Abstract
This paper is an exposition of the documental being, becoming, and unbecoming of hair, wherein I argue that although human hair is a corporeal material, and an object that can be viewed through various perspectives and theories, it can also be read as a document imbued with meaning, intention, and perception by humans, and fulfills Suzanne Briet's criteria (Briet, 2006; Buckland, 1997) for an object to be considered a document: it has materiality (it must be a physical thing), intentionality (intended as evidence), needs processing (to be made part of a documentary system), and is an object of phenomenological perception (recognized as a document by humans).

Keywords
Human hair, hair as document, mythology of hair, hair as evidence

> "[Hair] has an incredible power to annoy your antagonists, attract potential lovers, infuriate your neighbors, upset your parents, raise eyebrows at work, find compatible friends, and allow you to create, to recreate your identity. While we think of it as part of ourselves, it's also an object, one that can last for centuries in a locket or a grave, and cultures worldwide suspect that it might, at least under some circumstances, hold your soul."
> – Scott Lowe, *Hair,* 2016, p. 2.

Introduction
We as humans invest hair with so much meaning and money, so much so that the hair care market was worth USD 100 billion worldwide in 2025 (Statista, 2025), while the hair removal market is worth almost half that much (Statista, 2022). Hair is a nature-culture document that we carry around with intentional, unintentional, or encoded messages about who we are, where we come from, and how we choose to relate to society, and how society relates to us. It's not merely an inert or zombie body part – it is a textual document that is authored, read, and interpreted in social and symbolic contexts. For those of us who have a head of hair, and for those of us who don't, it is simultaneously a very personal subject, while also a very public object of note to others. Hair, by its mere presence, absence, or abundance, is also subject to various explicit and implicit control by individuals, societies and cultures, with both intrinsic and extrinsic meanings. They can signify belonging, identity, defiance, or resistance. While the singer India Arie defiantly sings "I am

not my hair" (2005), Lady Gaga passionately proclaims "I am my hair" (2011), both revealing the hidden tensions in the relationship we often have with our hair.

Morphology of Hair

Hair is a primary marker of our mammalian nature (Lowe, 2016, p.17) and human head hair (both on one's scalp and as a beard) is even more unique in that it continues to grow long and needs to be cut (along with human nails), whereas human body hair (torso, arms, legs, pubis) grows to a certain short length and then falls out, just like hair in other mammals, and fur in other animals, and scientists have been unable to find out why, although there are several unconfirmed evolutionary theories around body temperature and hygiene (Neufeld & Conroy, 2004).

"One of the biggest breakthroughs in recent years has been the discovery that hair samples, once considered useless in terms of DNA, are in fact a rich source of mitochondrial DNA [or] mtDNA" (Wolinsky, 2010) providing us with information about the evolutionary history of our species through hair samples in various museums across the world. Because of this development, scientists can also retrieve DNA profiles from shed human hairs that contain trace amounts of DNA, thus making it easier and more accurate than fingerprint-evidence to identify a person, especially in forensic investigations (Adelaide University, 2015) – this can also be done through proteins in the hair (Sheikh, 2016). Such live and posthumous identifications have both positive and negative implications for identification of kin, especially in tracing the migration paths of Indigenous communities, and people that are displaced from their lands, or are part of the "stolen generation", but also has potentially negative implications due to the unintended repercussions from such identification (Browning, 2016).

Hair contains a record of our exposure to drugs, chemicals, pollutants, toxic metals, and even mental and physical stressors, and can provide biological health markers, and thus function as a diagnostic tool in medical contexts (Florou et al., 2025), including the testing of newborn babies' hair to determine their prenatal exposure to any chemicals or drugs in their prenatal environment. Hair can also provide evidence of the environmental history of a place, be it industrial manufacturing, mining, or other factors (Thomas et al., 2022). It has helped as evidence in investigative history; for example, analysis of Napoleon's hair has revealed chronic arsenic poisoning (Kintz et al., 2007), and Beethoven's hair has revealed lead poisoning (Rifai et al., 2024), adding to the history of their times.

As with everything else under human purview, hair has historically been subject to several classification systems across the world based on color, texture, and volume, and to connect them to one's ethnicity, although none of these efforts are quite scientific. More recent studies based on a combination of geographical distribution and genetic make-up classify hair into eight main coherent hair types,

simply labelled by number rather than description or ethnicity (De La Mettrie et al., 2007).

Narratives of Hair

Stories of hair fill our mythologies, legends, and fairy tales. Hair has been caught up (in some cases, literally) in biblical stories such as Absalom's, the handsome son of King David, whose heavy head of hair had to be shorn often (and was sold for money due to its perceived value) and who finally dies because his head of flowing hair was caught up in a tree while fleeing from battle on a horse. Samson's hair was the source of his strength, for a razor had never touched his head, which becomes his downfall when Delilah cuts his hair. In Islam, a single hair from the Prophet Muhammad is considered worth more than all the gold and silver in the world, for it is believed to bring victory to whoever possesses it. In Hindu mythology, the god Shiva uses his matted hair to create a beast that would avenge his wife's death. In Greek mythology, King Nisus had a single magical crimson lock that protects him, which his daughter Scylla cuts off when she is infatuated with his rival King Minos, thus killing her father (Graves,1960, p. 314). Following ancient tradition, married couples in China are referred to as "hair-tied husband and wife" (jiefa fuqi 結髮夫妻) where strands of hair from husband and wife are tied together in an everlasting knot during the ceremony (Lam, 2023, p. 30).

The magic of hair continues in children's fairy tales from Rapunzel to Snow White; in fact, hair is loaded with symbolism and serves as a metaphor for sexuality in many of Grimm's fairy tales (Deslauriers, 1995), for it is also a signifier of adolescence and adulthood, of innocence and defiance, and of good and evil. Letting one's hair down can mean relinquishing one's reservations or inhibitions, or as in the case of the legendary Draupadi of the Hindu epic poem *The Mahabharata*, be a result of an oath to only tie her hair after washing it in the blood of the man who dared to ravish her. Alexander Pope's poem Rape of the Lock uses the cutting of Arabella's hair without her permission as a metaphor for a non-consensual personal invasion, a rape. Thus, "Hair is signal, an antenna, one of the languages of the self. It helps us—eloquently or horribly—to perform gender and sexuality. Beards are expressive symbols of masculinity but our most bearded person, Christ, is gloriously androgynous. The figure of the 'bearded lady' is both beautiful and sad—Macbeth's witches' wiry chins signal their depravity as well as their power" (Jones, 2009).

Social Life of Hair

Historically, hair and hairstyles have had several religious and social connotations, indicating status and rank in society, one's age, one's ethnicity, one's religious belief as well as one's preferred aesthetics. From blonde to red to brown to black

to gray, each color has a social history of its own (Jolly, 2004). Almost all major religions have rules about hair for various stages and rituals of human life based on what they believe the hair holds; some need hair to be uncut, and others for it to be shorn entirely. In many religions across the world, hair is associated with sensuality and is so covered, especially during prayers. It is often shorn or tonsured in religious ceremonies such as funerals to enforce monasticism (as in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Christianity) or grown long and matted to signify power, divine or political (as in the Naga Ascetics in India and the Rastafarians in Jamaica), where the tangled, unkempt locks symbolize detachment from worldly vanity and a commitment to spiritual pursuits, or symbol of strength often linked to the hair of the Biblical figure Samson. Sikhs from India have similar beliefs about the holiness of hair and forbid cutting or shaving it, both for men and women, and protecting it with a turban.

Sikhs are also known to be fierce warriors, for they had militarised against the Mughal Invasion of India in the 17th century, and hence just the presence of their turbans and meticulously maintained beards became associated with courage and valour. In 1854, during the British-Sikh Wars, the moustache was made mandatory for every British soldier in the East India Company so they would be taken seriously by Indian soldiers (French, 2006; Mukherjee, 2023). To this day, Indian soldiers and police in some states are offered a moustache allowance. Moustaches have also become something that men can grow in November as part of a *Movember* event globally to raise awareness of men's health issues, such as prostate cancer, testicular cancer, and men's suicide.

Since hair seemingly grows for free, it has been used as a renewable resource for several money-raising events for cancer etc., where people grow their head hair and then publicly shave it to donate it to a cause. The shorn hair is often donated to make wigs for those who need it, such as people undergoing cancer treatment, for a major source of trauma for many during cancer treatment is the loss of their hair, signifying a loss of their identity, their personality, and their history, and reducing them to a cancer patient. As a character says in Rachel Harrison's novel *Cackle*, "I never realized how much bullshit is bound to the bottom of your hair. How it carries with it the years and experiences, all it has witnessed, has endured. The reason you can't let go of your past is that it's still attached" (Harrison, 2022, p.217).

The Roman army made crew cuts and a clean shave an established practice as hair was seen as a liability that an enemy could pull or hold back to cut off one's head (Gabriel, 2008, p. 3), for the practice of head-scalping had developed independently in various cultures and was used as a trophy of war. Although "there was no need for colorful uniforms in the premodern world; armies could separate comrades from enemies by hairstyle alone" (Lowe, 2016, p. 36) – different countries now have specific rules about facial hair in the military.

Societal practices also dictate when a person should cut their hair, and how, whether in mourning, sacrifice, penance, disease, or as a punishment. Many young women will ask their friend if they have broken up with their boyfriend if they find that the friend has suddenly cut her hair, for the hair that one had grown while with a man signifies a burden on one's head. From the long hair popularized by The Beatles to the pragmatic shaven heads for working class British that was then adopted by punk culture and then by skinheads (Hess, 2019), hair styles (and what they signify) evolve as society evolves.

Hair has a specific history across many cultures as a site of controlling women, be it the requirement to cover one's hair from the views of men other than their husbands, or of forcefully removing a woman's hair after her husband dies, as in some regions of Africa and India. More recently, the provenance of the hair used in making wigs has been in the news wherein Orthodox Jewish women who wear wigs (*sheitels*) to hide their hair instead of covering their natural hair with a scarf, and who constitute one of the largest markets for wigs, a global market of USD 8 billion in 2024 (Dixon, 2025), have been told by their Rabbis that they cannot source hair for wigs from countries where the hair is shorn as part of a religious ritual (Hoffman, 2024).

Counterculture movements such as the hippie movement, the head-banging rockstars, and mohawk hairstyles make a statement with hair. There is a huge "natural hair" movement in the United States and across the world (Simeon, 2021) to regain pride in one's natural hair, and protest workplace cultures (including the army) that consider natural hairstyles such as dreadlocks, braids and the afro unprofessional (Powell, 2019). California and New York enacted laws in 2019 to prohibit discrimination over natural hairstyles such as afros, braids, twists, and dreadlocks. As of 2025, 27 of 50 states have passed similar "hair bills", often named the Crown Act – Create a Respectful and Open Workplace for Natural Hair (GovDocs, 2025). However, texturism or discrimination based on hair texture and color remains a challenge for many to this day.

Hair in the Archives

Hair is used as a memento-mori or as a relic in various cultures, especially in the form of a lock of hair in a keepsake box or knitted into mourning jewelry, and for sentimental, symbolic, religious, or political reasons, or for its perceived magical properties – both as a talisman for protection, and as an instrument to cause harm. Believers and acolytes collected the hair of people they admired, and even enshrined them in sacred places, while others used them in witchcraft or magic. Bonnie Prince Charlie gave away lockets with locks of his golden hair to his Jacobite supporters as evidence of their loyalty even as he escaped to France via the Isle of Skye, which have now emerged from across Scotland, and are sold as sentimental commodities.



Figure 1: Locket containing Bonie Prince Charlie's hair which he gave to Flora MacDonald as a keepsake and token of his appreciation for her courageous acts in smuggling him out of Skye as her maid. Now displayed at the Dunvegan Castle on the Isle of Skye (Photo by author).

Museums, libraries, and shrines across the world hold locks or lockets of human hair from famous and infamous people and there are online sites that auction strands of hair from celebrities one can choose from (Paul Fraser Collectibles,

2025). The Library of Congress in the USA holds hair from people in the arts and in public life, and "nearly all of the hair stems from the 18th and 19th centuries, in the era before photographs were common and lockets of hair were seen as tokens that could be anything from romantic to momentous. People might go months or years between seeing one another; a lock of hair was a meaningful talisman" (Tucker, 2022). In short, strands of history can be traced through strands of hair.

Hair as a Medium for Creativity

Hair is a very accessible and malleable medium for art and creative expression, for it can be braided, colored, sculpted, felted, woven, knitted, crocheted or embroidered with, sculpted, or hung like a canvas. It is simultaneously delicate, strong, and long lasting. It is often colored and shaped with messages to support protest movements and used in various art projects in creative and innovative ways. Levy (2001) describes documents as "talking things" – they are "things" or objects we have given our voice to and sent out into the world to serve some sort of purpose for us (Narayan, 2015). Hair certainly talks and many people use this ability to express their own unspoken thoughts by using hair to document their voices and displaying them to the world.

One of the most spectacular use of hair for an art project is that of the artist Wenda Gu, a contemporary Chinese artist living in New York, whose projects *United Nations of Hair* and *Babel's Tower* both re-create life-size rooms and homes with locally sourced hair intricately woven into nation-specific walls and ceilings complete with calligraphy and flags, all brought together in the *United Nations of Hair* with the hair of over a million humans collected from all over the world. Gu Wenda also uses ink made from human hair and writes in a made-up language that is translated and re-translated until it loses its meaning. His *united nations: man and space*, recreated the 188 flags of the member states of the United Nations from hair samples sourced from six continents (Zhou, 2015). The United Nations series consists of installations at sites around the world in which hair is used to create works of art emblematic of a future not ruled by racial or national boundaries. To mark the British handover of Hong Kong to China, for example, he created *United Nations: Hong Kong Monument: The Historical Clash*, which consisted of a Chinese flag made of Chinese hair, a Union Jack made of British hair, and hair cuttings from all over Hong Kong scattered on the floor. These United Nations monuments have been installed in Australia, Canada, China, France, Great Britain, Holland, Hong Kong, Japan, Italy, Poland, Russia, South Africa, South Korea, Sweden, Taiwan, and the United States (Bessire, 2003; Wang & Sun, 2005).

The hair for the above projects was collected from barber shops, beauty salons and individual volunteers from around the world. Wenda Gu invokes the fact that "hair contains traces of DNA in order to point to our shared genetic heritage. By having some 500,000 people involved in each one of his major works,

the mixing of so many people's hair produces, in his eyes, a collective portrait of humanity that can't be created by traditional representational techniques" (Peabody Essex Museum, 2023). One can also call this a document of humanity, for future anthropologists to decode. Indeed, "most kinds of art exist as some kind of document, such as a film, painting or sculpture. Art's information, moreover, is materialised, and thereby transformed, into an artwork, or piece of art, by and through documentation. Documentation is therefore a crucial component of the field and practice of art because of its important roles in materialising artistic concepts into particular kinds of documents that are considered, treated, practiced and interacted with as art" (Kosciejew, 2017).

Theorizing Hair

Hair occupies a complex position at the intersection of biology, culture, and power, and can be theorized through diverse disciplinary and philosophical lenses. According to Donna Haraway, "Bodies as objects of knowledge are material-semiotic generative nodes.… Their boundaries materialize in social interaction. Boundaries are drawn by mapping practices; 'objects' do not pre-exist as such. Objects are boundary projects" (Haraway, 1988, p. 595) Through this lens, bodily materials such as hair can be understood as boundary objects, as nature-culture documents, as entities that traverse the domains of nature and culture while retaining coherence of information across different interpretive communities, and "acknowledging the embodiment of this information allows us to inscribe back to a social world that inscribes itself on our bodies. How we decide to adorn our bodies signals who we are, beyond those characteristics we cannot change" (Dudak et al., 2024). Hair thus functions as a material-semiotic node: an object that is both a natural growth and a cultural artefact, continually negotiated in relation to social meanings, political structures, and individual identities, and thus takes on the attributes of a document; a document that then contributes to the objectification of a person, "reducing and perceiving bodies as data and/or documents (e.g. through shape, weight, color, race, ethnicity, ability)" (Dudak et al., 2024).

Stuart Hall states that "representation is the production of meaning through language; in representation we use signs, organised into systems of representation, to communicate meaningfully with others." (Hall, 1997, p. 4). Using Stuart Hall's perspective, we can conceptualize hair as a signifier of identity, a site where meaning is produced and contested. Hairstyles communicate membership, resistance, or assimilation within cultural and racial groups. Within Black diasporic contexts, the politics of natural hair has been a crucial terrain for negotiating visibility and self-definition against dominant Eurocentric norms (Mercer, 1997). In this sense, hair is not merely symbolic but is constitutive of subjectivity and belonging. As Humans, "we enact the material-discursive affordances of our bodies, and their ornamentations, to signal aspects of our sociocultural identity and

group memberships, including pronoun pins, hairstyle, political apparel, traditional form of dress, tattoos, and drag, among others." (Dudak et al., 2024).

Michel Foucault's (1977) theories of disciplinary control and biopolitics can be used to further illuminate how hair becomes a target of regulation and normalization, for "Discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile' bodies" (pp. 138–139). Foucault also notes that institutions such as schools, hospitals, factories and barracks exemplify this disciplinary and regulatory regime through rules and regulations around hairstyles among other things (p. 205). Institutional practices, from military grooming codes to school and workplace policies such as rules for hair, demonstrate how hair is governed to produce disciplined, compliant bodies. Similarly, Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity can help us understand how hair participates in the iterative enactment of gender norms; short or long hair, and its styling, can performatively affirm or disrupt socially sanctioned gender identities (Butler,1990).

Frantz Fanon's (1952) ideas on colonization can help us deepen this critique by situating hair within the legacies of colonization and resistance. For Fanon, the colonial encounter imposed racial hierarchies that devalued African features, including hair texture, compelling subjects toward mimicry of the colonizer's aesthetic standards. "Black and other marginalized bodies are disproportionately policed and punished through sociotechnical systems reducing their human status to one of documents" (Dudak et al, 2024). Sanches Neto and Day (2020), recounting Bowker and Star (1990) on the "apartheid South African practice of testing to see if a comb can stand on end as a test for hair stiffness, taken as an essential quality for 'Blackness'," state that it was not an empirical test of "actually proving racial skin color or hair stiffness (one can't), but rather, the point was the putting into deployment of social and cultural prejudices through such means" (Sanches Neto and Day, 2020). bell hooks (1989) demonstrated how the reclamation of natural hair by African Americans operates as a form of political resistance and self-love within Black feminist praxis. Through such acts, hair becomes a medium of decolonization, a document that is "re-documented" (Sanches Neto, 2025) and used as a way of taking back one's agency and to exert resistance.

Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) notion of embodied cultural capital can also offer us insights into how hairstyles and hair-related practices signal social hierarchies. Access to specific hair care regimes, products, or salon cultures often reflects classed and gendered investments in bodily presentation, translating aesthetic choices into social capital. Sara Ahmed (2004) explains how emotions such as pride, disgust, or shame adhere to bodies, parts of our bodies, and their textures, including hair. These ideas can help explain how individuals experience their own hair in relation to societal ideals and racialized hierarchies.

Anthropologist Marilyn Strathern (1988) interprets hair as a relational and shareable extension of the body. In many Melanesian and Indigenous contexts, hair is exchanged, preserved, or ritually used to sustain social relationships, embodying the intersubjective nature of personhood. Similarly, applying Roland Barthes' (1972) ideas of mythmaking, we can understand hair as a site of social mythmaking, where styles and representations circulate as myths that naturalize social values, whether of femininity, rebellion, or purity. Across these theoretical perspectives, hair emerges not merely as a biological feature but as a densely layered medium through which identities, hierarchies, and emotions are articulated. It is a site where personal embodiment and collective history intersect, a living document of social life and cultural meaning.

Hair as Document

"Documentation [is] the process of recording evidence within or about entities as documents" (Dudak et al. 2024) and "almost anything can be made to serve as a document, to signify something, to be held up as constituting evidence of some sort" (Buckland, 2014, p.1). When situated within Suzanne Briet's theory of documentation, hair can be understood as a paradigmatic document, a material object imbued with intentionality, evidentiary potential, and interpretive framing. Briet's example of the antelope illustrates that a natural object becomes a document only when it is removed from its environment and treated as evidence within an organized system of meaning. Similarly, hair, whether preserved in a museum, analyzed in a laboratory, displayed in fashion media, or archived as personal memorabilia, undergoes a process of documentalization. It acquires meaning through human practices of selection, categorization, and representation, for all documents are context-bound and "documents function within shared systems (e.g. families, organizations, cultures)" (Gorichanaz and Latham, 2016, p. 1127). Drawing on the theorists above, hair functions as a boundary object (Haraway, 1988) bridging nature and culture; as a signifier (Hall, 1997) of identity and belonging; and as a site of power (Foucault, 1977) through which discipline and resistance are inscribed. These interpretive practices align with Briet's phenomenological understanding that an object becomes a document when it is perceived as such within a cultural or institutional framework. Thus, hair can be read as a "living" or a "dead" document, recording biological, social, and affective histories. It evidences the interplay between embodiment and knowledge, and between materiality and meaning, transforming this biological filament into a carrier of social memory and cultural discourse.

Conclusion

This paper detailed some usual, unusual and new ways that hair has been intentionally used as a document of, and to document humanity. In human society, hair, a material object, becomes a document through human intentionality, contextual use, and social recognition. It is not just hair – it is hair as evidence, as memory, or as data. This aligns closely with the idea that documents are not defined solely by form, but by function, use, and interpretation. Hair can also be understood as a living document – a continuously evolving, embodied record that reflects personal, social, political, and biological change over time. This interpretation expands traditional notions of documentation to include dynamic, organic, and performative modes of meaning-making, including the "richness of the factors that must be taken into account to understand how documents become informing" (Frohmann, 2004, p. 387).

As Buckland notes, "art is made art by framing it as art, so an object becomes a 'document' when it is treated as a document" (Buckland, 1997). Across mythologies, religious control, museums and archives, forensic labs, saintly reliquaries, personal and family lockets, and millions of hair salons across the world, human hair has indeed been framed and treated as a document and as documentary evidence. These practices demonstrate how hair is embedded within organized systems of knowledge, fulfilling Briet's requirement of documentary processing.

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