

I Am Not My Hair: African American Women and Their Struggles with Embracing Natural Hair!

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# **I AM NOT MY HAIR; AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN AND THEIR STRUGGLES WITH EMBRACING NATURAL HAIR!**

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this paper is to discuss the struggles African American women face with embracing the natural texture of their hair and appearance. African American women have wrestled with the concept of “good vs bad” hair as far back as the beginning of the mid 1800’s when slavery was rampant. Natural hair is defined in this paper as hair that has not been processed (chemically) in any way. Straightening (alternative to “natural” hair) is a chemical process by which excessively curly hair is straightened in an irreversible way. Generally, the products used are formulated in a cosmetic emulsion with high ph. Several questions are raised in this paper including but not limited to; (a) what is good hair? (b) is “natural” hair accepted in a professional setting? (c) are Euro American hair styles preferred by society? In an effort to further demonstrate the seriousness of this topic, this paper will also include types of straightening products and processes. Solutions to help African American women make the transition from relaxed to natural hair will also be presented, along with hair care advice that addresses the top concerns which create most of the struggles African American women face. Finally, using standpoint theory, this paper examines the effect of the white standard of beauty upon African American women. This paper is meant to bring these issues to the forefront by discussing the effects Euro American beauty standards has had and is still having on African American women.

**Keywords:** hair texture; body image; African Americans; beauty; women; natural hair; perception.

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**H**ow many times have women in general discussed appearance, hair, hair texture, weight and body types in public places? More specifically, how often do African American women reflect on their own appearance? How many African American women have been told they have “good hair”? What is “good hair”? Good hair is often considered hair that is straight, silky and without tangles. Therefore, if the texture of African American's hair is thick, kinky and curly, does society view it as “bad hair”? Is this the reason African American women seek to straightened their hair to fit into society's standard and to be accepted?

I wish I had a quarter for every time I've sat idly in hair salons listening to my counterparts discuss the topic of hair, more specifically “good hair.” Growing up, Saturday was always “wash” or salon day. My sister and I typically spent the majority of our Saturday in a hair salon trying to maintain our mane. As a child, I remember begging my mother to allow our stylist or beautician (as we referred to her) to relax my hair. I wanted that long, silky straight look that my classmates had and was quite tired of having “kinky” unmanageable hair. I didn't have “good” hair like my brother. As I had often been told by other family members, I had a bad “grade” of hair. Although nappy or kinky hair texture is the most devalued, it is also the most versatile (Ashe, 2010). From afros to updos, it is the kink factor in Black hair that holds the greatest possibility of diversity, allowing Black females much greater creativity than most other women when styling their hair. Yet, because it reflects African rather than European ancestry, kinky hair has a low social status, particularly for females (Lara, 2010). Along the beauty continuum, the presence or absence of kinky hair texture can make the difference between being attractive and unattractive, accepted or unaccepted. Within Black hair hierarchies, it is the prominence or absence of the kink factor—from nappy to curly to wavy to straight—that determines good and bad hair valuations (Robinson, 2011).

I was teased at school constantly because of my tightly coiled, kinky hair; I became obsessed with the thought of one day having the straight appearance “relaxing” my hair would offer. As a teen, I knew very little about wearing my hair in its' natural state or having hair that had not been processed (chemically) in any way. I believed that straightening through use of a chemical relaxer would make my “bad” hair appear to be “good” hair to others. The two ways that I will describe that may be used to straighten hair are with relaxers or simply by applying heat. Straightening using relaxers, which is alternative to “natural” hair is a chemical

process by which excessively curly hair is straightened in an irreversible way, by use of relaxers or texturizers formulated in a cosmetic emulsion and contain high PH. Another alternative, which I was quite familiar with, was straightening the hair using heat from a curling iron or flat iron. The disadvantage of using only heat was that my hair would only remain straight for a day or two. Without a chemical process, the hair will naturally revert back to its' original state. At the age of 13, my first relaxer was applied by a local hairstylist. Needless to say, within a matter of two years, my hair began to break off terribly.

I became interested in this topic by simply watching different movies and television shows in which African American women were not showing their real identity. I think this information is important because appearance matters in today's society. Since one of the primary interests in both Afrocentric and black feminist criticism is to understand how oppression is constructed and eliminated, this essay discusses (1) how a Eurocentric standard of beauty made its way into the homes of African American women (2) how some women have challenged and transformed this universal standard by the choice they make in how they wear their hair (White 2005). First, hair is one major way Black females are devalued (Greene, White, & Whitten, 2000). In a popular magazine article about the understudied relationship between Black females and Black hair, one researcher writes, "If cultural theorists want to understand how Black women and girls view their worlds, it is essential to understand why hair matters to them" (Banks, 2004). Racialized beauty standards combined with the color complex make hair texture and length an essential part of Black female identity.

Many times African American women are faced with challenges when compared to their European counterparts. As African American women, hair can be a difficult subject due to its' complexity. Ford (1997) used the activation-recency hypothesis to test whether stereotypic portrayals of African Americans increase the likelihood that European Americans will make negative social judgments of an African American person. So the question becomes, if African American women chose to embrace their natural hair would European Americans accept this alongside other standards of beauty? When I first decided to embark on the journey back to wearing my hair in its' natural state, it was met with much disdain. At the time, I was an instructor finishing the dissertation process. I remember, several people (friends, family, associates and colleagues) questioning why I as a "professional" woman, would want to wear my hair in such an "unruly" state. Although my hair was very short, unhealthy and thin from 13 years of chemically altering, people still preferred the damaged hair to my healthy natural hair. I would sit in the hair salon for 4-6 hours every other Saturday and spend hundreds of dollars on weaves to maintain the "Eurocentric" standard of beauty. After one year of trying to convince myself, researching the topic of African American Women and natural hair, I big chopped (cut all of the chemically processed hair off). I worried if I would appear unprofessional walking into the office with my mini afro, but couldn't deny the feeling of absolute liberation. It felt great to look in the mirror and see myself with my own hair.

For the vast majority of Black women, hair is not just hair; it contains emotive qualities that are linked to one's lived experience (Thompson, 2009). Hair plays

such an important role to the point that one might even insist women are defined by their hair. According to Byrd and Tharps (2001) it is impossible to ignore the fact that pop culture paradigms of beautiful Black women are coiffed with long, straight hair. Black hair in its natural state is often negatively marked for its' difference. Historically, the idea that straight hair means higher social and economic opportunities was spearheaded by Madam C.J. Walker.

## History of Black Hair

The history of black hair dates back from pre-slavery Africa to contemporary times. Black people's issues with skin color and hair texture have their origin in White people's issues with skin color and hair texture (Blay, 2010). Kerr (2005) observed, "Light skin was an indication of status for white communities long before light complexion became a mark of status in Black communities" (p. 273). According to Byrd and Tharp (2001), in the beginning, African Americans used the right kind of oils and combs to accomplish these styles. Some of these styles took hours and sometimes days to complete. In this day and time only the mad and mourning did not do their hair. In the 1500s the slave ships came in from Europe. The first thing that was done to slaves once they were caught was to cut their hair off. That was only the being of the process of wiping out our culture and identity to break their spirit to make it easier to control us. Slaves came to America in the 1600s.

According to Thompson (2009), some of the hairstyles that were worn by Africans during this period are still worn today; including twists, braids, Zulu knots, Nubian knots, and dreadlocks, once the slave trade began, the African's connection to their hair was forever altered, and complicated by North America. Forced to work in the fields all day, there was no time to care much about one's appearance or one's hair. Moreover, "treasured African combs were nowhere to be found in the New World, so the once long, thick, and healthy tresses of both women and men became tangled and matted (Byrd & Tharps, 2001). In the 1700s, African American women mostly covered their hair in head rags because they had little to no time to do their hair because they were being worked to death. African American women that worked indoors were able to do their hair which resulted in braids. It was a lack of hair products when slaves made it to the USA. As a result of this women started putting butter and bacon grease in their hair (Byrd & Tharps, 2001). In *400 Years without a Comb*, Willie Morrow chronicled the history of Black hairstyling practices, arguing that skin color and hair are so intertwined that it is hard to separate the two when examining the forces that shape Black people's lives. Morrow (1973) argued that hair is the basic, natural symbol of the things people want to be and its social-cultural significance should not be underestimated.

## 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> Century

During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it became fashionable for White men of the upper class to

wear wigs; in turn, slaves who worked in the “big house” also took to wearing wigs, while others shaped their own hair to look like a wig (Thompson, 2009). In order to further distance Blacks from their cultural roots, and dissuade any attempts to hang on to such African hair traditions, Europeans began to categorize the appearance of Blacks including hair and skin tone. African hair was deemed unattractive and inferior by Europeans. Many white people went so far as to insist that Blacks did not wear their real hair, preferring to classify it in a derogatory manner as “wool” (Byrd & Tharps, 2001).

According to Byrd and Tharps (2001), by the time slavery was abolished in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, “the goal of grooming the hair had morphed from the elaborate and symbolic designs of Africa into an imitation of White styles adapted to Black kinks and curls. Living in the country of white racists made black women see kinky hair as “bad hair” and straight hair as “good hair”. As a result black women would go anything they could to accomplish this look including putting lye in their hair. Black women would mix potates with lye and put it in their heads to achieve “good hair”. After the civil war the idea of good hair magnified because the black women that were already processing their hair wanted to remain at the top of the African American society so they used their excuse with light skin and “good hair” (Byrd & Tharps, 2001).

## **The 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

In her historical review of early 20<sup>th</sup> century advertisements, Rooks (1996) found that the products that were advertised regularly included before and after pictures encouraging Black women to lighten their pigment and straighten their hair, if not for themselves, but for their community. It’s one thing when whites demanded blacks to change the way they were created, but when one of their own suggested hair straightening, well that’s a different story. Madam C.J. Walker’s 1905 hair softener, which was accompanied by a hair-straightening comb, is regarded as the first hair product developed and manufactured by, and sold to, Black people. Walker revolutionized the way Black women thought about their hair. Because she was also Black, her product sanctioned the act of straightening. Patton (2006) emphasizes that Walker’s beauty empire not only contributed to higher self-esteem among the Black community, but also created a new job industry for those who attended her beauty schools.

By the mid-1920s, however, straight hair had become the preferred texture to signal middle class status (Rooks, 1996). The shift to calling oneself Black and being proud of it translated into a style that proudly hearkened back to Africa (Byrd & Tharps, 2001). Those who wore an Afro were also wearing another look, known as the “natural,” which was “unstraightened Black hair that was not cut close.” Byrd and Tharps (2001) insist that a “real” Black person adorned a “natural” hairstyle, while those who straightened their hair were deemed fake for attempting to emulate a White aesthetic, and an “unnatural” Black look.

According to Dione-Rosado (2004), relaxed hair, braids, weaves, and shortly cropped hair are considered more professional in nature, hence they are adopted by middle class women more often. Therefore, hair can be seen as an indicator of gender, social class, sexual orientation, political views, religion and even age. Some African American women still think the natural state of their hair is cumbersome, unsavory, or even disgusting (Banks 2000). However, there are many others who are starting the journey back to their “roots” and wearing their hair in its’ natural state. Centuries of generations of racial mixing among Africans, Europeans, and Native Americans created unique variations of Black hair textures, ranging from tightly coiled or kinky to curly, wavy, and straight (Robinson, 2011).

## Conclusion

Although African Americans have a plethora of hair options at their disposal, there have been punitive measures taken by employers to restrict the donning of the “natural” in the workplace (Thompson, 2009). In 2007, a Black woman in West Virginia was fired from her job at a prison for wearing braids, which was deemed inappropriate. While the argument can be made that Black hair no longer carries the same socio-cultural significance it did in decades and centuries past, the “natural” remains an unwanted politically charged marker in the workplace. Robinson (2006) writes, “Corporate America isn’t the only adversary of natural styles. Some black institutions discourage the ‘natural’ look, believing it’s best to prepare African Americans to blend into a majority-White corporate environment.” Secondly, perhaps fueled by hip-hop culture and its images of pimps, thugs, and gangsters who wear cornrows and braided hairstyles, a review of the discourse on Black hair shows very little acceptance of natural Black hair.

Today it is not uncommon to hear someone flippantly say, “Just get a weave, it’s no big deal” without a second thought. Covering up your natural tresses and damaging your real hair for the sake of a desired “look” should not be taken lightly (Thompson, 2009). Patton (2006) states that African American women are unique in that they are asked not just to strive to attain mainstream standards of beauty, but to have such standards completely override their natural being.

In conclusion, America’s beauty ideal has not altered drastically since the late 1800s. Large breasts, small waists, and masses of flowing hair are still the look desired by men and sought after by women (Byrd & Tharps, 2001). It is the 21<sup>st</sup> century, yet Black women are still struggling to meet this standard. Thompson (2009) proclaims, until African American women (including “mixed race” women, who may not necessarily process or weave their natural hair) collectively agree that hair alternation stunts any potential to overcome the legacy of slavery and a multi-generational pathology of self-hatred, hair will always be a contentious (and debated) issue.

It is recommended that African American women begin researching their history and start the journey to true acceptance of self. In conclusion, there is no

such thing as “good hair.” The quote “good hair” is a myth. Nevertheless, some African American women still continue to try to attain this ideal. Throughout the years, the importance of African American hairstyles has remained a way of letting one’s social class status be known to others around them. No longer is hair only a marker of what status one has, it is now a maker of individual personality, and a matter of convenience. If African American women would embrace their real identity, the media would eventually accept the natural!

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