

Protecting the Crown

I stood there frozen as the men made their way through the fields. Buyers, looking at the merchandise. One set his eyes on me and all sound stopped. All I could hear was the blood rushing in my ears like the ocean in a storm as my clothes were stripped off right there in front of everyone. One circled me, poking at my stomach, grabbing for my breasts, and reaching towards a place that should have been privately mine. I jumped away from the bold hand and he chuckled, saying something I still couldn't hear over the ocean in my ears and the drumming in my chest. My eyes zoomed in on a hand reaching towards my hair and I couldn't take it anymore. My mouth started moving before I could stop it. "Please don't touch me," I told the owner of the pale hand that was an inch from my face. Only now the hand was smaller, thinner, and manicured. Blinking, I realized that I wasn't on a field in the antebellum south. I was in a coffee shop in 21st century America, and staring directly at an indignant looking white woman who had been on the verge of petting my afro.

The entire ordeal that had played out in my mind came from an article I'd read called "This Slavery Business is a Horrible Thing" about the humiliating inspections and forced breeding of Black bodies (Edwards 318). At some point it seems I internalized the perspective of the enslaved women who had no rights or authority over their bodies, or who was allowed access to them. "I just wanted to touch it," came an offended voice. My attention snapped back to the woman in front of me. "I understand, but I would rather you didn't." My response was a practiced one at this point, as this situation had played out several times before. Unfortunately,

her rebuttal was also nothing new. “It’s just hair, it’s not a big deal.” I stared at her as I tried to decide between walking away, educating her, or embracing the angry black woman stereotype she’s undoubtedly internalized and telling her off. It is a big deal, because there should never be a situation where anyone should have to argue their right to tell someone not to touch any part of their body. Behavior like hers reveals that there is still a mindset of colonial hierarchy in our modern society. Hair holds great significance for Black people and should not be treated as public property to be touched and policed according to the whims of people like her.

In a blatantly defiant motion her hand inched towards my hair again. I stepped closer to her abruptly and the movement stopped. I was grateful, because this happened to be a day I had time to educate the ignorant woman in front of me. I began to explain all the reasons why, for Black people, it’s not just hair. Long before slavery, for people of African descent hair was not only decorative but also dictated a person’s tribe, culture, and even religion as its place at the highest point of the body was said to provide a spiritual connection with God (Tchenga 276). I was surprised when I learned that in ancient Yoruba tribes children born with thickly coiled hair were thought to be blessed with a promise of wealth in the future, and their hair was rarely washed and never combed before their naming ceremony (Tchenga 276-77). It brought to mind my own family’s tradition of never cutting a child’s hair before the age of two years, and saving a plaited lock of hair from that first haircut as a memento. Among Black people in general, hair is not combed until the child’s head hardens. I never knew the reasons for our traditions, but it was a beautiful realization that our ways still reflect those of our ancestors. We pass down memories with our hair, even when we don’t realize it. We are not descendants of slaves, we are

descendants of people who were enslaved, and even though their names were lost, their ways were not.

The woman was annoyed with me now and asked how non-black people would even know something that obscure. I ignored the obvious eye roll in her tone. The fact that she was still listening meant that she wasn't a lost cause. A nefarious truth is that slavers who trafficked Africans knew exactly what their hair styles signified:

Slavery, a traumatic experience for Africans both physically and psychologically, contributed to the obliteration of Africans' culture and identity. Europeans had traded and communicated with Africans for a long time and thus knew the complexity and the importance of Black hair. (Tchenga 277)

There are etchings and cataloged drawings in the Library of Congress from the 17th century of various African tribal hairstyles. The images were created by a Dutch explorer and a German engraver, but their subjects were not slaves but free Africans in Benin (Varnado 7). Europeans were completely aware of the importance of hair as a sign of expression for Africans which is why slave traders made sure to shave their heads before loading them onto slave ships, removing not just a source of pride, but also an important tribal identifier (Vernado 6-8). "Hairstyles worn by community members helped identify a person's age, rank in the community, ethnic identity, marital status, and religion, among other things (Tchenga 276). For Black people living in countries where they are outnumbered and surrounded by the descendants of their oppressors, there is a running narrative that we are without heritage, without culture, without roots. Like a final bastion holding off the idea that Black people in Western countries have no identity before

slavery, our hair culture connects us to our true origins. Our braids and our coils are roots themselves, connecting Black people to the powerful, the ancient, us.

Many people outside of the Black community would tell us that we need to let go of the past, in response to this I would challenge them to go first. In December of 2018 a 16-year-old Black high school wrestler in Texas was forced to cut his hair during a match or forfeit. The regulations state that collar length hair must be covered or braided, but when the student offered to tie his hair back the referee refused to accept it, and supervised the student's trainer as she cut the boy's hair until it was at a length he was satisfied with (CNN). An article about hair discrimination and policing in England observes that, "school hair regulations are best thought of as part of a broader attempt to discipline and constrain the Black body" (Connelly and Joseph-Salisbury 224). The amount of audacity it took for that referee to bully a child into conforming to his standards is the same as the audacity required for someone to put their hands on a stranger's head and tell them they don't have the right to object. At the 2024 Paris Olympics, Simone Biles became "the most decorated gymnast in U.S. Olympics history" (Yates), and yet still faced scrutiny over the edges of her hair becoming 'nappy' over the course of the competition. It didn't matter that the coils were a testament to the athletic dominance that brought America numerous gold medals, they showed more blackness than was acceptable.

Our country is one of many that has recently elected a far right politician to lead them. Cultural discrimination is becoming acceptable and racists are becoming braver. Anyone who opposes this societal regression must be resolved to root out and destroy anything that feeds into it. As the article "If Your Hair is Relaxed, White People are Relaxed" notes,

Hair must therefore be understood in the context of structural and ideological white supremacy; that is, a socio-racial structure that venerates white European beauty and aesthetic standards, whilst denigrating features associated with the Black body, including hair... Hair operates as the most visible stigmata of blackness, second only to skin.

(Connelly and Joseph-Salisbury 223)

Black people can't change their skin, but the pressure to change their hair is ever present. I personally spent years putting harmful chemicals such as lye relaxers on my hair to permanently straighten the coily texture because I noticed the world was kinder to me when my hair wasn't natural. More people spoke to me and called me pretty, and job interviews had a higher success rate. If I had to be black in this society, adding as many white features as I could made it easier to navigate it successfully. It was only when I realized that I had developed a fear of being seen with my hair in its natural state that I decided I needed to focus on straightening my mindset instead of straightening my hair.

The practice of removing the unique characteristics of their hair to appear of a higher status was common for Blacks in antebellum America. According to the article "Heavy is the Hair," historians found through archives of slave-catching advertisements that escaped slaves would acquire wigs or brush their hair into pompadour styles that were popular with white people, in order to try to pass as free (Varnado 12). It took a lot to come to terms with the fact that I had also internalized a white supremacist belief that my natural hair was slave hair and not something to be proud of. It took a lot of self-reflection and confidence building to love my hair the way it grows out of my head. Having learned to accept such a large part of my Black features, I refuse to let others disrespect or belittle it.

Back in the coffee shop, the woman thinks she's formulated a clever comeback when she opens her mouth. "You're wearing your natural hair now though. I see a lot of Black women wearing their natural hair and they don't seem to have a hard time getting a job or being confident." I was slightly shocked and extremely happy to realize she was listening enough to offer any kind of rebuttal. I conceded her observation because she was right to a degree. For a long time it had been a running joke in the Black community that we would wear our hair straight at work until we passed the 90 day probation period, and then show up to our jobs in natural styles and shock our white managers. Thanks to the Crown Act we don't have to do that anymore. In 2022, the Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair (CROWN) Act was enacted by Congress. They declared in their findings that,

Throughout United States history, society has used (in conjunction with skin color) hair texture and hairstyle to classify individuals on the basis of race.

As a type of racial or national origin discrimination, discrimination on the basis of natural or protective hairstyles that people of African descent are commonly adorned with violates existing Federal law, including provisions of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

(Congress)

There should have never been a reason for Congress to need to intervene on behalf of Black people's right to self govern our bodies so long after slavery ended. Like me, many Black people have worked hard to be proud of our blackness in spite of being surrounded by naysayers, and the choice to wear our hair proudly should go unchallenged, as should the desire not to be physically accosted and treated as a novelty by strangers.

I looked at the woman in front of me, unsure of if I managed to get through to her or not, but heartened by the fact that she stayed to listen. I told her that the main thing I wanted her to carry away from this conversation is that black people are more than three-fifths human. The plantations are empty and the petting zoo is closed. We have every right to dictate what happens to our bodies whether others agree or not. Even if white people don't like being refused, they will have to accept it. As surely as the declarations of "my body my choice" and "no means no" deserve to be honored, so too should the Black person's demand of "don't touch my hair." It may not shine in the world's eyes, but it is our crown. We worked hard to regain it after it was taken, and we will protect it.

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