*At 10:45pm on Thursday the night before I had to turn in my Thesis, I thought about weeks of stress, and three nights of no sleep possibly going to waste when Final Cut Pro X stopped working. It was at that moment I understood the saying, “life is what happens to you when you least expect it.” I started scrubbing the tub, and then went to washing dishes because I needed something to distract me from my current situation—but it didn’t. I hadn’t started to write my reflection so I poured myself a glass of Pinto Grigio and decided to write.*

**What I Hoped to Learn/Do**

I was in the process of going natural and not yet full embraced it, which brought the curiosity of understanding how other black people (women and men) went about loving their natural hair. I knew the discourse of black women and acceptance of natural hair was not a new topic. Since slavery, including today, black beauty has been overlooked or altered to emulate Eurocentric beauty. According to author Michele Wallace,

“The black woman had not failed to be aware of America’s standard of beauty nor the fact that she was not included in it; television and motion pictures had made this information very available to her. She watched as America expanded its ideal to include Irish, Italian, Jewish, even Oriental [sic] and Indian women. America had room among its beauty contestants for buxom Mae West, the bug eyes of Bette Davis, the masculinity of Joan Crawford, but the black woman was only allowed entry if her hair was straight, her skin light, and her features European; in other words, if she was as nearly indistinguishable from a white woman as possible.” (1979, 157–8)

During my time as an academic, I noticed many women who have embraced their natural hair and are content with it. I was curious to know how they rejected white images of hair, and redefined what beautiful hair means. I created a list of my own questions that would help me answer this one. I found some amazing women who were willing to sit down and share their hair stories with me. As they told me their stories, I began to realize that my research wasn’t just about black women and natural hair, but unearthing self-love when society constantly teaches women to fix their appearance to comply with beauty standards. Instead I realized that, as a black woman, I am always fixing apart of my body to fit the categories of what is consider beautiful.

Aside from answering my research question, I was looking forward to telling my friends, “I made a documentary as my thesis.” I could finally call myself a filmmaker. At the moment the idea seemed vast. I was excited about learning something different. I wasn’t aware of documentary as a form of professional writing and I wanted to learn more about it and it’s relationship to writing. I started to work with Final Cut Pro X in Advance Multimedia Writing and wanted to learn more about the editing software. Multimedia Writing introduced me to video making, but left me thirsty for more. I didn’t know what I was thirsty for, but I knew this couldn’t be the end of filmmaking for me.

**What I Did**

When it was time for me to start my research I wrote a list of questions I wanted to ask the women I would interview. I interviewed black women between the ages of twenty-one and forty and one guy nicknamed “Afro Dude.” All my participants had natural hair. I wasn’t excluding women with straight, but more interested in women going through their natural hair journey. At first I stuck with my list of interview questions and when the participant would drift away from my questions I would strategically traffic them back to my original questions. However, when I went back and re-watched the first couple of interviews I felt something was missing—their stories. For my next interview I decided to let the conversation lead it self. That’s when I learned that sometimes you don’t have to be in control. The next few interviews I did, my participants opened up to me and instead of it being an interview it became a conversation. Together we had a conversation about black women and natural hair and it was then that I heard their stories.

Just when everything seemed to be going right, I was reminded that learning is never easy. I was focused on what I needed to complete my thesis, which I thought was the stories of these black individuals. I would only turn on the camera when it was time to conduct an interview. If I wasn’t doing an interview or uploading to the computer the camera was in the bag. My first mistake was not taking the time to properly learn my equipment.

*Mid January I grabbed my camera and headed to interview Charice (last name) at her home. It was around 1pm and the natural light was reflecting into her house so I didn’t use artificial light. The lighting appeared to be great. Afterwards I went to campus to import the interview to the computer, and when I played it back the footage was dark. This woman took time out her busy schedule, I can’t possibly ask her for another interview and whose to say the second interview would be as good as the first. To think I would pick up the camera and do some sample recording, instead I did the same. Next I set up an interview with Wonderful Faison. This time her interview was indoors with no natural light coming in. The room where we conducted the interview was bright and full of different colors. Like before all images appeared clear through the lens. However, for this interview her face came out blurry.*

If I had taken the time to learn my equipment I would have had more control over the lighting. I would have had a better understanding of how certain things work on the camera and could have prevented simple mistakes. Having a camera is like being in a relationship. The more time you spend with that individual the more you learn about him/her. Just like in a relationship when you mess up you have to find a way to make it right. With every mistake I would Google the answer and found some helpful videos on editing in Final Cut Pro X.

**What I Learned**

When it came time to bring the stories together, I realized that my abilities as a videographer effected the story. For instance, when I interviewed Wonderful Faison, her facial expression was what dragged me into her story and because of poor lighting part of her identity was lost, and my audience will never experience her interview the way I did. Finding a research topic wasn’t the problem. Finding amazing people to interview wasn’t the problem. Creating a story wasn’t the problem, but it was the technical stuff that took me by surprise.

Half way in, I learned that documentary is a language of its own and I was unable to speak it. I began to feel overwhelmed and felt like I took on an impossible task. I wanted to engage in the filmmaking, but I realized that I never took the time to learn the language. I learned that my thesis isn’t only about telling the story about black women with natural hair, but learning the language of documentary.

I could simply collaborate with experts in the field of movie making. For instance, I could have a professional videographer record me while I interviewed my participants. Or I could ask a musician to handle my audio. Yet, that’s not the form of collaboration I want for this project. I learned that I didn’t want to tell stories through documentary, but be able to understand every component of filmmaking—from the technical to the storytelling, because one can’t work without the other. The type of collaboration I want involves working with someone who will teach me rather then do it for me.

Another interesting thing I learned about filmmaking is that the rules of the traditional writing process apply to documentary. For instance, in the process of cutting and pasting conversations together I could have a run-on sentence or I could cut someone off to quickly and have an incomplete sentence. I had to go back and adjust some of my jump cuts because I had a lot of incomplete sentences.

One of the most complicated things I had to learn during this project involved copyright. I had to learn about the different types of creative common rules—which I still don’t fully understand. In doing this I discovered some websites that provide free music, images and videos I could use in the future. At times the videos were old or I couldn’t find the right images. This really limited my b-role and I found myself looking for more. That’s when I learned about fair use. I researched what fair use is and started noticing that people in the field had published work with copyrighted material, such as the movie "Queer Rhetoric and the Pleasures of the Archive.” 16-year-old Amandla Stenberg Schools Everyone On Cultural Appropriation in her video. This video went viral and because of fair use she was able to publish this video. I worked towards getting my own b-role, but after learning about fair use I found myself spending less time on it. For future and larger projects I won’t depend on fair use, but for now it was a great way of helping me complete my documentary. I learned a lot, but still feel as if there is more for me to learn.

**Goals For My Writing**

Despite the ups and downs that came with completing my thesis—I loved it. I see myself making more films in the future because of it. I’m looking forward to a summer of studying the technical side of creating a documentary. These past two years of my MA were my trial and error period. The video camera allowed me to gather the information I needed for my research, but didn’t prepare me to set up the story for my audience. As I move forward I want to learn how to connect the two. I had to learn that there are many components that come with making a movie. Documentaries aren’t just a person pressing the record button and uploading the video for someone to watch. They are about thinking about every component from beginning to end. I am proud of myself for creating a documentary. Yet, I am not content because I still feel that there was more I could have done and learned. Moving forward, I have come to realize that I need to learn more about the technical side of making documentaries from becoming familiar with the gear to understanding how to use Final Cut Pro X.

*This may not be the best documentary you’ve every watched. Please excuse moments of blurriness or awkward audio, but keep in mind that this was my first attempt at creating a documentary.*