stretching upward as a last support. Attached to their skeletal core, the ponytails recall the remaining bits on a corpse. They thus communicate resilience while also signaling death and absence: no one inhabits the dead body or vacated home. Only ghosts can filter through *Arc's* hollow framework.

**Figure 4:** Loren Schwerd. *Arc*, 2008. Human hair, fiberglass screen, wire. 20" x 14" x 40". Courtesy of the artist. Photo by the artist.



When ghosts abide in hair, however, their stories accrue there creating presence and sparking memory. As Victorian traditions of hairwork illuminate, hair mementos rely upon the entwinement of history and memory. That is, the belief that collective histories of families, say, or close networks, can be experienced as one's own memory and accessed through intimate mnemonic devices like jewellery or wreaths. The seismic loss of life to Katrina and the social and political crisis engendered by it, however, demands an adaptation of both the form and trope of hair relic and hairwork. In rearticulating the Lower Ninth Ward's hairpieces, Schwerd thus also articulates a larger collective history. She does this through rebuilding vacant and ruined homes with human hair, which acts symbolically to put people back into their houses and neighbourhood. Recalling Victorian conventions around lost spaces and lived environments, Schwerd literally "infuses" her architectural forms with the "corporeality" of the region's previous occupants. This has the effect of building layers of the past into the artworks' substructure. To gaze at her portraits is thus to summon a palimpsest of historical events on St. Claude Avenue: the sale and purchase of a weft, the exchange of words and stories on shop floors, the braiding and dressing of hair, the flooding of the levee, the failure of recovery efforts, belated evacuation, and subsequent death. Acting as direct evidence, the hairpieces have absorbed their "precise [time and] location": the occurrence and duration of the crisis, which flooded and ruined the beauty parlor on St. Claude Avenue. Baptized with the floodwaters of the Katrina disaster, they thus freeze in time the specific event. What is more, they evoke the trauma of its diasporic aftermath as well as its root causes: social and political realities including the interlocking race and class exploitation that means remigration to, and redevelopment in, the Lower Ninth Ward is only recently under way. So even though found hair belonged to shopkeepers, beauticians, wearers, and donors with whom Schwerd had no immediate personal connection, she does not preserve an isolated and unfamiliar past but continues historical, emotional, and ethical involvement in an event whose horrifying realities have been an indelible part of everyday life for surviving and displaced Ninth Ward residents. This reality is not the everyday reality of the artist, however; next, I reflect on her role and identity in representing Black lives, linking to broader state failures to commemorate the Black population of the Ninth Ward.



## The Role and Identity of the Artist in Commemorating Black Lives

To continue ethical involvement in the fact of past and ongoing oppressions, Schwerd takes an aesthetic form once used to commemorate and display grief for privileged white people and subverts its traditions to commemorate lives obscured and erased in Euro-American bourgeois memorial culture. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century white supremacist beliefs around the use and exchange value of Afro-textured hair coincided with different and divergent cultural attitudes to hair's collection and display. These played a role in the absence of Black hair and representation in memorial hairwork. While for white bourgeois Victorians the idea that hair fragments possessed the spirit, potency, and trace of owners aroused positive feelings, in traditional and diverse African belief systems the same idea caused concern about the maltreatment of donors should discarded hair be manipulated into charms for performing harmful magic (see Jordán 2000, 139; Lowe 2016, 112). Perhaps, therefore, African Americans within African diasporic cultures did not want their hair gathered by strangers and refashioned into display items and fashion accessories. Still, there is something to be said about representational decisions made on the part of white female wreath makers and devotees of hair jewellery, both as part of and in response to their socio-historical circumstances.

Historically, the fibre-based labour of hairwork for crafting wreaths was that of middle- and upper-middle-class white women and its purpose was to commemorate loved ones who typically came from the same or similar racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. That is, the historical labour of hair wreath making evokes the era's broader zeitgeist of racial segregation between white people and people of colour in the US, where subjugation and discrimination extended far beyond the South. As Alexis de Tocqueville observed in 1835, "the prejudice of race" was just as strong "in those states where servitude [had] never been known" (330). The US historical culture of racial prejudice could mean that geographically distributed white bourgeois hairworkers did not have close relationships with African Americans or were either unwilling or unable to formally and aesthetically acknowledge them in memorial forms. And this is to say nothing of white bodies coming into prohibited physical contact with Black bodies under slavery and Jim Crow through the touching and working of Black hair.<sup>xiii</sup> Representing white people alone, therefore, hair wreaths and gems can be seen to crystallize segregation and human remove even while their purpose was to entwine people and bring them close.

At this point, it is worth noting that Schwerd is also a white middle-class woman, who uses the forms and labour of hairwork associated with privilege, wealth, and whiteness to memorialize, acknowledge, and concretize loss and intergenerational relationships. Furthermore, she is a professional artist who we know works with the hair of strangers to create a product that is evocative of human suffering and that, to a degree, circulates in the commercial art market. In 2012, one of the works was purchased by the Columbus Museum in Georgia.<sup>xiv</sup> The artworks' exposure to commerce extends the commercialization of its bodily contents and exposes its sensitive subject matter to commodification. This reflects a longstanding tension and contradiction in the commercial art world in the shifting perspectives that see artists who depict disaster as cultivating affect and raising political awareness, and that view them in a different light as commodifying pain, distress, and hardship. These perspectives become even more complex when artists depict and draw inspiration from the cultural practices and traumas of marginalized and disempowered communities, which they are not part of. In this sense, respectful memorialization, cultural appropriation, and economic profiteering become blurred and herewith it is possible both to draw and disjoin connections between Schwerd as an actor in a commercial art world and the earlier cited historical example of the professional hairwork industry.

Up to about 1910, either directly or via the mail-order services of department stores, professional hairworkers were commissioned to transform the hair of people they did not know into emotionally charged commercial products. The overall fate of these products was determined by commercialization, as Helen Sheumaker (2007) points out. Exposure to commercial hair, the market in ready-mades, and manipulation by ostensibly unfeeling workers was believed to taint and cheapen the emotional value of the hair fragment and this delivered human hairwork its death-blow (149, 152). The interaction of commemoration and commerce worked negatively in the case of professional hairwork, a business that capitalized on the trauma and vulnerability of people experiencing loss and wishing to see loved ones enshrined. In the case of Schwerd's hairwork, memorialization and the market also fuse and extend beyond the hair to the art itself, whose subject is Black pain and suffering, rendered by a white artist who has, conceivably, gained professionally from the long-term exhibition and success of this work. Plus, as observed earlier, her individual creative process does not explicitly include in-person input or guidance from the local Black community of New Orleans, whose lives have been uprooted and whose hairstyles the artist is inspired by and emulates. As hooks (1992) teaches, white supremacy has a way of worming into even the most politically conscious and popular of enterprises, de-centering, removing, and segregating non-white lives and perspectives.

Let me be emphatic; however, Schwerd's portraits are not *self*-portraits, rather they represent and remember Black lives. They are artworks that, like many artworks in Western contexts, wrestle with the realities and processes of capitalism and interlocking oppressions and whose political and emotional values survive. Thus, while they recall the business of professional hairwork and the actions of the white middle-class Victorian wreath maker, who collects, cleans, combs, and combines hair fragments into elaborate memorial formations, they also deviate from their historical antecedents in important ways. For one, they challenge representational exclusivity in hair-related memorial forms and the associative denigration and segregation of Black bodies and lives under US white supremacy and Euro-American colonialism. Furthermore, Schwerd works with unfamiliar hair to redeploy an item of expressive Black hair cultures, which she positions aesthetically as fine art and precious keepsake. The artist thus highlights the beauty and artistic nature of Black hairstyles as "walking art galler[ies]," to use Clark's (2015) poignant phrasing (92). I believe this separates Schwerd's sculptural portraits from the creations and vision of Victorian hairworkers and allies them with artwork by Clark and other African and African American visual artists, including Crowe and J.D. 'Okhai Ojeikere, whose fibre-based and photographic portraits of the hairstyles of Black women challenge diminishment by white supremacy and racist beauty culture.<sup>xv</sup> Brushing off brings about social and symbolic death, making the creative responses of Black women to racist beauty culture all the more decisive. Schwerd's works communicate that in African American hairstyle- and beauty-based resilience there is a link to the houses still standing in the Ninth Ward and the people who did everything in their power to return to them despite the government's ineptitude, indecision, and indifference. Her purpose in using weaves to recreate material ruins and create memorial objects is thus to celebrate and acknowledge everyday Black resistance across a range of strategies and experiences.

Likewise, commemorating social and cultural resistance requires an understanding of the forces that push against it like the gale and surge of hurricanes. This message is strong in *Mourning Portrait* for the reason that its artworks communicate refusal on the part of the African American community of New Orleans to be destroyed by the Katrina crisis or to wait on government response before getting on with their lives. Concurrently, they point to how this resolve and protest is *responsive* to wider state refusals around protecting and valuing Black lives, including failures to grieve and commemorate them. Accordingly, Schwerd reanimates a vehicle of historic white remembrance with Black hairstyling artifacts and redeploys both to commemorate and display grief for underprivileged and invisible — "ungrievable" — lives. Judith Butler (2009) suggests that the lives of ethnically and racially marginalized others are "ungrievable" in the sense that they "cannot be mourned" because they have never counted as living, "that is, never counted as [lives] at all" (36). Regarding Katrina, we saw this point materialize in the state's decision that some lives (Black southern lives) did not count as lives worth rescuing or indeed count as lives at all. Furthermore, their deaths have gone widely unrepresented in state-sponsored monument and memorial. There are numerous shrines and artist-rendered monuments erected all over the city. To date, however, there is only one memorial subsidized by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA):<sup>xvi</sup> the Katrina Memorial, entombed behind cemetery gates along with over 80 unclaimed and unidentified victims. Furthermore, as Lindsay Tuggle (2011) points out, the Katrina Memorial is situated on "the outskirts of town" and its "bordered location" communicates that both its "ghosts" and "the space for mourning [them]" should be "consigned [there]."

Ergo, Schwerd's commemorative hair formations can be understood to represent a deeply political and radical act of mourning and remembrance in a culture that disremembers and thus refuses grief of Black deaths and disremembers and thus refuses celebration of Black lives. In the following section, I continue to interweave the stories of the mourning portraits with traditional hairwork forms and meanings, bringing them together with the political tasks of mourning and remembrance. Closely attending to additional samples of Schwerd's works, I consider the political afterlife of Katrina's repurposed hairpieces, which moves the politics of commemorative hair forms and fragments toward ethical responsibility and social change.

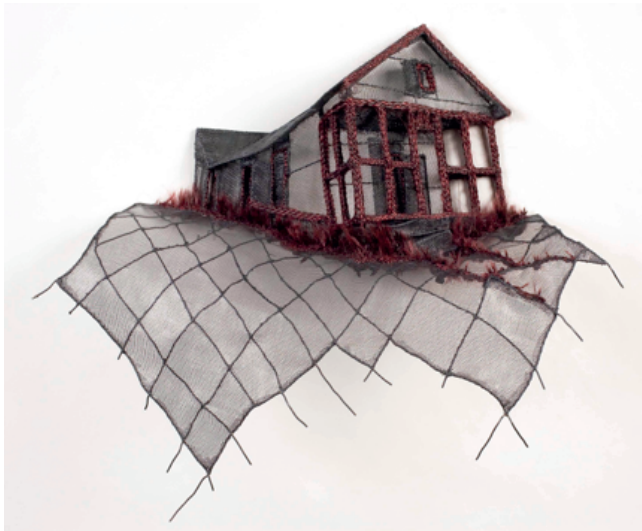
## The Political Afterlife of Hurricane Katrina Hair

Describing her process, Schwerd states that she “employ[s] basic methods of connection such as tying, weaving, and stitching” in loving and decided acts of memorial, which “imbue [her] work with a feminine sensibility.”<sup>xvii</sup> To revisit an earlier point, in Western settings femininity has been broadly associated with emotion inclusive of the work of mourning and thus forms the backbone of memorial hair wreaths. Together with sculptural African American hair and weave fashions, these are *Mourning Portrait*’s closest representational forms. Continuing their divergence from hairwork’s original purpose and message, however, the artworks epitomize new directions. They stray toward a project of articulating and enacting political agency and social justice.

Schwerd’s politicization of nineteenth-century hairwork traditions is rooted in how her pieces transform grief into a public demand. They are part of a growing body of fashion-related performance and memorial art made from charged bodily referents displayed to ensure that ethnically and racially marginalized communities share the space of public grief; for example, Tasha Dougé’s American flag woven from synthetic braids to signify the blood, sweat, and tears of African slaves in building the wealth of the US, and Métis artist Jaime Black’s ongoing REDress Project, which suspends blood-red dresses in public museums and urban locales to memorialize and recognize the lives of Canada’s estimated 1,200 missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls.

A nuanced portrayal of loss can be realized through the tropes and traditions of nineteenth-century hairwork designed to remember death and celebrate lives lived. Schwerd calls on these wreathed meanings inherent in the form, adding in the material artifacts of African American hair cultures as potent symbols of inextinguishable life and beauty. Furthermore, by choosing to weave into her works cultural forms that are exceedingly public and in popular circulation — hairpieces and hairstyles — Schwerd expands the politics of grief toward public visibility. Victorian hairwork was not exactly oriented in this direction, though it did have a public dimension. Its hair wreaths were displayed privately in the home, but guests given access to its inner sanctums were meant to see and appreciate the labour-intensive artistry of the objects (Sheumaker 2007, 85, 124). Furthermore, Victorian material cultures of mourning, as Ariès earlier observed, brought grief beyond the private sphere into the public domain through the vehicle of dress, which included hair gems worn on the surface of garments, and severed locks tucked away in purses and pockets — just beneath the surface but working still to say we carry our grief always with us. Despite material visibility, however, the emotional connections kernelled in nineteenth-century commemorative hair forms and fragments were, as Lutz reminds, mainly private: a symptom of Western modernity’s devotion to/of the individual. Typically, as if encased in reliquaries, hair wreaths and intricate configurations of hair in mourning jewellery were sealed behind beveled glass, symbolic of protection. The living and emotional nature of their medium was thus in a sense reified and tactile connection by anyone but weaver or wearer prevented.

Differently, Schwerd's renderings with hair are not fixed behind glass but are openly displayed. It is true, therefore, that they evoke and take inspiration from Victorian cultural attitudes to visualizing grief and emotion through aesthetic forms. The knits certainly work against psychoanalytic models of grief that materialized after the Victorian era in the work of Freud ([1917] 1971) and have since become status quo. These conform to death's other containment methods in hospitals and funeral parlors by assigning it a discrete timeframe and pathologizing grief that stretches on. Always growing back, hair is the ultimate metaphor for grief that cannot be expunged. This association is enhanced when hair fragments house traumatic memory, which is itself prone to re-experiencing/creeping back into the mind (Caruth 1991, 418) – a message we can take from the feathered hair that crawls down the netting of *1812 Tupelo St.* (Figure 5; Schwerd 2007), refusing curtailment. Thus, on one hand, the hairwork of *Mourning Portrait* borrows meaning from Victorian material cultures of mourning, which harnessed the potency of secular hair relics toward outwardly expressing, displaying, and maintaining grief and emotion in the everyday. On another, it expands the power of secular hair relics beyond being "materialized secrets" that communicate and transmit their deeper emotional narratives and memories only to a select few (Lutz 2015, 28).



**Figure 5:** Loren Schwerd. *1812 Tupelo St.*, 2007. Human hair, mixed media. 23" x 24" x 8". Courtesy of the artist. Photo by the artist.

To make sense of why it is important to extend the affective structures of grief through the “ties and bonds” of hair, I find Butler’s work on the politics of mourning to be helpful. As she points out, grief is not in fact “privatizing,” it shows us that “the ties or bonds...we have to others...constitute who we are, [they] compose us” (Butler 2004, 22). This is the case with *Unmoored Near Dorgenios St.* (Figure 6; Schwerd 2007), which, like each of the artworks, takes its name from a house that was forced off of its base to a new and unfamiliar address (Hansell 2008), signifying the fact of displacement and evoking the unmooring nature of grief. The piece is formed of small braids sewn tight onto a metal framework similar to *1812 Tupelo St.*, whose fiberglass screen evokes a hairnet and crimson plaits in geometric lines resemble cornrows braided close to the structure’s scalp. The action of sewing hair down onto a grounded structure offers an alternative narrative to being swept away and reminds that Schwerd’s techniques evoke those used to install weaves. Like all human hair extensions, a single weave can contain the hair of hundreds of women and is impressed with the labour of hundreds more (Berry 2008; Tarlo 2016). However, its entwinements are difficult to discern after chemical treatment, manufacture, and assimilation into natural hair. It is significant therefore that Schwerd combines different hair colours to recreate the walls of the unanchored home with finely woven human stitches crosshatched in black, chestnut, and copper blonde, visibly bringing together an array of lives and giving shape to human interdependency.



**Figure 6:** Loren Schwerd. *Unmoored Near Dorgenios St.*, 2007. Human hair, mixed media. 18" x 12" x 8". Courtesy of the artist. Photo by the artist.



Victorian hair wreath makers did this too, combining a spectrum of hair colours to make their memorial gardens pop and to demarcate different donors. However, Schwerd does not simply repeat standard hairworking aesthetics and techniques such as variegation and looping and “gimping” strands through wire to form shapes (see Sheumaker 2007, 81). Other more contemporary Black hairstyling aesthetics and techniques are also apparent in her work, from mixed-coloured braids to twist- and micro-braiding. A blending of influences is evident in the crossing pattern of *Unmoored Near Dorgenios St.*, which resembles basket-weaving techniques of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century hairwork brooches and earrings. Up close, it also includes delicate micro braids of the variety woven into natural hair and weaves. Circling back to how miniscule representational forms compress meaning, the tiny plaits here signify the tight-knit social and personal connections that develop around African American hairstyling, discussed earlier by hooks and Ford, and that grow in communities like the Ninth Ward over generations. Likewise, grief “furnishes a sense of community of a complex order” by giving prominence to “the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility” (Butler 2004, 22). That is, grief is a condition that can unite people; however, what Butler is also saying, and what Schwerd’s sculptures suggest, is that it is not universal or evenly distributed. Its presence shows us that although humans rely on one another for social and economic survival, survival is not granted equally. As *Mourning Portrait* communicates, the state-sponsored racism and violence of Katrina imperiled the survival of socioeconomically marginalized and racialized others for the survival of “proper” humans in “better” neighbourhoods. In consequence, like the undoing of braids, weaves, and stitches, bodies were undone by other bodies.

To resist violence of this sort and recognize ethically that we are interwoven “invariably in community,” Butler suggests “a point of identification with suffering itself” (30). For if like braiding and weaving mourning is a physical and social way of making connections, it follows that it can be a way of making connections to the suffering and mortality of others. Schwerd opens these points of identification up to the viewer. Her forlorn *Charbonnet Near Rocheblave St.* (Figure 7; Schwerd 2008), with its dead wire that transmits no electricity and street lamp that throws no light, still strongly emits the presence of suffering, dispossession, and vulnerability. In real life, this home was destroyed when it collided with a telephone pole during the deluge (Hansell 2008). As Sally Hansell observes, the utility pole is a focal point of Schwerd’s redesign and likens a Christian cross (ibid.). At first thought, it turns the structure into a safe haven by recalling crosses affixed to the roofs of urban and roadside churches. For the African American community, however, places of worship have also been made unsafe spaces by the deadly effects and expressions of white supremacy.<sup>xviii</sup> No refuge can be taken in Schwerd’s architectural replicas and as the tilting and unbalanced planes of *Dorgenios St.* suggest, only a haunted “house of cards” remains (ibid.).

**Figure 7:** Loren Schwerd. *Charbonnet Near Rocheblave St.*, 2008. Human hair, steel wire. 24” x 18” x 16”. Courtesy of the artist. Photo by the artist.



To draw one last connection between historical and contemporary examples, in the Victorian imagination haunted houses and haunted parts of houses were not lost or passive spaces. As Lutz reminds, they were spaces with presence and personality and thus they played a pivotal role in reuniting the dead with the living environment and the living with the dead. Schwerd's decision to focus on lost spaces in the Ninth Ward seems linked to this Victorian convention. However, as the artist observes about the post-Katrina Ninth Ward landscape, the insides of houses were radically altered and their intimate contents either removed or discarded on lawns and sidewalks. "Everything was revealed," says Schwerd, "the private space turned inside out" (qtd. in Hansell 2008). In other words, lived environments surpassed the typical uncanny sense of the unhomely, which sets in after people leave or die. They became *unlivable* environments in which the living and the dead may no longer commune. The broken residences of *Mourning Portrait* ask viewers to imagine such unlivability, which brings with it separation into tent cities and football stadiums, sorrow, grief, and alienation, experiences and feelings not traditionally associated with home. They ask viewers to ask themselves: What is it to return to ruins with loved ones and worldly possessions disappeared and strewn through the streets? What is it to have to gut what remains? Moreover, what is it to die from shoddy infrastructure and no help? And what, given precarious environmental, economic, and political circumstances, is it to live with the plausible fear that this will happen again?

These are unimaginable questions with unspeakable answers, which Schwerd nonetheless manages to articulate and which become relatable through the human element of hair. This makes sense since, as Butler (2004) surmises, it is the body's porosity (epitomized by hair) that exposes us to others, especially to their vulnerability and mortality (21). Her claim is that this produces recognition of our own mortality and can thus motivate us to act politically: to resolve to leave others unharmed by the kinds of violence that forgets them and leaves them for dead. Hair fragments, in general, and those scavenged from the rubble of Katrina, in particular, make the perfect medium to transmit this message. For in communicating immortality, they also paradoxically recall the fact of death common to us all. Though snips of our hair survive, we will all perish, and some of us, for reasons of race, gender, geography, and socioeconomic status, will perish sooner than others. While this might seem like a morbid note on which to finish this essay, it is precisely this point that highlights the importance and political potential of commemorative hair forms and fragments, which can move us to make connections/make change. The political afterlife of hairpieces washed up in the Lower Ninth Ward and revived through contemporary art may address loss and grief, but its impetus is toward transformation. If there can be hair relics of the future and of future political agency, these are it.

# Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the reviewers for their insightful feedback and the editorial team for believing in this work. I am also extremely grateful to Loren Schwerd, Annunziata Morant, and the City of Toronto Museums & Heritage Services for kindly allowing the reproduction of artwork and artifact images. Finally, my gratitude to Danielle Van Wagner (Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto) for her help with genealogical research on the Vilas family.

## Author Biography



### Esther R. Berry

Esther R. Berry is a gender and cultural studies scholar, instructor, and curator whose works and teaching fuse critical theory with popular cultural texts, including fashion, film, contemporary art, and print media. Her book project *Making Waves: The Biopolitics of Hair and Its Global Trade* is under advance contract with McGill-Queen's University Press, and resulted from a SSHRC-funded postdoctoral fellowship at Ryerson University in the English Department and Modern Literature and Culture Research Centre (2015–2017). In addition to this work, Esther has two publications on the topic of the global hair trade (*Postcolonial Studies*, 2008; *cléo: a journal of film and feminism*, 2014) and one forthcoming in 2019 in *Feminist Formations*, a journal published through Johns Hopkins University Press. Her exhibition "Talismans of Memory, Love, and Beauty: Exploring Hair as Material Culture in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries" recently ran at Ryerson's Modern Literature and Culture Research Centre gallery (Aug 26–Sept 28, 2018) and was featured on Radio Canada (Sept 25, 2018).

#### Article Citation

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# Endnotes

[i] Artist cited in catalogue materials for “The Culture of Rights/The Rights of Culture” exhibit (see Polak and Schwerd [2008] 2009).

[ii] As Sundiata Cha-Jua (2006) observes, this is especially disturbing in light of the state’s financial investment in erecting walls and national boundaries to exclude racialized immigrant groups escaping poverty caused by American foreign presence and neoliberal policy, occurring under the Bush regime at the time of Katrina and more recently under Trump (2).

[iii] As enumerated by Louisiana state officials and reported in the *New York Times* (Dewan 2005).

[iv] Album belonging to the Vilas family of Sterling, Vermont, loose page with the names and hair of three sisters, Lucy, Caroline, and Pamela, 1825. Verso, a mourning poem penned by the mother of the girls, Mercy Flint. National Museum of American History, Warshaw Collection, Hair Box 3, Folder, Miscellaneous.

[v] Diary belonging to Mary Elizabeth Browne, New England, loose page with hand-written diary entry, dated September 26, 1862. National Museum of American History, Warshaw Collection, Hair Box 3, Folder, Miscellaneous.

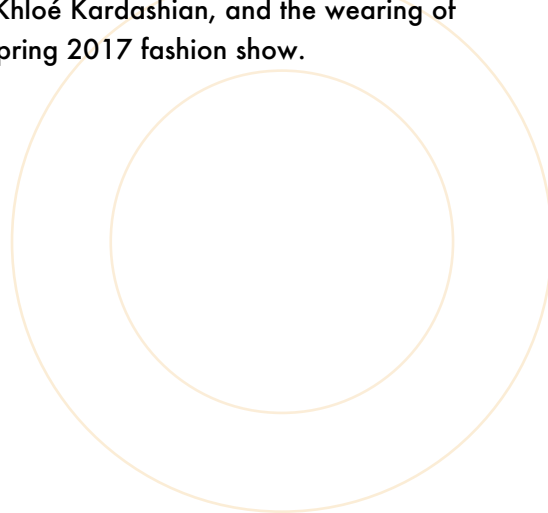
[vi] In landmark legislation, the New York City Commission on Human Rights recently made racial discrimination based on hair and hairstyle illegal (see the Commission’s “Legal Enforcement Guidance on Race Discrimination on the Basis of Hair,” 2019).

[vii] Hair was forcibly cropped and heads shaved in residential schools and on plantations as a means of gendered retribution, dehumanization, subjugation, cultural genocide, and “sanitation,” with long hair and traditional African and Indigenous hairstyles blamed for spreading bugs and infection and seen to signify barbarism. In addition to the forcible removal of hair, the absence of traditional styling tools in the colonized Americas, specifically African combs, made hair and hairstyles difficult to maintain. While this worked to eradicate African cultural practices, it also illustrates the resourcefulness of free and enslaved African women, who designed and crafted combs from materials available to them (see Canada’s 1996 *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*, Vol. 1, 315; see also White and White 1998, 40; Gottschild 2003, 208; and Byrd and Tharps 2002, 13-4).

[viii] For example, minstrel stereotypes and the accompanying industry in minstrel wigs, whose products were pictured in theatre-supply catalogues such as Philipp Ostermayer’s *Catalogue of Theatrical and Society Hair Goods* (Jersey City, New Jersey, n.d.) and Heisler & St. Germain’s *Theatrical Emporium* (Hair Good Department, Brooklyn, New York, n.d.). National Museum of American History, Warshaw Collection, Hair Box 2, Folders, Ostermayer, Philipp, and Heisler & St. Germain et al.

[ix] Notably, by Black beauticians and hairworkers such as Mme. L.C. Parrish, who established a “wig-making and hair-weaving trade for Black women in Boston around 1889,” and the Philadelphia-based Bustill family, whose hairwork and hairpiece advertisements populate the era’s African American periodicals (Bundles 2001, 69; see also Parrish 1912, 3; and Gardner 2015, 80-1).

[x] This makes the cultural misappropriation of “ethnic hairstyles” by persons who benefit from hegemonic power structures all the more disturbing; for example, the wearing of cornrows, Bantu knots, and box braids by Kim and Khloé Kardashian, and the wearing of dreadlock wigs by white models for Marc Jacobs’ Spring 2017 fashion show.



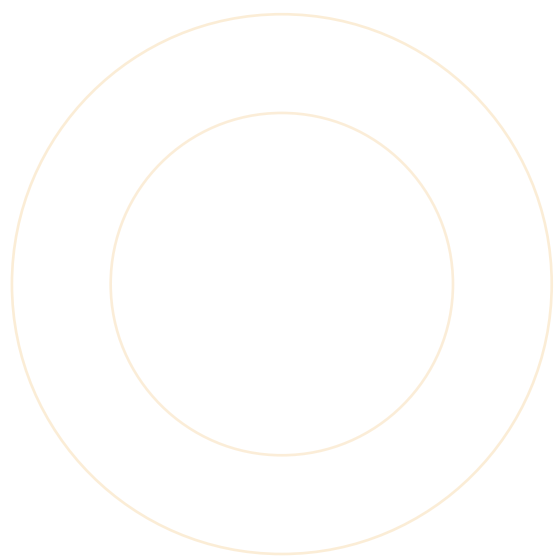
[xi] During the Victorian era, DIY hairwork manuals were a popular way of learning how to make hair keepsakes and jewellery. They also provided instruction on how to make hairpieces, including braids and curls. See Mark Campbell’s 1867 guide *Self-Instructor in the Art of Hair Work* and Alexanna Speight’s *The Lock of Hair* (1871).

[xii] For Bush’s exact quote, see the *New York Times* (“Barbara Bush Calls Evacuees Better Off” 2005).

[xiii] Body contact between whites and Black persons was prohibited under Jim Crow and enforced in Georgia with barbering laws that forbade Black male hairdressers from cutting

or styling the hair of white girls and women (see US National Park Service 2018). This law positioned Black men as sexual predators and linked women’s hair, a sexualized body part, to the suggestion of illegal interracial intimacy. In the earlier colonial and antebellum eras, free and enslaved African and African American men and women were employed to work and style the natural and artificial hair of wealthy white families and customers (Gill 2010, 9-10).

[xviii] I am thinking specifically of the 2015 anti-Black hate crime in Charleston in which a white-supremacist terrorist murdered nine African American parishioners at their church.





[xiv] See page 7 of the Columbus Museum's 2012 Annual Report.

[xv] For hairstyles featured in Sonya Clark's "The Hair Craft Project," see the artist's website (2019). See also Crowe (2019), and stunning photographs by Ojeikere currently housed at London's Tate Gallery.

[xvi] FEMA only partially subsidized the Katrina Memorial. Supplementary donations to finish the project were received from African American funeral associations and charities such as the African American Funeral Directors of New Orleans (see LaCoste 2014).

[xvii] Artist statement in web materials for the Hair On Fire exhibit, Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art, College of Charleston, South Carolina, May 14–June 15, 2009.



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