

# Misogynoir: \*Black Hair, Identity Politics, and Multiple Black Realities

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*Have you ever danced with your hair? Afro shake your afro*

*See, I love you Afro Afro, I hate you sometimes...Nappy with slick designs,*

*Sexy and so scandalous, Natural super fly, Don't touch or I'm gonna have to cut ya*

*Afro Dance by Les Nubians*

## **Prologue**

Hair, especially for Black women, is multi-dimensional. It is used as a marker of race, ethnicity and beauty. It is used to empower women, and to diminish their spirit. It is this multi-dimensional relationship that has made this piece so difficult to write. As a Black woman growing up in the United States (U.S.) with all of the nuances as well as the complexities that accompany the politics of Black hair, it was easy to develop that love/hate relationship that so many of us have. Mine started with me sitting locked between my mother's legs as she snatched the comb from root to end while my screams echoed through the house earning me the nickname 'Mari-ooch Mari-ouch'. I need to add that my mother, a Black woman, has straight hair. I, a Black woman, do not. And although she was not performing the dreaded 'comb test' on me, she most certainly was combing my hair the way she combed hers.<sup>1</sup> I was also limited in the ways in which I was allowed to wear my hair, but more on that later. As an adult, I have worn my hair in every conceivable way that Black women embrace with the exception of weaves. I have had braids (all types), twists, finger waves, relaxers, innovation dry curl, texturizers, locs and what I call freedom hair.<sup>2</sup> And while I have proudly worn all of these black-girl styles, my identity, my hair type, and my style choice were [are] constantly called into question. What we need to fully embrace is that just as Black complexions range from one end of the spectrum to the other, is that there are multiple Black hair experiences that allow for multiple Black hair realities.

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### **I am Not My Hair - Am I?**

In 2006 singer/songwriter India Arie released *I Am Not My Hair*.<sup>3</sup> The essence of the song was that although society makes value judgments about Black people based on their hair texture and styles, the reality is that no one's personality or behavior should be defined by something that can be altered or changed; that it is the soul of a person that is important, not one's hair. Black women embraced the song as it became a mantra to many who struggled with their hair in a beauty culture that draws from imposed images and perceptions. It was embraced by women who wore their hair cut close to their heads or who were bald. And for others, it was a way of 'tapping' out of public discourse surrounding black hair altogether. Fast forward to 2015 when Solange Knowles released *Don't Touch My Hair*.<sup>4</sup> Knowles was quite clear that "this hair is my shit" and told folks not to touch her pride.<sup>5</sup> She talked about the power and vision she has through her hair and how this hair connected to her soul. *Don't Touch My Hair* gave voice to those women who felt a sense of attachment to and pride in their hair, sometimes with guilt. It was an empowering anthem, just as Arie's was almost ten years before. Both songs help counter the legacies of slavery and colonization that have distorted the beauty of Blackness. Both songs also depict the struggles that exist within Black hair politics. Black women throughout the diaspora have been devalued and deemed unattractive as a result of these legacies and this psychological trauma has been passed down for generations.<sup>6</sup> Women became their hair, or lack of it. They were, and are, ridiculed and stereotyped because of it. They are often required to negotiate politicized spaces where their hair is policed not just by the public, but at times, by family, friends, and employers.

### **Socio-Historical Significance**

Hair grooming and styling were embedded in ancient African life and were sources of pride among African people. Evidence of braided styles in regions of the Sahara date back to 3000 B.C. Images of Black women in braids, locs, and twists have been found in ancient Greece and Rome from the period 200 B.C. The head of a young girl with cornrows found in Nubia was dated to 550-750 A.D. Braids, twists, and other naturals styles varied among groups such as the Zande in the Congo, the Bodi in Ethiopia, and the West African Mende, Wolof, Yoruba and Mandingo. Precursors to contemporary afros and locks were founded among the Kikuya, Masai and Himba of Kenya and Angola, the Fulani and Somali of northern Africa, and in ancient Khemet. Used as conveyors of messages, a language of sorts, specific hairstyles (or the lack thereof), various adornments, and headpieces often relayed ethnicity, marital status, age, religion, social standing, and/or geographic origin. In Nigeria, the Kuramo people were identified through a shaved head with a single patch of hair on top. Young, unmarried girls partially shaved their heads to show their unavailability among the Senegalese Wolof. A Wolof man preparing for war donned a specific braided style. Royalty among the Ijebu people of Guinea wore elaborate headpieces. Thick, full, long hair represented prosperity in family and farm to the Mende in Sierra Leone as well as the Wolof in Senegal.<sup>7</sup>

Believing that it was powerful, hair was used by medicine men for protection and to stay connected with the ancestors. The Wolof, in particular, believed that women had the ability to call on the power of the genies and spirits in hair. In Cameroon, healing potions were made stronger and protected by placing human hair on the containers holding the mixtures. Hairdressers were respected, held sacred roles within communities, and just like medicine men were not arbitrary positions<sup>8</sup>. *After all, not just anyone can play in your head.*

When trade agreements developed between Europeans and Africans in the fifteenth century, the elaborate myriad of styles displayed throughout the regions did not go unnoticed. These styles included heads with specifically shaved areas, intricate braid patterns and deliberate placement of hair stands. Europeans traders became aware of the meanings and significance of styling and adornments. When these trade agreements morphed into full-fledged Atlantic slave trades, African hair was manipulated (often cut) by these Europeans to mask African identities, ethnic affiliations, and social standing.<sup>9</sup> This was done to ensure isolation and confusion among the captives inhibiting logical alliances. Slave ship captains used what had been a source of pride for Africans as a rationale for their enslavement indicating that captives were inferior simply “by reason of colour;” that their Africanness “disfigured them with horrid Curles, lips and noses.”<sup>10</sup> This ideology, this tool of oppression, impacted the understanding of African hair from that point forward.

Racist colonization and enslavement resulted in the use of derogatory terms in describing African features overall. Grossly inaccurate assessments were derived from racist gendered observations of African culture, religion, beliefs, and lifestyles that were different from those of Europeans. Africans were frequently described as brutish, often associated with animals, particularly apes, and assertions made regarding their supposed bestial nature.<sup>11</sup> Europeans associated the presence of multiple wives with an insatiable sexual appetite in men. They mistook semi-nudity, especially the exposure black women’s breasts, for vulgarity. Their breasts were described as long and full; their bodies believed made for easy childbearing. Moreover, according to the English, their temper was ‘hot’ and they made no issue of prostituting themselves.<sup>12</sup> Building on these types of bigoted narratives noted in slave ship logs and captain’s journals, plantation owners continued to debase the physical characteristics of enslaved Africans in ways rendering them unattractive in historical memory. They were considered ugly and wild with no sense of self-worth. Their behavior was regulated to such extremes that many were not even permitted to refer to their hair as ‘hair.’ They were focused to use the term ‘wool’ instead. Pride in appearance, especially hair [wool] was also not expected.<sup>13</sup> Travelers and journalist further supported this ideology by noting that “the women, arrayed in their gay muslins, are arranging their frizzy hair, in which they take no little pride.”<sup>14</sup> However, these depictions were not accurate. African hair was not unkempt or frizzy. Although not always as elaborately designed as it was before enslavement, much pride was taken in the care and presentation of Black hair even during this period.<sup>15</sup> Although styling and grooming were drastically curtailed by the circumstances of slavery, modified practices continued with what few traditional tools and adornments survived.

Alternative devices, techniques and habits also emerged allowing the tradition of Black hair care to endure even within the challenge of enslavement. Horse cards and sheep fleecing cards replaced many of the combs used to groom hair. These cards had wooden handles with wire pick-like extensions. The use of African palm oil to soften and nourish the hair was replaced by grease and butter. Coffee and axel grease were used as dye while cornmeal and kerosene doubled as scalp cleansers. Traditional braiding and

wrapping common in many West African communities also continued. Enslaved women wrapped, braided and threaded hair using dried eel skin, twine and scrap material instead of the materials and fabrics traditionally used.<sup>16</sup>

However, continuous mental, social, and physical manipulations of the depictions and self-image of Africans both free and enslaved, and later on all freed people resulted in emotional and psychological scars that have manifested themselves in the emergence of a beauty aesthetic that borrows from European standards. This distorted beauty aesthetic was and still is, intertwined with respectability politics, politics that determined who and what was acceptable based on presentation and appearance. For Black women in particular, this included expectations surrounding Black women's hair that are still felt today.

### **Identity Politics**

Identity is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as the fact of being who or what a person or thing is; the characteristic of determining who or what a person or thing is.<sup>17</sup> It is shaped, expressed, claimed, and assigned through a combination of variables including race, ethnicity, gender, culture, and yes, hair. For Black women, hair can be as much political as a celebration of who they are. It can be a vehicle of empowerment, especially when occupying hostile spaces. Women of African descent are placed into categories of Blackness based on hair style, texture, and color, and treated accordingly.<sup>18</sup> Although there were always varying hair textures across the African continent, slavery, rape and miscegenation led to an expansion of the Black hair texture spectrum further complicating identity politics. Historically, the more 'positive,' 'accommodating,' 'desirable' adjectives were applied to those Black women who fell on the end of the spectrum where looser, straighter hair met lighter skin. The more negative, intimidating, less desirable descriptors were reserved for those Black women who fell closer to the end of the spectrum where tighter coiled hair met darker skin. Many women fell any and everywhere in-between the two ends.

The Black hair spectrum was, and still is, used as a predictor of Blackness; as an example of consciousness displaying various levels of militancy or conformity. 'Hair police' operated from within a dichotomy using Black women's hair to determine inclusion or exclusion in group alliances. When Black people are the assessors, the assumption is that the more African/Black/natural hair is reflective of a heightened level of Black consciousness. This includes a strong sense of self-love and Black pride. However, when Black women appear to exhibit straighter, lighter, more European hair styling or coloring trends, the assumption is there is a level of self-hatred. These women are often accused of trying to be more white or aligning themselves more with whites; in other words, they are thought of as being *sell-outs* or *wanna-bees*. Alternately, the opposite theory applies when White people are the assessors. More African/Black/natural hair is representative of uncultured and unsophisticated Black women; women who are too militant, too combative, too hostile. The Black women who are considered more pedigreed, more civilized and are more socially accepted are the ones who embrace less ethnic styling.<sup>19</sup>

Historically, hair was placed into two basic categories, bad hair and good hair. All Black hair fell somewhere between the two (the spectrum). Adjectives used to describe Black hair included unmanageable, uncontrollable, kinky, nappy, wild, bushy, frizzy, rough, unruly, and curly and again, these negative descriptions originated as a result of slavery and racism. Black hair had to be tamed, fixed and controlled. A bad hair day was one where hair did not act or look *right* (white). Good hair was straight and manageable. It was smooth and soft. A good hair day meant that the hair was sleek,

controlled, 'pretty.' Black women with 'good' hair were considered less Black, usually 'mixed' with something other than African. It was this otherness, this closer to whiteness, that beautified them. This polarizing of good hair vs bad hair is something that still haunts Black communities and is evidenced through a booming hair care industry that offers women a plethora of products to straighten, control, and manage hair. It is evidenced through the excessive variety of silky-smooth, Hawaiian-silky, Brazilian, wavy, and straight hair bundles available in beauty supply stores. And it is also evidenced through the exorbitant number of Dominican hair salons that specialize in blowing out all types of hair textures promising silky, flowing locks.

The stereotypical descriptions of Black hair are often intertwined with the stereotypical images of Black women that exist in popular culture. Images such as the Angry Black Woman, the Badass, the Video Vixen, and the Welfare Queen generally have specific hair styles or types associated with them. The Angry Black Woman and Badass are shown bald, with crossly cropped hair, with afros, locs, or wild hair – all of which are deemed as threatening in mainstream society. Their hair is political, even militant and so are they. For visual examples think Okoye, Nakia and the Dora Milaje from the 2018 movie *Black Panther*; think Jamaican singer Grace Jones and 1990s Hip Hop artist Rage; and, think former Black Panther Party members Angela Davis, Elaine Brown and Assata Shakur. All of these women are unapologetic about their Blackness.

The Video Vixen, who is non-confrontational and who needs to be seen as desirable is often depicted with long flowing loosely curled hair. This hair maybe natural or it might be a weave. If it is colored, it is a light, non-offensive color. The Welfare Queen, on the other hand, has a bad weave that she used her welfare check to fund. Sometimes it is even a bright bold color that makes her appear unattractive, and at the same time allows her to be ridiculed and looked down upon. These types of categorizations manifest aggressions that are directed specifically at Black women.

### **Misogynoir and Microaggressions**

Negotiating politicized environments and dominant spaces can be extremely challenging for Black women. When the dynamics of hair are introduced these public spaces become figurative and literal battlefields. Moya Bailey, faculty in the Department of Cultures, Societies, & Global Studies, and the Department of Women's, Gender, & Sexuality Studies at Northeastern University (Boston, Massachusetts, USA), coined the term misogynoir. Misogynoir is defined as way to describe the unique anti-Black racist misogyny that Black women experience.<sup>20</sup> It is misogyny where Blackness (race) and gender are the determining factors for oppression, prejudice and contempt directed specifically towards Black women. Although this term can be applied more broadly, it provides an appropriate context in examining Black female hair experiences.

Many Black women find themselves navigating public spaces where their hair is policed by the public, employers, friends, and even family. This policing can be as straightforward as questioning the legitimacy of certain hair styles or it can be more subtle taking the form of microaggressions.<sup>21</sup> An example of a hair-focused microaggression would be becoming the focus of curiosity with people invading personal space to touch one's hair. It can be a causal comment where a hairstyle is questioned as 'professional' enough. Perhaps it takes the more blatantly disrespectful form of workplace bans targeting specific hairstyles and colors when worn by Black women.

Black women, particularly in the U.S., understand the images and social comparison that comes with hair choice; that straightened or relaxed hair signifies differential treatment, social acceptance, and at times easier work experiences.<sup>22</sup> Women with straight or relaxed hair are perceived as nice and less threatening than women with their hair in what is considered more ethnic styles. Dilcia Stephens, an independent contractor and former court reporter, recalled being advised to straighten her hair by her son's school counselor. Her son attended a prestigious private high school in the Washington D.C. area and they were in the process of looking at Division One (D-1) colleges.<sup>23</sup> His white male counselor suggested that she straighten her mid-length afro when visiting colleges or meeting with representatives so that she looked less radical, non-threatening - not like an activist. Ironically, activists think she is trying to make a statement – which she is not. As she puts it “I’m just lazy. I love my natural hair and I am just too lazy for straight hair.”<sup>24</sup>

One of the things that made this interaction so troublesome was that Stephens did not have a relationship with this counselor where discussions included any topic outside of her son's academic progress. She was an active member of the school's mother's organization and respected in the school community. She always presented herself in what would be considered a respectable manner – appropriately dressed with well-coiffed ethnic hair. Yet, this young white man who appeared to be in his mid-thirties, felt he could, in 2017, suggest an alternate hair style to a fifty-two-year-old Black woman. Although she did not ask him, Stephens doubted he had similar conversations with white parents. She does know that he did not make hair or appearance comments to the other Black mothers of seniors with relaxed, straightened or pressed hair.

Sometimes it is the more familiar networks that do the policing and have the more passive/aggressive commentary. One of Stephens' friends stated that her hair took on a new religion when she first cut her relaxed hair. Natalie Cosby, an educator and yoga instructor has gotten everything from sexy to lesbian since she has shaved her afro into a caesar and dyed it blonde.<sup>25</sup> Anthea Jefferies, a senior level administrator in higher education had slightly different experiences with her family. When she recently cut her relaxed hair into a short natural afro her family became concerned. They thought she that she must have been upset or going through something because she had such nice hair and to look at what she just did.<sup>26</sup>

Diahann Billings-Burford's hair drama experiences were more work specific. Billings-Burford, a senior level corporate lawyer, had locs for many years and recently cut them. People within her circle were concerned with her wearing braids to work and interviewing with her natural hair questioning the ramifications of having natural or braided hair. The strange thing here was that Billings-Burford's locs were also natural. This type of thinking was in line with a family member who suggested I wear a wig for a job interview to cover my locs while scrunching her lips together.

Yet as frustrating as familiar commentary can be, some of the most flagrant cases of misogynoir and microaggressions are found in the behaviors that attempt to police Black women's hair choices in the workplace. These practices aim to restrain Black women's personal and cultural identities and freedoms. Stephens did not think she was being treated any differently from others in one corporate environment. Everyone was bit reserved and a little standoffish but she attributed that to the nature of corporate industry as it had been consistent. That changed the day she came to work with her hair blown out straight. Her interactions switched from indifferent to patronizing. She was even told not to worry her

pretty little head. Jefferies has had white people at work want to touch her hair – something she does not allow. She is very mindful of the sacredness of hair and personal space. As a result of her hair style and her refusal to allow people to touch her hair, she has been described as ‘angry.’ To counter this, she combed her afro bigger as a way to own her power in a hostile environment. This gave her a liberated feeling, a sense of pride and confidence that is critical for maneuvering in spaces of misogynoir and microaggressions.

There are times, however, when self-confidence and empowerment are not enough; when misogynoir creates challenges for Black women’s employment through discriminatory practices that target specific hairstyles. Some employers have instituted arbitrary regulations prohibiting braids, twists, locs, and even blonde hair. These bans clearly place constraints on freedom and autonomy in ways unique to Black women in attempts to render them invisible. Yet Black women have not been silenced and workplace battles have, at times, resulted in legal actions. Although, not always successful, these court cases demonstrate how Black women’s hair style and/or color choice have been the vehicles for their marginalization as well as their liberation. They also demonstrate the lengths that people in positions of power such as managers, supervisors, and directors will go in their attempts to ‘check’ Black womanhood.

One of the earliest known cases occurred in 1981. Renee Rogers, who wore her hair cornrowed, sued American Airlines as a result of their policy that banned all-braided hairstyles. This was followed by slew of cases including *Mitchell vs Marriot Hotel* and *Santee v. Windsor Court Hotel*. Mitchell was threatened with termination if she did not change her cornrowed hair. She was issued three warning before forced on a one-month leave intended to allow her time to ‘fix’ her hair or purchase a wig. Santee applied for a housekeeping position with the Windsor Court Hotel group. She was asked if she would change her then blonde hair color. When she refused she was not offered employment. Patricia Pitts filed suit against her former employer Wild Adventures in 2008. Pitts worked for the company for about two years prior to being chastised for her hairstyle. She came to work one day with her hair braided. Her supervisor did not approve of the style and recommended that she get a ‘pretty style.’<sup>27</sup> Pitts restyled her hair in an effort to accommodate her supervisor, this time donning two-strand twists. Her supervisor was not satisfied, claiming that the twists looked too much like locs.<sup>28</sup>

Although *Bryant vs BEGIN Manage Program* was also about hair color choice, there were different undertones. In this instance, the aggression and harassment that Bryant endured as a Black woman came from another Black woman. She was called a *wannabee* because her blonde hair and wardrobe choice were not Afrocentric enough for her supervisor. Bryant felt she was being targeted because she was not conforming to idea of being ‘Black enough.’ In *Burchette vs Abercrombie & Fitch*, Burchette, an employee in the company’s Fifth Avenue store (located in an upscale shopping district in New York City), was told to remove her blond highlights or be terminated. The United Parcel Service (UPS) and Federal Express also found themselves in court over braided and loced [dreadlock] hairstyles. Even more recently [2016] Chastity Jones filed a claim with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) against Catastrophe Management Solutions after being offered employment only to later have the offer rescinded by a personnel manager who did not like her loced hair. The EEOC utilized the legal system to its full extent ending with the United States (U.S.) Circuit Court of Appeals which ruled that banning locs[dreadlocks] during a hiring process is legal. Jones, the original complainant, and the National Association of Colored People (NAACP) filed a request with U.S. Supreme Court to review the

case, a request that the Court has recently refused [May 2018]. These rulings and the refusal of the Supreme Court to hear the case have opened the door for more school and work place dress code policies that prohibit hairstyles and hair colors normally attributed to specific racial and ethnic groups. In essence, misogynoir is legalized.<sup>29</sup>

There is, however, something that makes the legal banning of blackness even more shameful; something that reinforces the marginalization of Black women, in particular. That is the appropriation, acceptance, and even celebration of these traditional black hairstyles when worn by non-Black women. When white women don black hairstyles they are described as trendy, edgy, and beautiful. These are the same hairstyles that are deemed inappropriate, ghetto, unclean; that cost black women jobs; and, the same styles that subject them to ridicule and censorship. White women have not only been celebrated when they have worn black styles but some have been given credit for them. In 1979, white actress Bo Derek, appeared in the film *10* with cornrows and beads. She also sported the hairstyle after the release of the movie. Mainstream culture dubbed the cornrows (or Fulani braids) ‘Bo Braids,’ a term that is still heard today. When Kim Kardashian mimicked the style in 2018, she credited Derrick by also referring to her style as ‘Bo Braids’ – even in the midst of controversy. A 2014 *Los Angeles Times* article credit Derek for setting a standard for cornrows; a style with roots in ancient Africa and the very style banned for Black women in the cases previously discussed. This is just another example of cultural appropriation; another attempt to legitimize black cultural trends through white filters. This becomes even more outrageous particularly since these styles were designed for the thick, tight coil and curl patterns of African hair.

White former *Fashion Police* host, Giuliana Rancic, implied that Black actress Zendaya’s faux locs were dirty and smelled like patchouli oil or weed when the young actress walked the red carpet at the Oscars in 2015. The style was edgy, raw, even beautiful when white model Kylie Jenner copied the look for the May 2015 issue of *Teen Vogue*. Another issue of *Teen Vogue’s* cover featured a story on Senegalese twists featuring mostly white models the same year while white fashion designer Marc Jacobs used bantu knots and locs in various runway shows.<sup>30</sup> The website *Naturally Curly*, run by two white women, has women of color contributors and a large ethnic following. The site has posted articles and links to youtube videos that demonstrate how to do what they call ‘Dutch’ or ‘inverted French’ braids – more commonly known as cornrows in Black communities. More local examples can be found at any international arrivals airport terminal where white women and girls highlight their return from Caribbean vacations with cornrowed hair/beads. Whatever way the appropriation and celebration occur, the marginalization of Black women ensues; and it is real; and it is frustrating.

## **Conclusion**

Black women receive more intense public and private scrutiny over their hair style or color choices than any other group. And although this scrutiny can divide Black women, it has also united them in the fight against misogynoir. Black hair is tied to a personal and collective identity; it tells stories and relays histories; it is a source of pride. Although there is no uniform texture, style or color, Black hair is representative of the strength and survival of African people. At the core Black hair still denotes an undeniable power that is seen as intimidating, yet regal. Black women knowing and owning their hair is empowering and sacred. And we must fight to preserve that sacredness, even in the face of legal negation and cultural appropriation. As authors Ayana Byrd and Lori Tharps explain, hair’s social, aesthetic, and spiritual significance has been intrinsic to...sense of self for thousands of years.<sup>31</sup>



## Epilogue

I said at the beginning of this piece that I was limited in the ways I could wear my hair as a child. I had two or three braids –no beads or extra adornments except for a barrette (bubble) at the root and another on the end to hold the braids in place. I envied my friends’ cornrowed styles so much that I learned to braid while still in elementary school. Yet, still I was only allowed two braids so I wore two cornrows, and then lied about doing them fresh everyday *-that comb to scalp thing*. When I was fourteen, I spent the day box braiding my entire head and adorning the ends with beads and tinfoil as was the style at the time, only to have my mother come home and make me take them all out. I think my mother was limited in what she could do with my hair since our hair was (is) so drastically different; she had no idea how to handle the unrestrictive freedom hair that adorned my head. Even now she remarks at how much better I am with hair than she is and she will recruit me to do hers when she does not make her bi-weekly salon appointment. I on the other hand, hit the salon maybe once or twice a year when acknowledge that my ends need professional trimming.

As an adult, I had my hair loced for about ten years and she would routinely threaten to cut my hair if I fell asleep around her. Although she would not have actually done so, her threats were rooted in perceptions of loced hair and the fear she held about the acceptance and employability of her daughter. This was even more evident when she suggested I wear a wig for a teaching interview that I had some years later at a college in the southern United States. She was concerned how I would be received and more importantly judged. This, as well as the reluctance to allow me to wear the hairstyles I so longed for as a child were wrapped in respectability politics. My multi-generational African American mother with the straight hair believed that you had to run that comb from the scalp every day or your hair was not ‘done.’ If you had multiple braids or cornrows you were not able to ‘do’ your hair and respectable people ‘did’ their hair every day.

Over the years I have experienced my share of hair-focused microaggressions ranging from questions and statements such as: Why would you do THAT to your hair?; Will it stay like that?; Do you think your locs make you look more Black?; I know you think it looks more professional this way but it looks better the other way; Having a bad hair day?; Did you do your hair?; Boy your hair is wild today; and, Can you calm it down some? I, the only Black woman holding a senior level administrative position, was pressured by an employer to participate in the then popular ice-bucket challenge at work with male colleagues. This was the challenge where a bucket of ice water was poured over the participants’ heads. I have been told that I was more militant because I had to prove how Black I was like the many other ‘angry high yellas’ and that this contributed to my hair style selections. At different periods in my hair history, I have resorted to cutting my hair short to hide from this hair politics that take a toll on everyone regardless of texture. But I am working through my issues. Today, I do not own a comb. Using one sends me back to the sounds of breaking stands from my Mari-ooch days. Instead, my freedom hair is free. It may be braided one day and twisted a few weeks later. Perhaps it is adorned with shells or jewelry. I am no longer ashamed or feel guilty when it grows beautifully big and wild. Now when I cut it, it is because I want to, not because I am running from public scrutiny. There are days when my hair receives more love and attention than others, and days when it falls into a better groove than it did the day before. Whatever the temperate of the moment, I take it in stride. I remind myself that there is power in looking the way I

want and I own that. I also remind myself of the personal and cultural significance of my hair and that there are never, ever, any bad hair days.

*'I have good hair because I have African in my family'*

*-Pinterest, 1202 Best Black Hair Care & Beaut*

## ***Endnotes***

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\*Black is used interchangeable with African to represent all people of African descent throughout the diaspora as well as to refer to African hair. If further distinction is required, it will be made within the text.

<sup>1</sup> The comb-test for hair was what the paper bag test was for complexion. Both methods were part of the intra-racial struggle of colorism used to divide Black people based on color, hair texture, and physical features. The purpose was to test the resistance a fine-tooth comb met as it was run through the hair from root to end.

<sup>2</sup> The term 'dreadlock' is not used because of the implication of the hair being considered 'dreadful'. The term 'locs' is used when referring to this style instead. Freedom hair is hair that is just that – free. It is free to do what it wants. Freedom hair should not be confused with unkempt or unclean hair.

<sup>3</sup> India Arie, *I am Not My Hair*, released 2005. Motown.

<sup>4</sup> Solange Knowles, *Don't Touch My Hair*, released 2016. Saint-Columbia.

<sup>5</sup> Knowles.

<sup>6</sup> Ayana D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharps, *Hair Story: Untangling The Roots of Black Hair in America*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001, 2014), 14, 129; Zimitri Erasmus, "'Oe! My Hare Gaan Huistoe': Hairstyling as Black Cultural Practice," *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, No. 32, Race, Identity and Change (1997): 12-13.

<sup>7</sup> Byrd and Tharps, *Hair Story*, 2-4.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 4-5.

<sup>9</sup> Shane White and Graham White, "Slave Hair and African American Culture in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (Feb. 1995):51,59 68; Halima Taha, "Under Cover." In *tenderheaded: A Comb-Bending Collection of Hair Stories*, edited by Juliette Harris and Pamela Johnson, (New York: Washington Square Press, 2001): 156-160; Regina Kimbell and Mary Huelsbeck, "A Black Camera Interview: Nappy or Straight: Must We Choose? Regina Kimbell on Black Hair-Itage, *Black Camera*, Vol.22/23, Vol. 22, No.2 – Vol. 23, No. 1 (Spring 2008): 57; Byrd and Tharps, *Hair Story*, 9-10.

<sup>10</sup> Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Towards the Negro, 1550-1812* (New York: Penguin Books, 1969), 8.

<sup>11</sup> Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W.W. Norton &Company, 1985), 29; Jordan, *White Over Black*, 35-40.

<sup>12</sup> White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, 29; Jordan, *White Over Black*, 35-40.

<sup>13</sup> White and White, *Slave Hair*, 58; Byrd and Tharps, *Hair Story*, 13.

<sup>14</sup> White and White, *Slave Hair*, 45.

<sup>15</sup> White and White, *Slave Hair*, 46,51,58,63,65,68-70; Byrd and Tharps, *Hair Story*, 13-14.

<sup>16</sup> White and White, *Slave Hair*, 56, 64; Byrd and Tharps, *Hair Story*, 15-17.

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- <sup>17</sup> <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/identity> Accessed ----
- <sup>18</sup> Althea Price, *The Politics of Black Women's Hair*. Toronto Canada: Insomniac Press, 2009, 14; White and White, 56.
- <sup>19</sup> Ingrid Banks, *Hair Matters: Beauty, Power, and Black Women's Consciousness*. (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 28-31; Price, *The Politics*, 15; Erasmus, Oe! My Hare Gaan Huistoe', 12-13; Kimbell, *A Black Camera*, 57; Byrd and Tharp, *Hair Story*, 178.
- <sup>20</sup> Moya Bailey, <https://www.moyabailey.com> Accessed 08/07/2018.
- <sup>21</sup> Microaggressions are common slights, snubs, or insults that communicate hostile, derogatory and/or negative messages to targeted a person or group based solely on their belonging to an identified marginalized group. They can be verbal, nonverbal, environmental, intentional and/or unintentional. A common example of a microaggression is telling a full-figured woman that she has a pretty face or being surprised that a Black woman sounds intelligent or well-spoken.
- <sup>22</sup> Banks, *Hair Matter*, 38-39; Kimball, *A Black Camera*, 12; Byrd and Tharps, *Hair Story*, 27-30.
- <sup>23</sup> Division One is a sports designation applied to colleges by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) in the United States. Level One schools are usually the biggest schools, have the largest athletic departments, a minimum of 14 sports teams, and first-rate facilities. They are the most sought after placements.
- <sup>24</sup> Interview Dilcia Stephens by author, March 28, 2018.
- <sup>25</sup> A caesar is traditionally a men's cut where the hair is cut very low to the head, sometimes with a little texture, design, or parts. Cosby sometimes adds color to hers.; Interview with Natalie Cosby conducted by author, April 2, 2018.
- <sup>26</sup> Interview Anthea Jefferies conducted by author, April 2, 2018.
- <sup>27</sup> Wendy Greene, "Black Women Can't Have Blonde Hair...in the Workplace" *The Journal of Gender, Race, and Justice*, Vol. 14, No.2 (2011): 415.
- <sup>28</sup> *Rogers v. American Airlines*, 527 F. Supp. 229 (SDNY, 1981); *Mitchell v. J.W. Marriott Hotel*; *Santee v. Windsor Court Hotel, L.P.* No. 99-3891, 2000 WL 1610775; *Pitts v. Wild Adventures, Inc.*, No. 7:06-cv-62.
- <sup>29</sup> *Bryant v. BEGIN Manage Program*, 281 F. Supp 2d 561 (E.D. N.Y. 2003); *Burchette v. Abercrombie & Fitch Stores, Inc.* No. 08 Civ.8786, 2009 WL 856682; *Equal Employment Opportunity Commission v. Catastrophe Management Solutions*, No. 14-13482 (11<sup>th</sup> Circuit 2017); Noel Gutierrez-Morfin, *U.S. Court Rules Dreadlock Ban During Hiring Process Is Legal* September 21, 2016, Accessed April 16, 2018, [www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/u-s-court-rules-dreadlock-ban-hiring-process-legal-n652211](http://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/u-s-court-rules-dreadlock-ban-hiring-process-legal-n652211)
- <sup>30</sup> Taryn Finley, *8 Times Black Hairstyles Have Been Culturally Appropriated*, *The Huffington Post*, July 17, 2015, Accessed April 12, 2018, [www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/9-times-white-people-have-appropriated-black-hairstyles-since-2014\\_us\\_55a81211e4b0896514d0c3ca](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/9-times-white-people-have-appropriated-black-hairstyles-since-2014_us_55a81211e4b0896514d0c3ca)
- <sup>31</sup> Byrd and Tharps, *Hair Story*, 7.