

A Hair Story

By *Dajou Cottrell*

Thesis: Throughout history Black cultures have used hair in ways that transcends the binary function of aiding appearance and protecting the skull. Through the various contexts outlined in this paper, Black hair becomes a symbol of empowerment, identity, spirituality and a tool of communication¹. In order to grasp Black culture, it is important to understand the subtleties of Black hair in its many roles.

In over the course of 2018 - 2019, Dajou Cottrell analyzed artifacts from North America, and Africa (West, South and Central) in the Redpath

¹ Only two of these topics are presented in this journal.

Museum, and the American Museum of Natural History. Primary data collected for this paper was conducted through first-person ethnographic interviews with members of the African Diaspora in Montreal and Toronto.

Hair as Identity

The attitude towards hair in the community of the Ashanti people of Ghana, and the natural hair movement, shows how hair can become an expression of how people see themselves. The various examples outlined below shows how black hair transcends itself to become an expression and depiction of one's identity.

The Natural Hair Movement is a social movement that, “encourages people to move away from societal norms, to accept and love themselves as they are” (hairunruled, 2018). In this movement, hair becomes identity, as people are encouraged to remove chemical alteration from their hair and begin to accept their hair as it naturally grows and to accept themselves. Black women who wear natural hairstyles (Black hairstyles without chemical alteration), have experienced judgement based on the way their hair looks (hairunruled, 2018). This movement is a source of empowerment for anyone who has been judged for the way their hair looks or who has felt that they cannot wear

natural hairstyles due to negative perceptions of their hair in the past. The Natural Hair movement runs through social media, or through social gatherings like ‘Curlfest’ which encourages black people to proudly claim their natural hair. Participants of the movement will form Facebook groups posting tutorials on various ways to style natural black hair. Various stars like Lupita Ngong’o and Issa Rae are open supporters of this movement. The Natural Hair movement conveys the message that natural hair is an essential part of a Black person’s identity, while also stating that love and acceptance of your natural hair, is a form of self-love. The movement expresses hair as identity

since it shows that the way we depict our hair expresses how we see ourselves.

In the Ashanti tribe in regions of Ghana, Togo, and Cote d'Ivoire, when a person dies, their family keeps part of the deceased's hair as a memento. This hair symbolically maintains the presence of the lost loved one. Upon someone's death, the spouse and close family members shave their heads and place their hair in a pot along with the hair of the deceased. This pot is to be protected and kept in a secretive safe place, as the hair could be exposed to witchcraft if left in the wrong hands (Seiber, 2000 p. 153). Hair or pieces of hair in the pot symbolize a physical and

spiritual extension of the family and the deceased (Seiber, 2000 p. 154). The tradition of keeping a loved one's hair in a pot to mark their presence is a form of hair as an extension of a person.

'Hair as Identity' describes how hair can be representative of how one sees themselves. Through various stylings of hair, it can also portray what a person wants to express to the world. In examining the Natural Hair movement, it shows how hair can be a symbol of reclaiming identity, and what that means for Black culture. The Ashanti traditions of safeguarding hair of lost loved ones, shows how a person's hair can represent them, and become an extension of

who they once were. To summarize, this section shows how hair has the versatility to function in different capacities depending on the context.

Hair as empowerment

This section will evaluate how the acceptance and education contributes to Black people regaining power in the sense of self-empowerment. The perceptions of African hair have a history of instigating negative bias against Black people in the US and Canada. This section seeks to illustrate the way that public perceptions of hair have restricted black people from obtaining certain positions or being allowed in certain spaces. It will also explain how reclaiming natural hair is being used as a way for

black people to become self-empowered in their identity and themselves. In examining western society and its connection to natural hair, this section examines how hair has defined African Americans' place in society.

There have been cases, in North America, where the way a black person chose to wear their hair has defined where they could be employed or how they were treated. The New York Times article 'New York City to Ban Discrimination Based on Hair', states, "It isn't difficult to find black women or men who can speak about how their hair has affected their lives in both subtle and substantial ways, ranging from veiled

comments from co-workers to ultimatums from bosses to look ‘more professional’ or find another job” (NYTimes, 2019). Cases have emerged like that of Avery, who is 39 and wears braids to work. Avery’s supervisor has told Avery repeatedly that she should “do her hair,” when her hair was already in a combed natural hairstyle (NYTimes, 2019). Avery’s supervisor has also made comments, such as “straight is better,” implying that Avery should have a perm in order to ‘look appropriate for the office (NYTimes, 2019). Consider also a case such as my interviewee A.C., who has lived in Canada her whole life and experienced the segregation of

roles based on her hairstyle.

A.C. remarked, *“I went to an interview with my Afro in the late 80’s, only to be told during the interview that the interviewer’s only comment was that they were unsure if my look matched the office environment. Despite having all the qualifications, I did not receive the job.”*

These statements made towards Avery and A.C stem from a place of racism. A racist view that natural hair is woolly, unruly or unclean and therefore should not be worn in a place of work. The comment made towards Avery that “straight is better” only reinforces the idea that people with straight hair are more professionally

groomed that those with natural hair. To further understand this issue, it is important to examine the history of African Americans' hair in the context of North American history. During slavery, the hair of a field slave was looked down upon as being woolly or unkempt. In the 19th century wigs were considered the societal standard for posh and elegance. House slaves were given wigs from their master since it was the appropriate house uniform. After the emancipation of slavery, many African Americans sought to straighten their hair to fit into the American workplace. Time's magazine article 'The hatred of Black hair goes beyond ignorance' says, Madame C.J.

Walker, the first Black female millionaire, made her fortune selling products meant to straighten black hair as a way to help black people get ahead in society by fitting in aesthetically (Time, 2017).

The perspective of Black slaves as having unruly or dirty hair is a viewpoint that has been maintained many years after slavery. Even in modern times, the reaction African American/Canadians receive when they wear their natural hair (or any type of protective braiding hairstyle) is a reaction of judgment, discrimination, and in some degree disgust. These perspectives of Black hair helped to shape the biases that A.C. and Avery must

consider when they apply for a job. A study held in February 2017 showed that in comparison to white women, Black women feel more anxiety about their hair and are twice as likely to feel pressure to straighten it in their workplace (Time, 2017). The study found that many people “show implicit bias against Black women’s textured hair” (Time, 2017). The judgment of natural hair is based on a lack of understanding. By not having the experience of tending to Black hair, it is not possible for people of other cultures to inherently understand the methods needed to tend hair. The same can be said for Blacks attempting to understand white hair. R.B was born in the Caribbean and spent most

of his childhood learning about hair from his father, who was a barber. As he grew up and went to college, he mostly helped his friends style their hair, friends who were either of African or Arab descent. It was not until he had entered school to become a professional hairdresser that he took the time to learn how to style white hair.

R.B: *“When I first entered into school to study hair, I had no idea how to work with white hair. I had to learn and take classes, or practice with wigs before I was ready to color a white person’s hair,”*

Learning and understanding is important when experiencing and co-existing with different cultures. The main issue

with the bias towards Black Hair is based on a lack of understanding. Therefore, there needs to be an education on how much work goes into the intricacies of styling and maintaining black hair for Black people and people of other ethnicities. Education brings cultural awareness; cultural awareness can help decrease the amount of discrimination that Black people endure about their hair.

Many Black people in North America have associated natural hair and Afros with black empowerment. They have also found themselves undergoing societal pressures because of natural hair movements. The Time article, 'The hatred of Black hair goes

beyond ignorance', provides an example: "when I started college, I faced a whole new set of pressures: I joined black student organizations where chemically processed hair was seen as a throwback to the era of white suppression. In order to be a card-carrying progressive, you had to embrace your natural hair" (Time, 2017). In the '60s, Afrocentric movements like the "Black Panther" saw Afros as a symbol of black empowerment.

A.C. commented: "*Growing up in Canada during the 1960s-70s, I admired the Afro, but wearing the hair came with setbacks, because of the political connotations it had to the Black Panther Party movement.*"

For jobs or within your friend groups, if you wore an Afro, it was like you were trying to make a statement.”

A.C.’s statement delivers the examples of a switch, from feeling the pressure to straighten your hair to fit into society, to feeling pressure to wear natural hair to fit in with your community. So, what is the power that has been taken away? It is the power of choice. With the expectations of the community and of society, Black westerners emerge in the world of the internet fighting for the right to choose their hairstyles without ridicule.

As of February 2019, New York announced a law that states it is illegal to discriminate against a

person based on their natural hairstyles. This law helps address the discrimination in school and in the workplace, that has caused black people in the past to be refused jobs, or to be expelled from school. Time’s magazine article ‘The hatred of Black hair goes beyond ignorance’, states “in March 2014, the U.S. Army issued a new policy that banned traditional black hairstyles, including cornrows, twists, and dreadlocks. The regulations even described these styles as ‘unkempt’ and ‘matted’.” After months of backlash and a letter from the provides an example: “when I started college, I faced a whole new set of pressures: I joined black student organizations

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that, like the New York law and the rollback of the U.S army policy, things are changing. Blacks in western society tend to shy away from wearing natural hairstyles because of the bias views it may receive. Furthermore, Blacks in western society also shy away from natural hairstyle because natural hair is difficult to upkeep. It requires a lot of condition products, and hours spent braiding and combing so it can be presentable.

R.B. said, "*a lot of people do not know how to style natural hair. They may have never been taught how, and now to make the switch from perm to natural hair seems too difficult.*" However, R.B mentions that "*people are beco-*

ming more accepting of their natural hair, since the internet is providing lessons to people about how to braid hair”.

R.B comments on how salons in Montreal are putting more effort into educating the public on Black hair.

R.B: *“The Inhairitance Hair salon in Montreal offers their services to teach people about natural hair braiding and styling. Since services like this exist, I believe that people will start to learn more and more about their hair.”*

This section displays how hair has transcended its functionality by becoming a tool for power. Initially negative connotations like “woolly” took power away

from Black people, in a form of verbal degradation. However, in the 21st century with the New York City law, the internet, and the natural hair movement, hair can transcend its functionality by becoming a tool to regain power as a community, i.e. self-empowerment. Whether a black person’s hair is permed, in cornrows, or in an afro; the empowering part of it is that the individual has the right to choose what kind of hair they want to wear. As indicated during slavery and post-slavery time, the way Black people wore their hair (at times) was influenced by what was deemed acceptable in their workplaces. Now Black people are taking the right to choose that for

themselves. Society is moving towards the greater presence of black hair, and more diversity in media [see image below from (comedy central, 2018)]. Below is an interview between Daily Show host Trevor Noah and actress Lupita Nyong'o, discussing the importance of the portrayal of black hair in Black Panther. The interview shows how movies like "Black Panther" work to redefine the perception of Black to be positive and beautiful. "Black Panther" is an example of how media representation of proud black hair can be used as a tool to help a community regain empowerment within themselves. Simply because it shows the children of tomorrow the way to

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Conclusion

The purpose of this essay was to highlight how African hair can transform its functionality depending on context. In ‘hair as identity’, hair was shown to be a form of self-expression. Within the Asante tribe, hair became the spiritual relation between a person’s presence and being. The natural hair movement displayed how hair can express an identity, in correlation to a culture and to express accepting one’s heritage. In ‘hair

as spiritu-ality’, it is evident how hair can become a symbolic connection to religion, as well as a transfer into a new spiritual beginning. Overall the study of hair demonstrates how hair can be used as an avenue to gain an understanding of the dynamics and relations of Africans as well as African diaspora communities around the globe. Viewing the transcendence of hair from an anthropological perspective, displays how hair can be an expression of one’s connection with your culture. A good visual is provided by Lupita Nyong’o in her interview with Allure, regarding her hair. “Now I love my hair. I love it because I’ve also been able to really embrace the stuff it can do. It’s like

clay in the right hands. Clay can be dirt in the wrong hands, but clay can be art in the right hands.” — Lupita Nyong’o. (Michelle, Lee & Condé, 2018)

Black hair is like clay, and much like clay, the shape and purpose of the hair is determined by the artist. The appearance of hair can transcend function and deliver meaning for both the context it is viewed in as well as the expression of cultural pride. Part of culture is built around the understanding and sha-

ring of a common language. As displayed in this paper hair is something that can be understood and used to communicate messages. This paper argues that understanding the versatility of hair is important for understanding Black identity. Through the study of African hair, anthropologists can understand the historical communicative dynamics that exist within African cultures as well as understand the power Black hair holds in characterizing African culture in the present.

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