

Briyanna Moore

Professor Amanda

WRIT 1120H

02 December 2020

The Significance of Black Hair

Kinky, coily, and curly are adjectives that describe my hair. Its texture causes me to spend tedious hours in the shower, in desperate attempts to detangle my hair, and to experience a repetitive cycle of disappointment when I realize that my coarse hair won't mold into the smooth, slicked-back puff I imagined in my head. Several members of the black community also face the same love-hate relationship with their hair follicles, yet the various styles that we can force our hair to cooperate with remain of great importance to our community. As a result, the number of black people wearing natural hairstyles with pride continues to steadily increase. Unfortunately, this acceptance of black hair has also led to black hairstyles being used as an "urban" aesthetic in American and other international societies, resulting to non-black people wearing traditional black hairstyles and further blurring the line between cultural appreciation and cultural appropriation. Such events have led black folx to express frustration, confusion, and a variety of mixed emotions. In order to understand the strong feelings of protection over hairstyles that come from the black community, we must look at the intentionality, history, and political meanings behind certain hairstyles. Therefore, in order to successfully understand the significance of hair to our black friends and family, and why they should stay exclusive to the black community, let's go back in time, and view the history of black hair.

The evolution of African hairstyles to the various ways African Americans wear their hair today has a rich history that is filled with oppression. In fact, one major historical event that contributed to the developing of black hairstyles was the slave trade. As stated in the article, “GOOD HAIR: Learning about your Roots; A lesson in Black hair history” published in Southern University’s news journal *Southern Digest*, “African women would braid rice or seeds into their hair as they traveled...on their way to enslavement, or even in their kids' hair...so they could have food to eat” (“GOOD HAIR” para 6). After this, braids evolved to serve “as maps for those escaping to freedom and a way for slaves to communicate without their masters knowing”. This quote alone describes how braids were not just used to style black hair, but to aid in survival through slavery. In contrast, as Africans became more enslaved, they were forced “to assimilate to European culture, causing their grooming traditions to disappear”(para 2). This began the forever long battle of the suppression of black hair and for “the texture of [black] hair (to be) compared to ‘wool’” (para 2). The assimilation of grooming black hair to meet European beauty standards began with extreme actions made by slaves such as “using bacon grease, butter, and kerosene as a means of conditioning, cleaning, and managing their hair on a day to day basis” (para 2). This eventually led to slaves being sold if they portrayed a certain aesthetic that weren’t of their traditional heritage. Slaves who had straight hair were deemed more valuable than those who did not because they had “good hair”, a term that refers to the prestige that comes with having looser textured hair, as “black women who had their hair styled like white women were looked upon as more attractive than those who did not” (para 3).

Nonetheless, the forced oppression and discrimination of natural black hairstyles continued after the emancipation of slaves. As a result, the now transitioning African-Americans developed more techniques to achieve the European beauty goal. As visually depicted and

described in Madison Horne's article "A Visual History of Iconic Black Hairstyles", Madam C.J. Walker became the first female self-made millionaire in 1905 after developing hair care products that focused on restoring and making black hair fit the beauty standards of the time. Walker also developed the "Walker Method," a straightening hair styling method for black women that incorporated a heated comb with pomade. In more recent years, wigs and other chemical treatments now achieve the smooth, straight hair that the Walker Method sought after in the early 1900s. Furthermore, the history, intentionality, and suppression of black hair is valuable knowledge to understand because when the discussion of appropriation of black hair is brought up, non-black people might rebuttal, "Black people straighten their hair. Why isn't that cultural appropriation?". It is important for people who use this question as a point of argument to realize that cultural appropriation is a choice. As for straightening hair, that was *not* a valid choice for people of the black community. To be considered worthy, beautiful, and accepted as a member of society, black people had to assimilate to white culture. After all, "European textured hair was 'good' and African textured hair was 'bad,' foreign and unprofessional" (Horne "A Visual History").

Our next stop on this hair care timeline is the '60's and '70's- the era of black America's first natural hair movement. According to Chinwe's article "Natural Hair Movement in the '60s and '70s; How It Began and Why It Ended", published on natural hair company BGLH Marketplace's website, this movement correlated with the Black Power movement that was also on the rise during the mid '60's. This is an essential time period and movement for black hair. As Chinwe quotes from *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America*, written by African American writers and editors Lori L. Tharps and Ayana D. Byrd, "'Negroes and colored folk were becoming black people' that have been systematically oppressed in all areas of life;

and for some black people, wearing their hair in its natural state became a ‘way of showing their visible connection to their African ancestors and Blacks throughout the diaspora’”(Chinwe “Natural Hair Movement in the ‘60s and ‘70s”). Thus, the natural hair movement served as a way for black people to reclaim their heritage and their (hair) roots that they were forced to neglect. It told White America that Black America could no longer be forced to assimilate to any culture but their own.

Needless to say, the natural hair movement spread like wildfire throughout the U.S, and transferred from only members of the Black Panther Party wearing their natural locs to regular day people also embracing the styles they were once forced to suppress. However, racist America during this era was quick to accuse both movements of being a threat to American society, and began labelling those with natural hair as menaces to society. Such a term was applied to political activist and philanthropist Angela Davis, who was well known in the ‘60’s and ‘70’s for her contributions to the Civil Rights era, the black branch of the Communist political party- and her big, puffy afro. Davis recounts in her personal article, “Afro Images: Politics, Fashion, and Nostalgia”, that decades after the ‘60’s and ‘70’s, people remember her solely for her infamous hairstyle. She also states that while current fashion magazines regard her to be one of the “fifty most influential fashion (read: hairstyle) trendsetters over the last century” (Davis 37), the same images and hairstyle that people idolize her for “played a major role in both the mobilization of the public opinion against [her] *and* the development of the campaign” that the U.S government had set against her due to her ties with the Communist party (39).

Nevertheless, Angela Davis’ story is important to consider while discussing the history of black hair because she articulates a clear difference between modern media’s knowledge of the history engulfed in black hair versus the real events that happened to not only her, but many

others during this time period. To Angela Davis, wearing her hair naturally meant her being portrayed as a “monstrous communist (that is, Anti-American), whose unruly hairdo symbolized Black militancy (that is, antiwhiteness)”, to be deemed by the FBI as one of the top ten most wanted criminals, and to be told “go back to Russia” and “go back to Africa” within the same sentence. Such backlash forced her to ditch her infamous afro, and made her conform to the European beauty standards she fought to neglect. Davis had to wear “straight black hair, long fake eyelashes, and eyeshadow, liner, and blush”, to disguise herself from government officials (39-41). Furthermore, Davis never thought that “the same ‘revolutionary’ image [she] then sought to camouflage with glamour would be turned, a generation later, into glamour and nostalgia” (41). Davis’ point of this quote is to share how contrary to her actual experience while wearing the afro hairstyle, the public viewed her to be “charismatic and raucous revolutionary ready to lead the masses into a battle” (39). On top of this, magazines 24 years after these times contextualize her photos to fit a fashion photo spread aesthetic, leading to younger generations of Americans also neglecting the political statement and history that lies within said photos and hairstyle.

Following the natural hair movement, and Angela Davis becoming an unintentional fashion icon, black hairstyles continued to be embraced and worn more frequently by members of the black community, causing more people to be intrigued with the aesthetic of black hair. Frustratingly for the members of the black community, this has led to non-black people starting to wear the same hairstyles that black people *still* aren’t accepted for wearing as a fashion statement. This is a current trend not only inhabited by America, but by other international communities such as the likes of South Korea. The U.S and South Korea have had ties with each other since the Korean War in 1950. This developed into the two countries establishing a

political and economical relationship, which gave Koreans an access to American culture in later decades. Thus, as the hip-hop and rap scene began to spread throughout the U.S. and gained popularity, it also began to trickle into Korea very heavily in the late '80's and early '90's. This eventually led to many of Korea's youth at this time to grow a fascination and interest in hip-hop and rap so much so that, as credited by Natasha Mulenga in the article "Why K-Pop Stars Must Keep Speaking Up About Supporting Black Lives Matter", Korea's first K-Pop idol Seo Taiji preformed with two other members in the group Seo Taiji and Boys. This group became the first musicians in Korea to incorporate hip-hop, rap, and dance into Korean music. As a result, Seo Taiji and Boys revolutionized Korea's music industry and served as the foundation for later Korean musicians to be able to adapt to western music and fashion styles.

Nonetheless, current K-Pop groups and trends still use black culture as a source of inspiration, resulting in the reach of K-Pop to expand internationally. However, as Korea and K-Pop has now become a spot of interest for American teens, many K-Pop fans have been rubbed the wrong way with a multitude of idol group's "appreciation" and valuing of black culture. As noted by Mulenga, "Korean artists like to wear Black hairstyles such as cornrows and dreadlocks and have 'textured' their hair to fit their 'hip-hop concepts.'" (Mulenga "Why K-Pop Stars Must Keep Speaking Up"). Many black fans have also expressed their discomfort with this aspect of K-Pop. This has led to black fans calling out "Korean artists who have engaged in acts that are hurtful and harmful to black people, such as performing in blackface, saying the 'n-word' and appropriating cultural hairstyles" (Mulenga). However, some idols claim in defense to such backlash to not have adequate knowledge on the history behind the hairstyle that they were caught wearing; and claim to be appreciating black culture instead of appropriating it. This applies to Jackson Wang, a member of top K-Pop group GOT7. In June 2017, he received an

enormous amount of backlash in response to a Chinese Pepsi ad he modeled in while wearing dreadlocks. Wang did not take this backlash silently, and even responded to the backlash within the comment sections of his Instagram post of the ad. As recorded by Paul Resnikoff in the article “Koreans Can't Wear Dreadlocks? EXO's Kai Accused of 'Cultural Appropriation’”, Wang wrote, “I don't think I'm the only one doing this and if people are gonna point fingers at this, so be it... haters gon hate. I have all my respect and love for all RACE. But if you think this whole thing is disrespecting or [mocking] a race, I'm really sorry but you are on the wrong page. I made this decision because I was too in love with the culture. No matter if it's music wise, people, background or anything, and I truly respect it with my heart. It's a complete misunderstanding.”(Resnikoff).

Wang's statement shows the true, possibly unintentional ignorance that many Korean idols have regarding black hairstyles and black culture; as well as how even on an international level, black culture is viewed as an aesthetic that portrays the good sides of what it means to be black. It is acceptably frustrating for black fans of such artists to see such a response and ignorance towards black culture because they can comprehend the history and controversy behind black hairstyles. Black fans are more aware that in the 1980s, while South Koreans were being exposed to good aspects of black culture, the “Hyatt hotel chain terminated black female employees who wore cornrows”(Horne); in the 1990s, the same era that gave birth to westernized fashion and music in Korea, “FedEx couriers were fired if they had dreadlocks”; and most importantly, how even currently in America, wearing hairstyles such as dreads or cornrows practically puts a target on your back, and is deemed as “a dress code violation or a distraction” in places of business; and have led to many black teens being stereotyped and killed in acts of police brutality (Horne).

Furthermore, the utmost reason why such hairstyles should stay in the black community is explained in Chinwe's article with the following quote said by Kathleen Cleaver, an activist and affiliate with the Black Panther party: "For so many, many years we were told only white people were beautiful. Only straight hair, light eyes, light skin was beautiful, and so black women would try everything they could to straighten their hair and lighten their skin to look as much like white women ... But this has changed... and white people are aware of it too because [they] now want natural wigs ... They want wigs like this [points to her natural hair]"(Chinwe). As Cleaver voices in this quote, black people have been forced to assimilate to European culture and beauty standards since the beginning of slavery. It has been repetitively beaten into the black community's head that all aspects of their hair is unacceptable and intolerable. Thus, it took a lot of years of strife and struggle for myself and my community to be in the place where we can celebrate and own the events that make up the history of our hair, and be able to manipulate our hair into natural hairstyles with confidence. That being said, this is why it is a slap in the face to all members of the black community when non-black people wear our ethnic hairstyles only for the "hip-hop" or "urban-chic" aesthetic. Using black hairstyles for this purpose completely neglects the other reasons and history behind our hair; and the ongoing struggle black people face for embracing this part of our culture. Nevertheless, once the complete history, intentionality, political reasoning, and struggles that black people face due to their hair is realized by people outside of the black community, then everyone can enjoy the beauty of black hair equally. Indeed, to us, and to our ancestors, it's not just hair. It's history, the willingness to fight, artistry, and so much more.

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