

## Speaking Out About Black Women's Hair in the Market Place

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### Abstract

All women's hair speaks to their identity as women; however, Black women's hair tends to get more media attention and on several occasions caused them to be fired. Black women have to constantly remind themselves not only about the clothes they wear to work, but also how they wear their hair. The questions become: 1) will others be offended, 2) will they take me seriously, and 3) will they look at my hair and think I am an airhead, or simply think I do not care about my hair and have no respect for hair maintenance. Black women are always having to be conscious about how the world view them and whether what others think will keep them out of the market place to provide a decent life for themselves or their family.

This article was developed to take a look at the history of Black women's hair and how it is viewed in the market place. It also discusses how to embrace Black women's hair stories. Yes, there is room in the market place for Black women and their hair. How people feel about themselves has an impact on their self-concept and mental health. Black women should be given the space in society to celebrate who they are as people and their hair.

**Keywords:** *Black Women's Hair; Market Place; Employment*

### Introduction

Speak with any Black woman and I guarantee she will have a story to tell you about her hair. Hair stories for Black women can be one of joy and glory when placed in the appropriate cultural context. A woman's hair, regardless of her race or ethnicity, is said to be her glory. Even the Bible speaks on the topic of women's hair as an illustration of her beauty. Most people think, what is the big deal when it comes to Black women and their hair. This statement is generally followed by, "it's just hair". Well not so fast, Black women's hair is more than something that covers the top of their heads. Black women's hair tells a story that is laced with a wonderful tapestry of stories. Each Black woman has her own unique personalized Black hair story journey.

### My Hair Story

I recall very vivid images of my mother spending countless heartwarming moments styling the hair of my sisters and me. I have a total of six sisters and two brothers. My mother had the pleasure of maintaining seven girls and two boys' hair daily. My mother took great pride and put lots of energy in ensuring that her children's hair was immaculate, as well as, their clothing. She wanted the world to know that we were well kept children and would not allow us to leave the house with what she often referred to as "unkempt hair". My mother makes no distinction among her children when it came to hair grooming and styling of her children's hair. The message was clear and simple "you are not leaving this house unless your hair is combed". In actuality, what was really being conveyed to us as young Black men and women is that the world will judge you by the color of your skin, but the hair on your head will signify that you are proud Black men and women.

Whenever my mother would comb my hair it was a very intimate moment for us. She would sit me between her legs which were straddled and comb my hair with great care. She would often ask me if what she was doing was hurting me because the expression on my

face was “please be gentle, do not comb my hair to rough or put the rubber bands on so tight that they might pull my hair leaving little fine white pimples around the edge of my hair”. I do recall the smells of the many hair oils my mother would apply to the scalp of my hair, i.e. Royal Crown, Blue Magic, and Afro Sheen. The time spent with my mother getting my hair done was very special because we talked about family matters and what was taking place in my life. This was also a time I got to lay my head on her thigh and for me as a young child, it brought me a great deal of comfort. For some odd reason, I felt very safe when my mother was attending to my hair, as if I did not have a care in the world. My mother's big strong hands in my head indicated that she was both my protector and provider.

On special occasions, I would get my hair pressed with a straightening comb. These special occasions were when I participated in the school play or had a special event at church where I was given the opportunity to demonstrate my oratorical skills. These events were not very often, as Easter and the school play was once a year. The message to me was this was a special occasion, therefore I could get my hair straightened. The subtler message was that there are times when it was okay to alter the texture of your hair to make it straight so you can look very nice. The process of getting my hair hot pressed was stressful at times because I felt like my mother was more like a drill sergeant. She was constantly yelling commands i.e. “hold your head still so I will not burn you”, “Hold your head straight”, “Stop all the moving around or you going to get burned”, “Hold your ears so I will not burn you” and “When you take your bath do not let your hair get wet”. I could not wait until this process was completed. Of course, I was extraordinarily impressed with how well my mother would press my hair. I would always feel very special and that my hair was exceptionally pretty when it was pressed and straightened. My mother, however, took great pride in informing her children that Black hair was most beautiful in its natural state and no matter how you manipulate it, it was going to return to its original state. As a child, I thought otherwise. I was being influenced by my peers who often got their hair pressed and permed. I thought I should always have my hair hot pressed. When I got older, I wanted a perm. My mother was very adamant that we would not get our hair permed. She did not believe in putting chemicals in your hair. She stated, “If God wanted you to have hair like that he would have given it to you and no matter how you attempt to alter your hair, it is going return to its natural state”. I must admit, I silently resented my mother for not allowing me to get my hair permed because I thought it would have been much easier to manage. I thought straightened hair was prettier. I learned early in life that you could not win an argument with my mother so there was not use in trying. The rules in my house growing up were “no talking back” and “because I said so”. This meant the conversation was final and the rules had been established.

I did not get my hair permed until I went off to college wanting desperately to experience a degree of what is referred to in the Black community as “being grown” and having a taste of liberation. The media and most everything around me, with exception of my dear mother, told me that my hair would look nicer and would be easier to manage if it was permed. About this time in my life as a young adult, I was embarking on my own personal identity as a Black woman desiring to express myself through my hair. I got my hair permed, crinkled, braided, slicked down on the sides, finger waved, weaved, curly permed and braided extensions. This was all a part of me as a young Black woman; expressing my hair self-esteem and giving the message to the world; I am Black, bold, beautiful, and I am loving all the many ways I can style my hair. Yes, the media did play a huge role in how I often expressed the styles of my hair, as well as my involvement with the military. I joined ROTC during my undergraduate studies. Being in the Army helped set boundaries and curtailed how I wore my hair. I did not have any problems with the rules, regulations, and hair policies within the Army. I was never eccentric when it came to my hair. I always admired short haircuts. Several women I secretly and publicly supported as my role models wore their hair short: Dr. Jannetta Cole, Dr. Deloris Cross, Dr. Julianne Malveaux, Representative Barbara Jordan, and Dr. Bettye Fletcher (my own personal role model). Of course, there are many others who played a role in me wearing my hair in a low-cut fade. Serving in the United States Army Reserve made this choice of hair style even more inviting because as a Black woman I always wanted to strut a hair style that represented who I was from my deepest core. A hair style that was manageable, low maintenance, and that was transferable whether I was in uniform or in the professional market place. Personally, I would say my hair style is very user friendly, but of course there might be others who do not agree with this statement. There are many things my parents instilled in me about my own identity as a Black woman in America. One is being “the best Linda you can be”. I have taken that statement to heart in all areas of my life. This is evident, particularly when it comes to my hair story and feeling a sense of liberation about my hair, and how I have chosen to keep it styled. I share this story because as I alluded

to earlier, ask any Black woman and she would have a hair story to tell you if you would take the time to listen. I say listen, because tied into her story you will find the true essence of the queen she really is. A person's representation of who they are is expressed in their own identity self-worth; even in how they style their hair.

The challenge comes when a Black woman is hired for a job and she is then asked to leave her hair story outside of the market place. Her hair is often viewed as being unprofessional and not appropriate for the work place. The real question becomes; did she get hired for her hair or skill set? Yes, I am a strong advocate for work place etiquette, but unless credence is given to the Black woman's hair story, you miss out on her true authentic hair journey. Black women are judged, ridiculed, ostracized, and made to feel as if to fit in, she must give up a part of herself by mainstreaming her hair. Should she refuse, based on idiosyncrasies of the work culture, then the workforce misses out on the brilliance Black women bring to the market place. Take a look around and you will not have to look deep into history to witness the many contributions Black women have made in America. The way Black women wore their hair has never impaired their intellectual capabilities (i.e. Mae C Jemison, Maya Angelou, Evelyn Ashford, Whoopi Goldberg, Althea Gibson, Ruby Bridges, Michele Roberts, Octavia E Butler, Tyra Banks, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison).

### History of Black Hair

Understanding the history of Black hair is extremely significant in valuing the hair story of Black people. Where did Black hair begin? Too often we like to say that Black hair started with slavery when in fact it got its origin in the continent of Africa. During the early fifteenth century, African Hair was used as a form of communication. African hair told the person's age, marital status, ethnic identity, religion, wealth, geographical origin, tribe, and their social ranking. The young women of the Wolof tribe of Senegal would shave a portion of their hair to signify to the bachelors they were single and ready to be selected for marriage. A widow woman would stop taking care of her hair as she was not meant to be beautiful to other men. The Kuramo people of Nigeria were identified by the coiffure- a shaved head with a single tuft of hair on top. Nigerian housewives, who were a product of a polygamous society, created hairstyles for purpose of taunting their husbands and the other wives. The hair style was known as the kohin-sorogun ("turn your back to the jealous rival wife"). The hair style was designed to be seen from behind. The Wolof men of ancient time wore their hair in a particularly braided hairdo, which signifies he was going off to war and prepared to die. The man would inform his wife and she would not comb her hair because in matter of hours she could become a widow. Traditionally, the leaders of the community – men and women showcased most ostentatious hair styles. Only people with royalty or the equivalent wore a hat or headpiece. The common people wore their hair bare [1]. Africans were very proud of their hair and knew without a doubt that it was beautiful. They would spend hours grooming their hair - washing, combing, and oiling to ensure it would remain healthy. They would use elaborate combs, brushes, and ornaments like cowrie shells to accent the beauty of their hair.

At first impression, based on Western world views one would think Black people do not comb or care for their hair due to the texture of their hair. Black hair has been tamed to look like that of Europeans. It was never designed for that purpose. This is not a paper to discuss what's right or wrong as to how Black people should wear their hair. But to shed some light on the challenges Black women have had and continue to face in the market place concerning their hair. It is hoped this paper will ignite many healthy discussions concerning Black women being able to wear their hair in Afrocentric/ethnic styles without being accused of not conforming to the organization grooming code, which results in them being fired from their jobs. Yes, I hear what you are saying, conform to company policy and shut up, go along, to get along. That is fine when this does not encroach on you as a person, because what you are really saying is be more European and then you can be accepted. Chis Rock [2] in the movie Good Hair stated that "white people feel more relaxed when Black people have their hair relaxed." We live in a culturally diverse society and work in a global market place. Diversity in the work place has been taught in the United States for many years. Yet, there is still a great amount of work that needs to be accomplished in the areas of diversity in the work place. I certainly do not discredit the efforts which have already taken place, but when you hear about Black women being fired or sent home because of their hair, it suggests that we still have ways to go. Black women are comfortable with the hair on their heads that has been given to them by the creator. The real question becomes, should Black women have to make other people feel comfortable by put-

ting “creamy crack” in their hair when this is something that they do not desire to do? Recently, Political commentator Bill O'Reilly made a comment about Congresswoman Maxine Water's hair. He stated that he could not hear what she was saying because she looked like the late James Brown by the head. Of course, he later apologized and stated his statement was inappropriate. This is a current example of Black women still being ridiculed about their hair.

When Africans were brought to the “New World” around 1414 as slaves, they were systematically stripped of their identity. African people were forced to embrace the White European ideology of their standard of beauty and denied their own hair history of West Africa, which is unique to the Black culture. While Europeans were trading off the cost of West Africa, the people wore their hair in very elegant hair styles- locks, plaits, and twists. When slaves were brought to Jamestown in 1619, they were forbidden to speak their native languages. They were introduced to the White man's standard of beauty which was fair skin, straight hair, and thin facial features, which were totally opposite of “Africans” who were of darker hue, curly hair, broader noses, and thicker lips. Slaves quickly learned that if they wanted to survive they had to acclimate to the European customs. There were many slaves who resisted these foreign customs by maintaining their traditional African customs like braiding their hair in African styles and using natural herbs from trees for their hair and skin care. Europeans in the 1700s started to dehumanize and ridicule slaves about their hair referring to it as “wool”. It became increasingly difficult for Africans to maintain their traditional hair styles without the proper combs and herbal treatments they used in Africa. Slaves then resulted to very cruel and usual means to care for their hair, like the use of bacon grease, butter, cornmeal, and kerosene as hair conditioner and various forms of cleaners. Women used coffee to dye their hair. Also, women would put butter, bacon fat, or goose grease and use a heated butter knife over fire as a curling iron. Sometimes, women would take a warm piece of cloth that had been over a flame and pull it across their hair to pull the curls out. The men would take axle grease that was used for the wheels of wagons to both dye and strengthen their hair. Blacks became very ingenious with concocted methods in caring for their hair [1].

The lighter skinned, straight hair slaves, commanded a higher price at the slave auction compared to the darker, more kinky-haired ones. Slaves could not help but internalize the stigma of color consciousness and hair. Those that had dark skin and kinky hair were lead to see themselves as less than worthy and unattractive. The person began to feel devalued, although this was their true identity. The cultural message being sent was, if you look like who you are, then you are not attractive and are worthless. Much of this is still taking place today in the workplace when a Black woman comes to work wearing her hair in its natural state. The underlying message is in order to be accepted and maintain your employment with this organization, you must deny who you are by wearing your hair in a European hair style.

Black and multiracial women in Louisiana around the 18<sup>th</sup> century were ordered to cover their hair in public. Bando Du buen gobierno (Edict for Good Government) was the law that was being enforced. These rules were implemented to curtail the growing influence of the free Black population and keep the social order of the day. One thing that was specifically unique about the order was that it addressed how free Black women should wear their hair. Free Black women were wearing their hair in very fancy hair styles, which attracted the attention of the White men and the White women became jealous. The free Black women were then instructed that they had to cover their hair with a scarf. This was known as the “Tignon Law”. A tignon is a hair dress. Nevertheless, the free Black women took great pride in making their hair dress immaculately beautiful. So, what had been implemented to minimize the Black woman's beauty, actually brought more attention to her extravagant beauty [3]. Black women have a history of taking what was meant to be bad and turning it for their good. Head scarves are an excellent example of how innovative and resourceful Black women are ensuring that they will go to great lengths to maintain their beauty.

Slavery was abolished during the 19<sup>th</sup> century in many parts of the world to include the United States in 1865. During this time, Whites considered Black women who styled their hair like White women well adjusted. What became known as “Good Hair” became a prerequisite for entering certain schools, churches, social groups, and business networks. The metal hot comb was invented in France around 1845 and was made available in the United States. This comb was a device which had to be heated to temporarily straighten kinky hair. Annie Malone is given credit for patenting the hot comb in 1920. She is said to be the first self-made millionaire during this time. Blacks were feeling extremely compelled to try and fit into the mainstream of society, so they manipulated their hair.

Blacks begin to abandon their African roots in many ways, but one way was by altering the texture of their hair. Blacks went to great lengths to straighten their hair. Both the men and women put hot chemical mixtures in their hair often burning their scalps in the process. This technique was carried out so they could comb their hair back and look more European and have a silkier textured style. The hair industry flourished under the hands of the entrepreneur Madame C. J. Walker during the 1900s. She sold hair growth products, shampoos, and ointments especially designed and dedicated to the Black hair care market. She made the press and curl style very popular. Madame C. J. Walker was highly criticized, because people felt as if she was encouraging Black women to look White. Madame C. J. Walker's beauty products made her the first recorded self-made millionaire. Madame C. J. Walker told Black women that to be beautiful was not simply how you had your hair arranged on your head, but was to be combined with a beautiful mind and soul [1].

- Garrett A. Morgan in 1909 invented the first hair relaxer. He discovered the idea when he was sewing in his tailoring shop and he notice that a chemical he was using straightened the fabric of wool cloth. He first sold the product to men who were interested in straightening their kinky hair. He later marketed it to women for the same purpose.
- Marcus Garvey, a Black nationalist during the 1920s, took great efforts to encourage his followers to stay true to their heritage by wearing their hair natural and reclaiming their African roots. The influences of Marcus Garvey serving in the role of a political activist gave way to Rastafari theology, which took roots in Jamaica around the 1930s. Followers of the movement were forbidden to cut their hair, yet instead, they twisted it into dreadlocks. The religion grew rapidly into the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the African-Caribbean culture. The Rastafarians apply the following three scriptures in the bible as to why they maintain their hair style - Leviticus 19:27, Leviticus 21:5, and Numbers 6:5, which basically suggests hair is neither be cut from the head nor face. Dreadlocks are the results of the Rastafarian admiration for Kikuyu soldiers of the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya who wore their hair in dreadlocks while fighting the British colonizers during the 1950s. Bob Marley, during the 1970s, increased the popularity of dreadlocks. Marcus Garvey was known for telling Blacks "do not remove the kinks from your hair but from your brain". The name dreadlocks are said to have derived from when Africans had been on slave ships for several months and was unable to properly groom their hair, it grew in locks. The Whites referred to Africans' hair as dreadful. Due to the negative connotation, the "a" has been dropped and the hair styled is called dreadlocks.
- 1930s: Blacks begin conking their hair. The actual name was congalene and conking for short. This was an innovative method used by Black men mostly to straighten their kinky hair. Conking of the hair is a painful process that is achieved by applying lye, egg, and potatoes mixed together. It is toxic and upon application, it could burn one's scalp immediately. Two Black entertainers Mr. Peg Leg Bates and Mr. Roe created the first commercialized conk by company called KKK (Knocks Kicks Crazy). The name was an inside joke, a way of diffusing something that put crazy terror into heart of Black people. Malcom X spoke about this process in his book "The Autobiography of Malcolm X". Malcom gives a graphic description of the conking process- "my head felt like it was on fire, I was gritting my teeth and at same time trying to pull the sides of the kitchen table together and my knees were trembling. Then, Malcom X stated in the end it was all worth the pain'. Many Black men wore their hair in the conk style i.e. Cab Calloway, Nat king Cole and, Little Richard. Conking was not a technique that Black women subscribed to, instead they would wear a wig or straightened their hair.
- 1954: George E. Johnson started the Johnson Product Company. The Ultra Wave Hair care culture became popular. This was a process where Black men would permanently straighten their hair in their homes. Mr. Johnson also produced a chemical straightener for the Black women hair.
- The African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) founded in 1793, in Philadelphia, was the earliest church in America established exclusively for Negroes. 1870, was a time when color increasingly divided the Black community; the lighter-skinned worshippers split off to form their own domination called the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church. Even though the churches were created to be places where the Black community could come together for healing and to worship God, instead they served as breeding grounds for painful dehumanizing and discriminating against Blacks based on the pigmentation of their skin and their hair texture. Several churches in the cities of Philadelphia and New Orleans engaged in a process known as the comb test. This was a method whereby the churches would place a fine-toothed comb on a rope near the entrance of the door. The procedure was set-up so that when a person would

enter the church, if the comb got snagged in their nappy hair, then they were denied entrance. This was another way of degrading and making Black people who had kinky hair feel sub-standard and unworthy. The saddest part is how the larger society had gotten a subgroup of people to actually turn against people within their own ethnicity.

- The term Afro-Texture hair refers to natural hair texture of certain populations in Africa; the African diaspora, Australia, and Asia. Ideally, this is when the hair has not been altered because of hot combs, flat ironing, or chemicals using perming, relaxing, or other methods of straightening. Each hair strand will grow in tiny, springy-like helix shapes. The Afro-Texture hair, in comparison to straight wavy curly hair, appears to be denser. During the post-Columbian era, Western cultural Afro-Texture hair was described by using adjectives such as: “wooly”, “kinky”, “nappy” or spiraled. More recently it has become common practice to apply numerical grading to human hair types.
- The Chart below is one of the most commonly used charts to determine hair types.

Type	Hair Texture	Hair Description
1a	Straight (Fine)	Very soft, shiny, hard to hold a curl, hair tends to be oily, hard to damage.
1b	Straight (Medium)	Has lots of body. (i.e. more volume, more full).
1c	Straight (Coarse)	Hard to curl (i.e. bone straight).
2a	Wavy (Fine)	Can accomplish various styles. Definite “S” pattern. Hair sticks close to the head.
2b	Wavy (Medium)	A bit resistant to styling. Hair tends to be frizzy.
2c	Wavy (Coarse)	Hair has thicker waves. Also, resistant to styling. Hair tends to be frizzy.
3a	Curly (Loose Curls)	Thick & full with lots of body. Definite “S” pattern. Hair tends to be frizzy. Can have a combination texture.
3b	Curly (Tight Curls)	Medium amount of curl. Can have a combined texture.
3c	Curly (Corkscrews)	Tight curls in corkscrews. The curls can be either kinky, or very tightly curled, with lots and lots of strands densely packed together.
4a	Kinky (Soft)	Tightly coiled. Has a more defined curly pattern.
4b	Kinky (Wiry)	Tightly coiled. Less defined curly pattern. Has more of a “Z”-shaped pattern.
4c	Kinky (Wiry)	Tightly coiled. Almost no defined curl pattern. Has more of a “Z”-shaped pattern.

**Table 1:** Andre Walker’s Hair Classification System.

There are a variety of hair products that have been created to care for unprocessed, natural hair - Cantu, Shea Moisture, African Pride, and Carol’s Daughter products.

- 1960s: afro hair styles started to emerge. It was stated that they were worn as a symbol of rebellion, Black pride, and empowerment during the civil rights movement. The hair pick combs were used to comb the afro-hair styles. The hair pick was a comb with a handle in the shape of a fist, representing the Black power salute. Also, during the 1960’s, Black hair became a way Black people expressed themselves politically. Several Black women during this time refused to straighten their hair and the slogans “Black is Beautiful” and “Say it Loud I am Black and Proud” became the mantra of the Black community. There was this sense of pride and collective consciousness expressed through one’s hair. Black hair became a way Black-Americans could show their connections to their African roots. The civil rights movement was in full swing and this was a way to demonstrate that the White standard of beautiful was being rejected and Blacks could embrace their own Black beauty. Hair allowed Blacks during this time to combat racism on an intellectual level.

There are some superstitions concerning Black hair that have been passed on from one generation to next. As a result, many Blacks believed them to be truth and they lived their lives accordingly.

### Black Hair Superstitions

- It is bad luck to say, “thank you” when someone finishes styling your hair. Your response should be “more hair”.
- Little boy’s hair should not be cut prior to one year of age.
  - It will stunt the growth
  - It will turn out to be both kinky and nappy
- When you cut a loc of your hair, you should place it in the bible if you want it to grow.
- It is bad luck for woman to cut a man’s hair during her menstruation.
- Only cut your hair during a full moon if you want it to grow back.
- If you allow a pregnant woman to style your hair, you will become pregnant also.
- Keep your head covered during your menstruation.
- Burn the hair you have in your brush to prevent someone for using it to put a hex on you.
- Avoid combing your hair outside to prevent the birds from getting into your hair to build their nest or:
  - You will feel like a bird is pecking on your head
  - You will get a headache
  - You will lose your mind

When reviewing the history of Black hair, it is important to be able to put faces with Black hair stories. Below, are a list of women and how they expressed themselves by their hair.

### Did you know?

- Ida B. Wells, a civil rights activist wore her natural hair in photos taken between 1807 and 1897.
- Harriet Tubman, an African-American abolitionist, wore afro-textured hair style.
- In 1963, Actress Cicely Tyson wore cornrows on the television drama “East Side/West Side”.
- In 1966, Model Pat Evans went against both Black and White standards by shaving her hair.
- In 1968, Actress Diana Carroll, the first Black woman to star in a television series network, Julia, wore her hair straightened and curled.
- Angela Davis, who became a symbol for Black Power during the 1970s, wore an afro.
- In 1971, Melba Toliver wore an afro while covering the Tricia Nixon’s wedding. She was soon after fired by ABC affiliate in New York.
- The Jeri curls exploded in 1977. The Jeri curl perms lasted through the 1980s, also known as the curly perm.
- In 1979, Bo Derek, a white woman, appeared in the movie 10 with hair braided with beads.
- In the 1980’s, Grace Jones, a model-actress, was known for her trademark flattop fade.
- In 1988, Spike Lee exposed good hair and bad hair, light-skinned and dark-skinned in the film School Daze.
- In 1990, Essence magazine did a segment on Sisters Love Weaves. Also, a variety of natural styles and locs became more fashionable.
- In 1997, Erykah Badu posed on the cover of her debut album, Baduizm, in an Afrocentric head wrap.
- In 1998, Carson Inc., creators of Dark & Lovely and Magic Shave for Black men, acquired Black-owned beauty company Johnson Products of Chicago. L’Oreal purchased Carson Inc. two years later merging with Soft Sheen.
- In 1999, Lauryn Hill, top Grammy award-winning artist with her locs, was named by People magazine as one of the 50 most beautiful people.
- In 2001, Rapper Lil Kim wore a platinum blond weave, while singer Macy Gray sported a new-school afro.
- In 2006, Black hair care was a billion-dollar industry.

Black hair stories cannot be summed up in just one or two words. Black hair stories have a history which started in Africa. The politics of Black women have often been influenced by what was going on in the world around them, which prompted Black women to express themselves through their hair. Take a look at the words of a very popular song by India Arie- "I am not my Hair". The words are very thought provoking and conscious raising.

"I Am Not My Hair"

See, I can kinda recall a lil' ways back  
Small, tryin' to ball, always been Black  
And my hair, I tried it all I even went flat  
Had a lumpy curly top and all that crap, now  
Just tryin' to be appreciated  
Nappy headed brothers never had no ladies  
And I hit the barber shop real quick  
Had 'em give me lil' twist and it drove 'em crazy (crazy)  
Then I couldn't get no job  
'Cause corporate wouldn't hire no dreadlocks  
Then I thought about my dogs from the block  
Kinda understand why they chose to steal and rob  
Was it the hair that got me this far  
All these girls these cribs these cars?  
I hate to say it but it seem so flawed  
'Cause success didn't come till I cut it all off

Little girl with the press and curl  
Age eight, I got a Jheri curl  
Thirteen, and I got a relaxer  
I was a source of so much laughter  
At fifteen when it all broke off  
Eighteen and went all natural

February 2002,  
I went on and did what I had to do  
Because it was time to change my life  
To become the woman that I am inside  
Ninety-seven dreadlocks all gone  
I looked in the mirror for the first time and saw that

Hey (hey)  
I am not my hair  
I am not this skin  
I am not your expectations, no (hey)  
I am not my hair  
I am not this skin  
I am the soul that lives within

Good hair means curls and waves (no)  
Bad hair means you look like a slave (no)  
At the turn of the century  
It's time for us to redefine who we be  
You can shave it off like a South African beauty  
Or get in on lock like Bob Marley  
You can rock it straight like Oprah Winfrey  
If it's not what's on your head, it's what's underneath, and say

Hey (hey)  
I am not my hair  
I am not this skin  
I am not your expectations, no (hey)  
I am not my hair  
I am not this skin  
I am the soul that lives within

Who cares if you don't like that?  
With nothin' to lose, postin' with the wave cap  
And the cops wanna harass 'cause I got waves  
Ain't see nothin' like that in all my days  
Man, you gotta change all these feelings  
Steady judging one another by their appearance  
Yes, India, I feel ya, girl  
Now go ahead, talk to the rest of the world 'cause

(Whoa, whoa, whoa)  
Does the way I wear my hair make me a better person?  
(Whoa, whoa, whoa)  
Does the way I wear my hair make me a better friend? Oh  
(Whoa, whoa, whoa)  
Does the way I wear my hair determine my integrity?  
(Whoa, whoa, whoa)  
I am expressing my creativity  
(Whoa, whoa, whoa)

Breast cancer and chemotherapy  
Took away her crownin' glory  
She promised God if she was to survive  
She would enjoy every day of her life, oh  
On national television  
Her diamond eyes are sparkling  
Bald-headed like a full moon shining  
Singing out to the whole wide world like, hey

Hey (hey)  
I am not my hair  
I am not this skin  
I am not your expectations, no (hey)  
I am not my hair  
I am not this skin  
I am the soul that lives within

Hey (hey)  
I am not my hair  
I am not this skin  
I am not your expectations, no (hey)  
I am not my hair  
I am not this skin  
I am the soul that lives within [4].

It is these words in many other women you hear the cries of accept me for who I am as a Black woman from the top of my head to the soles of my feet. Yes, the hair on my head, and the skin I am in, make me who I am, but do not let that stop you from seeing an authentic Black woman.

### **Black Hair in the Market Place**

In today's society, getting and maintaining a job is important to all working-class citizens. Nevertheless, the burden is heavy on Black women in the market place because of how she wears her hair, which becomes a point of contention. Of course, on the lighter side of things, life would be much simpler if Black women got hired for the knowledge in their heads instead of how they wear their hair. But who said life was simple? Black women have always had to fight and challenge the status quo to be seen and for their voices to be heard. Speaking out and standing up for the Black woman so they can have a place at the table and wear their hair how it naturally grows out of their head, is worth speaking up about and taking a stand for.

There have been several high-profile cases where Black women have been fired from their job because of how they chose to wear their hair. Usually, they would have their hair in its natural state. Even as I write, in the natural state, something inside me cringes because natural simply means that is how their hair is supposed to grow out of their head which implies that anything other than that would be unnatural. This is certainly not a debate over whether Black women should wear their hair natural vs. straight. A dialogue about Black women's livelihood should not be at risk because of how they choose to wear their hair in the market place. Professional grooming policies are warranted within any organization, but Black women wearing their natural hair should not be seen as unprofessional. Who gets to decide what is professional and unprofessional? It appears, Black women are at the mercy of their employers to decide how they should wear their hair. The United States Army in 2014, banned dread locs, large cornrows, and twists. The Army stated the reason for such a ban was because the aforementioned hairstyles look unkempt; therefore, reasoning that kempt hair was defined as straight hair. Now excuse me, but if you are willing to allow women to fight for their country on the front line, put her life in danger, die for her country, suffer from depression and PTSD, but not allow her to have the right when she puts on the uniform to wear her in its natural state, I am a bit perplexed! Surely, when these women wore these hairstyles they were very neat and they were very well groomed and in keeping with the military bearing.

### **Critical Incidents of Black Women and Girls Who Came Under Attack Because of their Hair-Styles**

- In 2007, an editor at *Glamour* magazine declared that Afros were “no-no” in the workplace and that dreadlocks were “political” and “inappropriate”.

- Rhonda Lee, meteorologist in November 2012 of Shreveport, Louisiana KTBS 3 New TV station and an ABC affiliate, was fired after she responded to a racially insensitive message on the station's Facebook comment about her short natural hair.
- A Missouri woman was publicly grappling with her employer's new policy that banned her dreadlocs. She would have to cut her 10-year-old locs off if she wanted to keep her job.
- Dana Harrell, an education and sociology major at Claflin University in Orangeburg, South Carolina, was told during her internship interview that if she wanted to move forward, she would have to straighten her hair. Her words were "If I want to work in this company, I couldn't wear my hair in its natural state". "Not even braids" she said. "Nappy isn't happy here".
- Lorain Horizon Science Academy in Ohio released a letter to students' parents concerning a new dress, where natural hair styles such as Afro puffs and small twist braids were banned. Shortly after the parent's registered complaints, the school retracted the letter and publicly apologized for creating biases against students.
- In 2001, a leadership course at Hampton University banned natural hair styles such as, dreadlocs and cornrows with the understanding that these types of hairstyles would prevent students from obtaining corporate employment.
- A Black Hooter's server was awarded \$250,000 after her boss allegedly told her she wasn't allowed to wear her hair blonde because it did not look natural.
- According to a *Wall Street Journal*, Chasity Jones, in 2010, applied to work at Catastrophe Management Solutions and was initially hired, but the job came with one stipulation that she must comply with the company's grooming policy. She had to cut her locs. She refused to do so and the job offer was rescinded. In 3-0 decision, the 11<sup>th</sup> Circuit Court of Appeals dismissed the case presented by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.
- Malaika Singleton, Ph.D., a neuroscientist employed by the California State Senate at the time, began a trip in 2013 to London as a U.S. delegate to the G8 Dementia Summit where sister locs, a form of dreadlocs, became an issue.

The TSA agents at both the Los Angeles International Airport and the Minneapolis St. Paul International Airport grabbed and squeezed her natural hair from top to bottom. She contacted the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Northern California. In 2014, the ACLU filed an administrative complaint on her behalf to challenge TSA's discriminatory hair search. Ironically, in 2012, a similar complaint was also filed on behalf of Novella Coleman, a Black Staff Attorney with the nonprofit organization; she represented Singleton.

The ACLU announced March 26 that an agreement was reached with TSA. The agency agreed to conduct trainings for TSA agents throughout the country with special emphasis on hair pat-downs of Black female travelers. TSA will also "monitor all airports for consistent implementation of TSA and DHS policies and to detect the existence of radically discriminatory impact." Singleton said in a statement, "I hope that this agreement and the proposed training will lead to a more equitable treatment of all travelers throughout the U.S., regardless of their ethnic or cultural background or how they wear hair".

In Montreal, Quebec, Canada, 19-year old Lettia McNickle, who has worked as a hostess at a Canadian franchise of Madison New York Grill and Bar on Drummond Street since October, stated when she arrived for work in March with her hair braided on one side of her head, it caused her to not receive any shift work since that time. According to CBC News, McNickle stated her manager reprimanded her in front of the rest of the employees for having an unacceptable hairstyle. McNickle wanted to know what was unacceptable about her and was told, "We don't want that kind of look here at the restaurant". She was sent home by her boss. Ms. McNickle filed a discrimination complaint against the restaurant with the Quebec Human Rights Commission through the Centre for Research Action on Race Relation (CRARR), a nonprofit organization also in Quebec.

In a statement released by Madison New York Grill and Bar, it was stated that the incident did not involve race or discrimination and they apologized if the situation had caused harm to McNickle, her family, or friends. They stated that any organization is entitled to a dress code policy and wanted all their customers' experiences to be ideal.

CRARR stated they have yet to see a written copy of the company dress code policy.

The Vice President for the Canadian franchise said McNickle has not been fired, and she has not been given work hours because business has slowed down.

Should the company be found at fault? The Quebec Human Right Commission concludes that the plaintiff must be compensated for the loss of wages and moral damages within 30 days. The fines are said to be remedial and not punitive.

- In 1981, Renee Rogers, a Black woman working for American Airlines, was fired for wearing her hair in cornrows. She filed a discrimination law suit that made it all the way up to federal courts. Abraham D. Sofaer was the judge of the Federal District Court of New York. He rejected the argument that Ms. Roger hair style was a product of her African heritage. He stated Ms. Roger had adopted the style after the release of the movie 10 with Bo Dereck wearing her hair in braids with beads.
- In 1987, Pamela Walker, who was a full-time teacher and doctoral student at University of Illinois in Chicago and a part time worker at the Chicago Regency Hyatt, was fired for wearing cornrows to work. Subsequently, Ms. Walker filed a complaint with Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). Hyatt Regency then decided to reinstate her.
- Pamela Mitchell in January 1988, a part time worker for the Marriott Hotel in downtown Washington D. C. was sent home for wearing her hair in cornrows. Hair was said to be "extreme cornrowed styled". Ms. Mitchell filed a complaint with District of Columbia's Office of Human Rights. She gained national attention an appeared on the CBS Morning Show. Her case caught the attention of Jessie Jackson who was running for Democratic presidential nomination and Bo Dereck weave braid wear. The Marriott Hotel returned Ms. Mitchell to her position. They stated that even though Ms. Mitchell's hair style was acceptable, other cases involving cornrows might not be acceptable.
- Cheryl Tatum, during her first two weeks of work as a restaurant cashier at the Hyatt Restaurant in suburban DC, received complaints about her tight braids. Her supervisor requested she pull her hair back into a bun in order to be in compliance with the company's dress code. Ms. Tatum complied, but then three weeks later the personnel director, Betty McDermott, informed her that she would need to remove hair braids completely. According to Ms. Tatum, Ms. Mc Dermott proceeded to say she "couldn't understand why she would wear her like that anyway". Ms. Tatum refused to change hairstyle. She stated that she was impeccably groomed, the hair style was a part of her African heritage, it was cost effective, and she had no desire to wear a European style. Ms. Tatum was fired and she filed a complaint with EEOC. Her case garnered national media attention. The hotel executive, Mr. John R. Hamilton at the time, issued a statement that "well-groomed, neat, clean braided hair worn by females, without any beads or jewelry, is considered to be an acceptable imagine" but individual hotels should be given the freedom to say whether braids fit in with their locations and clientele.
- In November 1988, Ruth Sherman, a young white female teacher at a school in Bushwick, Brookly decided to introduce her students to a book entitled "Nappy Hair" by Carolivia Herron. Her class consisted of mostly Black and Latino students. Ms. Sherman was keenly aware that hair in the Black community could be a very sensitive topic. So, prior to actually introducing her students to the book, she checked with Black colleagues to ensure the book was culturally insensitive and not offensive. She received the confirmation from her colleagues that this was an excellent read. Ms. Sherman however soon found herself in hot water with many of the parents. Only one of the parents, who waged the complaints, child actually went to the school. The parents became outraged merely by the title of the book. They had not even read the book. They were informed that the book was indeed a celebratory book but by this time, the damage had already been done to Ms. Sherman. She feared her safety, reassigned and relocated to another school district. When the book 'Nappy Head' first hit the market, it sold only ten thousand books. After the incident with Ruth Sherman, the book sales skyrocketed to one hundred thousand copies.
- Teona Parker, a 7-year-old attending Deborah Brown Community School in Tulsa, OK, faced discrimination regarding her hair. In

September 2013, Teona was brought to tears after being alerted her dreadlocks were in violation of the school policy and that she would be kicked out of school. After receiving an immeasurable amount of national media attention surrounding this issue, the school later stated that Teona Parker's hair was not in violation of the school policy.

- Ashley Davis, 24, worked at a St. Louis-based finance company and was told that she had to relinquish her dreadlocks or lose her job. Interesting fact, she had dreadlocks when she was hired.
- Vanessa VanDyke, a 12-year-old in Florida, faced expulsion from her private school over her natural hair. The administrators were shamed into reconsidering their position.
- Audrey Lorde, a poet and essayist, suffered discrimination for her hair at an airport for wearing newly fashioned dreadlocks. Lorde arrived at the Beef Island Airport and was told by the immigration officer-a Black woman with heavily processed hair-that her entry was denied.... Lorde, requested to speak to the woman's supervisor and was informed that her dreadlocks marked her as a dope smoking Rastafarian revolutionary.
- Gabby Douglas- Olympic gold medalist on August 2, 2012, was criticized about her hair. The question was blatantly asked "why hasn't anyone tried to fix her hair". It did not matter how many medals she won! People immediately begin to bash the 16-year-old concerning hair. Not even taking under consideration that gymnasts spend a lot of their time leaping, jumping, and summersaulting in the air. Certainly, their hair is the last thing they are concerned about.
- Tennis star Venus Williams received a penalty when her beads flew off her braids onto the court on January 26, 1999.
- On April 4, 2007, after the Rutgers University women basket team won the NCCA Women's Basket Championship, former host Don Imus of CBS's Imus in the Morning referred to women on the team as "nappy-headed hoes". The team consisted of a total of 8 Black women and 2 White women.

Macroaggressions are those unconscious subtle acts of racism people do or say without realizing they can cause great harm or damage to the person [5]. Black women are no exception when it comes to their hair. Most people are fascinated by Black women's hair and feel a need to touch it without getting permission. Often times, they are invading the person's personal space by putting their hands on their hair.

The questions below are a few examples of some of the most commonly asked questions about Black women and their hair. These are excellent examples of the macroaggressions Black women experience on a daily basis concerning their hair.

### **Black Women Macroaggression Hair Questions**

1. What did you do to get your hair to look like that?
2. How long did it take you to get your hair style?
3. Why do Black women spend so much money on their hair?
4. Why do Black women wear scarves or a net over their hair?
5. Why do Black women not want to get their hair wet?
6. Is that your real hair?
7. Do all Black women wear weave?
8. What is the real issue with Black women wanting to wear natural vs. straightened hair?
9. Does it hurt to get your hair braided?
10. What do Black men have to say about Black women's hair?
11. Can I touch your hair?
12. Can I smell your hair?

Not only are Black women faced with ridicule in the market place about their hair, but they also have to deal with on a daily basis with people being curious about their hair. Having strangers asking improper hair questions can be very taxing both mentally and emotionally.

Bankhead and Johnson [6] conducted a study where they studied Black women with natural hair and their hair self-esteem. The study was carried out among 529 Black women who wore their hair natural. The participants were asked to complete both the Bankhead/Johnson Hair-Esteem Scale along with the Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale. The results revealed Black women who had more education and higher income also had higher hair-esteem. Additionally, it was noted that high hair-esteem was significant when it won the approval of romantic partners and supervisors. This study illustrates that Black women who wore their hair natural and got the approval of people who mattered, were more likely to have higher hair-self-esteem. Black women in the workforce need the support of their work environment to be able to wear hair in ways that reflects their culture.

Hair, regardless of a person's culture, is an enduring symbol of a woman's beauty. The American culture of female beauty is still pretty much defined by White women's beauty standards. The images of Black women historically have always been portrayed in a negative way whether it was her hair or her body [7,8]. These symbols often are the images that are branded in a person's mind about Black women. Black women are depicted as the mammy figures with her head tied with a headscarf [9]. Black women in the work place who wear their hair braided, any other natural state, or wear head scarves are viewed as unkempt and not socially accepting. They are often faced with the possibility of losing their job. Each Black woman has her own unique hair story. She should be given the opportunity to wear her hair as an expression of herself without the thought that she could fire from her job. Black women should not be held hostage by their hair in the market place. It is long overdue that Black women be given the freedom to wear their hair like it grows out of their head and not be paralyzed with fear of losing their job. Black women's hair is their social/psychological makeup of who they are as people. A woman hairstyle is her lifestyle. Take Rachel Dolezale for example, she was a woman who grew up White and was able to pass as a Black woman for many years, not only because her actions, but also because she had adopted Black hair styles as part of her identity.

Diversity in the work place is not only about the color of one's skin. It is also about embracing one's ethnic identity completely to include the Black woman's hair. We live in a globally diverse society which should reflect today's work force. When Black women are excluded out of the workforce because of how they are wearing their hair, we, as a society, are in turn denying a group of highly brilliant intelligent women from making valued contributions within the labor force. Black women have always played a significant role in moving this country forward. With the many contributions, they have made historically and currently, it is imperative that we do not take this issue lightly of speaking up for Black women's hair in the workforce. Black women's voices should to be heard in the market place as to how they want to wear their hair. Black women's hair helps to define who they are on many levels.

In 2001, Hampton University, a Historically Black Institution, prohibited male MBA students from wearing cornrows and dreadlocks. The Dean of the Business School stated he wanted Black men to look professional and get hired. He farther justify his statement by saying "when was cornrows and dreadlocks a part of our history? I mean Charles Drew didn't wear it, Muhammad Ali didn't wear it, Martin Luther king didn't wear it". There is much education that needs to take place about Black hair, not just for other races but even within the Black community (Bryd and Lori 2014). Black women's voices should be heard in the market place about how they want to wear their hair. Black women's hair defines who they are on many levels. For a Black woman to wear her hair how it naturally grows should not be career suicide. She should be celebrated and embraced for her uniqueness and not pressured to adhere to mainstream America's hair styles.

I think Joey Mazzarino, the head writer for Sesame Street said it best in October 2010, when he was inspired to write a song for his five-year-old daughter whom he had adopted from Ethiopia. She stated she wanted to have blond, long, straight, and bouncy hair. So, he wrote the lyrics to the song "I Love My Hair". A brown skinned Muppet dressed in a pink, puffed sleeved dress with a curly afro sang the song. It went viral instantly because it not only touched the hearts of children, but parents as well were deeply moved by the beauty of the lyrics.

"Wear a clippy or bow or let it sit in an Afro... I love my hair, I love my hair, I love it and I have to share. I want to make the world aware I love my hair. I wear it up, I wear it down, I wear it twisted all around..."

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