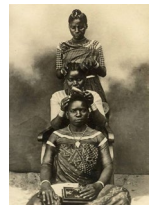


Black History Month 2024

A Short History of Hair Discrimination

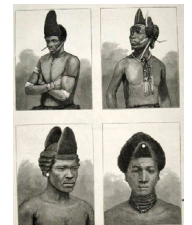
Traditional Status

Afro-textured hair and hairstyles have always been an important symbol of wealth, identity, family, heritage, age, tribe, religion, and social rank, as well as a visual language. Hairstyling was a meaningful social activity, where time spent on intricate styles and hair care was highly valued. It was an intimate activity, where bonds were built, and knowledge was shared within communities. Connection to these traditions was ruptured by the advent of the transatlantic slave trade and colonialism.



Slavery & Colonialism

Early discrimination of Black hair began in the fifteenth century. European colonists classified Afro-textured hair as closer to fur or wool than human hair, using Black hair as validation for dehumanization, enslavement, and exploitation. Slave traders regularly shaved the heads of captives, and the term dreadlocks originally derives from slave traders; descriptions of Afro-textured hair as “dreadful” after it had naturally formed into locs during the Middle Passage.



Colorism & Texturism

During slavery there was a strict caste system that separated Black slaves by skin tone and hair texture. Lighter-skinned slaves with less kinky hair, received better treatment. This hierarchy of hair types was based on European standards of beauty and fed into the creation of social structures based on skin tone (known as colorism) and hair texture (known as texturism) that continue to impact the lives of Black people.

Attitudes Post-Slavery

Derogatory attitudes towards natural Black hair continued after the abolition of slavery. Global definitions of beauty have long been determined by whiteness, with Western European features associated with “civility” and “respectability”. As a result, Black people began to use hot combs and harsh chemicals to straighten or “tame” hair in ways that mimicked European textures. Straighter hair and looser curls became synonymous with “good hair” and were understood to be a requirement for accessing social and career opportunities, perpetuating the idea that natural texture hair was unkempt, unacceptable, and unprofessional.



Racialized Barriers

Even after the abolishment of slavery, barriers to advancement like "The Comb Test" were used in the US to enforce the idea that Afro-textured hair was not socially acceptable. An organization would hang a fine-tooth comb outside its door, indicating that if a visitor's hair could not be easily combed, they were not welcome to enter. During Apartheid, Black South Africans were forced to participate in "The Pencil Test" to see if they could hold a pencil in their hair while they shook their head. If the pencil dropped to the floor, the person would be classified as white. If the pencil remained in their hair, they were classified as Black, subjected to segregation, and forbidden from accessing the same privileges. While these tests faded out of use, hair discrimination did not.



Black Power & Rastafarianism

In the 1960s, the Black Power movement declared that "Black is beautiful" and that embracing Blackness was a radical act of self-love. During the Civil Rights Movement, the Afro became a symbol of pride and solidarity within Black diasporic communities. For some, the way hair was worn became a political statement - a purposeful act of defiance against the beauty standards that had degraded Black hair for hundreds of years. Although Rastafarianism originally developed in Jamaica in the 1930s, the faith also became popular around the world at this time. Rastafarians wear their hair in dreadlocks for Biblical and spiritual reasons, and the success of reggae music introduced locks to the mainstream.

Natural Hair Movement

The early 2000s saw the growth of the Natural Hair Movement, focused on encouraging Black people to celebrate the natural characteristics of our kinky, curly, hair texture. This came with growing evidence that hair relaxers can cause serious and permanent damage. The growth of the internet, and more recently social media, allowed the natural hair community to connect across the world and share encouragement, advice, product reviews, hairstyle tutorials and much more. The movement saw the beginning of reclaiming the word "nappy" in the United States, which had previously been intimately tied to slavery as Black hair was likened to the tuft of a cotton plant called a "nap". The foundational principle of the Natural Hair Movement is that the hair curling from our heads is innately beautiful and should be free to exist that way without policing or prejudice. So, too, should we be free to choose any other hairstyle without shame or judgement.

