

Cover letter

While I was writing this my process was simple, I thought about what I wanted to talk about then looked up resources on google and google scholar about that specific topic. Like when I wanted to talk about the consequences of using hair straightening products like relaxers, I just looked that topic up on google scholar and made sure a good portion of the statistics and data i was looking at had a percentage of black women worth mentioning. I rewrote a lot of parts to try and make things flow smoother and as per instructed by my professor I added my thesis in the first paragraph of this essay rather than incorporating it throughout the essay. I also greatly shortened my first paragraph to portray my general idea and issue with various topics surrounding black hair and braiding styles that have been misrepresented and abused and changed. I also changed some of the photos because I felt they did not accurately portray what I wanted to show. Many of the pictures after the history lesson showed African Americans trying to blend in by straightening and damaging their hair and I wanted this essay to be a bit more about braids and how black people were doing them again instead of them purely focusing on assimilating into white society. This project has considerably helped me to reach my learning outcomes as well. It has helped me reach outcome 2 by making me constantly search for reliable and well sourced material and having me fact check everything I read that wasn't a scholarly source. It also forced me out of my comfort zone by forcing me to look outside of my usual source material of student essays and dissertations. I ended up quoting a lot of blogs and Learning outcome 3 was a bit harder to do though because I wanted my sentences to go smoothly without putting quotes in the middle of me trying to make a point. I quoted when i felt it fit and if i didn't then at least the sources are still listed at the bottom. I don't think I did my best in this sector though I did quote

every source that I used, I believe I could've quoted them better and used the quotes better as well.

03-18-25

African American Braids, It's not “Just hair”

The riddler

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Part 1: The history

Braids, it's a small word generally used to encompass the entirety of African American protective styles. You've surely heard of them, box braids, butterfly locks, goddess braids/boho braids, cornrows, feed in braids, senegalese twists, wicks, dreads, so on and so forth. Many of these styles are specific to black people and are specifically for the coarse hair that typically only black people have, most of America can agree on that, however there's a very small and loud group that believes that these styles are for everyone. They argue that Vikings had braids as well and that it's “just hair” and today I am arguing firmly against both of those insidious and stupid points by focusing on the broader topic of black hair being more than just hair. If you didn't already know, African hair was held in such a regard that it was comparable to divinity, it was never just hair it's our story.

The history of African American hair starts in Africa, a diverse country where in the 15th century hairstyles grew to represent a number of things from marital and societal status to age, tribal identity, religion, wealth; I could go on but for the sake of time I won't. See hair was so integral to African societies that it was even used as an insult. There was a hairstyle known as *Kohin-sorogun* that Nigerian women would wear to taunt their husbands' other wives if they were in a polygamous marriage. With time it easily became a secondary source of communication among the different civilizations living throughout the country. So much so that

if your hair wasn't done then that would equate to being seen in a negative light or to be going through hard times. Recently widowed women for example would not do their hair for a while as a show of grieving and to purposely make themselves “less attractive” to dissuade other suitors from pursuing them. If we compare these aspects to modern day we can see just how different things are. Back then, simple looks like afros or straight back cornrows that we see today would not fly because those styles are too plain. Not to mention nowadays they lack any personality or message, kind of. I think we can all agree that wearing an afro in a predominately white society will always be a form of rebellion against white beauty standards and our oppressors, however unlike our ancestors, our hair no longer tells a story. You can't look at black person's hair and tell who they are anymore, though there are still traditions that we haven't seemed to lose. One, is keeping it in the family. In these different cultures a common theme was leaving the braiding and doing of one's hair to oneself or a trusted family member or person in the tribe since hair was seen as so sacred. They were even used as protective talismans and in religious services. In the book *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* by Ayana Byrd she explains, “The hair’s value and worth was heightened by its spiritual qualities. Both male and female devotees of certain yoruba gods and goddesses were required to keep their hair braided in a specific style.” further elevating their status in society. After this she quotes Mohamad Mbodj, a professor at the university of columbia who studies the history of south africa and specializes in senegal, where he says “The hair is the most elevated point of your body, which means it is the closest to the divine...” The hair was seen as a way to speak to the gods and they held so much power that a strand of hair could be used for an array of different spells and curses. As such, the person who did hair in the tribe was seen in as much positive light as the gods and when it wasn't

family doing your hair, then this was the one you went to and basically put your life in their hands: The village braider. Though not every tribe had one.



Amasunzu hairstyle from old Rwandan (F.1)

Some tribes would leave braiding to a family member as I said before or just go to the village braider. Sometimes though, depending on what tribe you were in, there were strict rules regarding interacting with the opposite sex and in those tribes men and women would each have their own braiders since men weren't allowed to braid women's hair and women weren't allowed to braid men's. Even then, hair braiding was still a communal activity that brought people together. Whether that was friends or family, the amount of trust that these men and women had for one another left bonds for life; and as for when people cut their hair, let's just say it wasn't a common thing. If someone ever did cut their hair, for personal or traditional reasons like mourning then they would have a ceremonial burial, but many people in these tribes did not do this unless necessary. Take the Wolof tribe, (one of the tribes abducted and brought to the “new world”) the women were not only known to desire long and thick hair but also to have it. Long

hair was associated with more positive attributes in society such as having a green thumb or being able to have healthy strong children. So when their hair got long they didn't cut it but instead put it in more elaborate styles and did even grander accessorizing, and It makes sense. In a society where hair upkeep and elaborate looks took a lot of time and care and were seen so positively, it would be difficult to cut it off for personal reasons or otherwise. Its sad that the slave trade interrupted such a marvelous evolution, just imagine letting such creativity fester for a few more millennia.

Now for the worst part of our history lesson, the slave trade. During the slave trade most of the approximately 30,000 african people sold into slavery a year, were shaved bald to further push the image of them being non-human cattle. For over 341 years it went like this. All that I've just told you, every god they prayed to, every event in their life, every loss they grieved all went down the drain in a matter of seconds; and people still ask why we won't shut up about slavery. We were enslaved for longer than we have been free, we literally had to free ourselves because millions of people swore we weren't human. So no, I won't shut up about slavery, because we were put in cages to be gawked at like animals and the whole time we were called uncivilized.



From Theafricanhistory.com, “African women’s hairstyles played significant role in the Ancient Africa” (F.2)

During the slave trade enslaved people had no way to take care of their hair when it started to grow back and depending on what they were forced to do, they used different methods to take care of it. Enslaved people forced to do labor closer to their white abusers would attempt to copy the styles of white women at the time while those who were put outside used scarves to protect their hair from the heat. Soon, both parties were going back to their roots and doing braids again, only way less extravagant and basically glued to the scalp. For the outside enslaved men and women braids were mainly for functionality purposes while for the inside enslaved people, they wore them for appearance reasons to appease the whites that they labored for by looking neat or clean. This was around the 1700’s where the extremely different circumstances of these two groups, the indoor slaves and outdoor slaves, brought a divide amongst African Americans as a whole because of what we now know as colorism and texturism. Basically the looser your curl pattern was and the lighter your skin tone, the closer you were to “whiteness”

and the more privileges you received in white society. In the coming years this will personify as hair salons charging more to do braids and other styles on 4c hair and charging by thickness rather than just charging by style. We will also see in our unfortunate future salons, both black and white owned and even families, pushing people with thicker and coarser hair to get relaxers. This is a result of this very division between the black community by their white counterparts who labelled light skin African Americans with straighter hair as better than their darker friends and families. There were even light skinned black people who owned slaves themselves at this time further pushing the divide between lighter and darker skinned African Americans and these slave owners were just as negligent. On the plantation since many of the enslaved people lacked any combs or oils, hair diseases ran wild for both parties. Things like lice were common and the enslaved people forced to do outside labor constantly had matted and tangled hair because of the lack of time and tools available to take care of it in the harsh conditions. Still, they did what they could and as they continued trying to make the best out of a horrifying situation, white woman, in that unnecessary racist manner that they tended to do everything, tried to further make a fool out of the African Americans by coining the term “wool” to refer to enslaved African Americans' hair. Specifically the darker skinned men and women forced to be outside. Even then as their white abusers continued to taunt them, black people were being resourceful. They started taking rice from the fields they were forced to take care of and expertly hid the grains in their own hair or the hair of their peers by braiding them under the strands. They would then wait to cook and eat the rice later.

Now if we check on the evolution of African American hair from the 15th century to the 1700's we can see how the function of African American hair and braids have changed. It went from a form of identity and expression to a survival tactic, but barely even that. They were so far

from where they started that African American hair could be compared to having the significance of time in a black hole, in essence it had no significance at all.



(F.3)

Part 2: The self discovery

By the 1800's everything a black person did was a PR stunt to get ahead in white society and life in general. If you can't beat em, join em; I feel that quote belongs here because African Americans were so caught up in joining white society that they started inventing new ways to look less African, and this is when we started to see the early versions of those glorious poisons that we know today as relaxers. Back then, black people would mix potatoes, eggs, and lyre to relax their hair and it was bad then but the chemicals in these modern solutions are even worse. Many black people have horror stories about these chemicals. Most involve their mothers relaxing their hair or giving them perms at young ages due to these women seeing natural 4b/4c

hair as “difficult” or less pretty/attractive compared to other textures, so they tried to change it. In the end it only made things worse since these chemicals cause the sort of damage that stays in every strand of hair unless, if you were to want something different and healthy, you chop it all off and start over. But at this period in time that wasn't beneficial, so the relaxers kept being used and black hair thinned out, barely growing like it used to because of the conditions. Keep in mind that before the slave trade Africans were growing their hair long and fast because they had ample time and tools in order to do so and not to mention their stress levels couldn't compare to their predecessors which is also a high contributor to hair loss and thinning. Conditions, throughout this whole paper we see how that can make or break a person, and in the 1800's the conditions called for chemical warfare in the form of hair straighteners. Roger Wilkins for example, assistant attorney general and a Pulitzer prize winning journalist of his time, would have Vaseline combed through his hair and laid with a stocking every night by his grandmother and he continued the ritual well through college ([JSTOR](#)). Even Malcolm X would use that horrid lyre mixture for his hair and If you've never seen a relaxer or perm kit or been to a beauty supply store, then I give you these pictures for a modern day reference(4/5).



Facebook- [Always beauty supplies](#)(F.4)



[Essence- “The perm box girls: where are they now?”](#)(F.5)

And yes, those are children on 2 of the covers, pathetic marketing isn't it? Making kids insecure. I don't know what others felt but it hurt me to look at those boxes, being a brown skin girl with thick 4c hair was almost embarrassing. I grew up staring at those girls and wanting to be them, so I can tell you that they made me feel obsolete, that the shelves were always empty and that they never should've been there in the first place due to the health side effects alone. I haven't seen a study on the effects of children regularly getting their hair relaxed but for women there certainty is a statistic. You can find it in The National Institutes of Health 2022 study where they proved that women who used hair straightening products frequently, aka more than 4 times a year, were, "...more than twice as likely to go on to develop uterine cancer compared to those who did not use the products."([NIH](#)) It doesn't take a rocket scientist to tell you that black women are the predominant consumers of these products and I hope by now you know why. After all this history I wrote I need you to come to this conclusion on your own. I need you to understand that trying to blend in is actively harming African Americans but also that our need to change was not originally ours, it was beaten into us for over 3 centuries. We have been abused for simply being who we are and I don't blame Black women or men or any black person for wanting to change just so they have the opportunity to be treated like a living breathing being, however, why should we be the ones to diverge into obscurity and not the society that demands we do so? Years away from the slave ships we were forced on and we are still expected to assimilate to a society we never wanted a part in; but that doesn't mean we have to. This is a transition, if you haven't picked up on it, into possibly the most entertaining and progressive century in American history, the 1900s-1990s. The century of the revolutionaries and the

healthiest hair African Americans had ever been able to achieve since arriving on this foreign land.

This time period was drastically different than the previous ones for a multitude of reasons. Not only were black people able to actually take care of their hair without worrying about conforming to what white society wanted it to be, but they were fighting against racism in ways that they couldn't before. They got more firm in their rebellions because they were losing patience for the discriminatory policies the government wouldn't stop enforcing and by this point a lot of African Americans were getting less tolerant of racism in general. They fought against the racial prejudice of everyday people, things like redlining, jim crow, and finally with a growing industry for black hair care products in the early 1900's, we see people fighting against white beauty standards. With the help of each other at that. This wasn't like the plantations, here black was black, no light skin, no dark skin; and due to this comradery we see black people being the highlight of this era. With the little money they had after the civil war they started the black owned hair businesses by doing door to door sales and they started the beauty schools that would later become today's cosmetology schools and beauty supply stores. The black community was coming together and providing each other opportunities that they wouldn't have gotten on their own. The African American Museum of Iowa talks about the shift on their page. When it comes to beauty schools they say, "The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s put an end to Jim Crow laws in the South. This opened up to new employment opportunities for African American women that had been out of reach only a decade earlier." ([AAMI](#)) So, that was the 1950s but as we know, the civil rights movement lasted longer than that and as black people continued to fight for their rights through the 1960s we saw the rise of the black panther party, defined as a U.S black power organization, and as a sort of signature they wore primarily afros.



History skills-[The rise and fall of the Black Panther Party, the most revolutionary of Civil Rights groups.](#) (F.6)

Now I'm not gonna get too much into the black panther party because their goal was racial equality and didn't have much to do with african american hair, despite them wearing pretty much only afros for the movement. Still, their look had an impact and after abolishing jim crow in 1964 people felt more ok to rock their natural hair. In work settings, African Americans tended to go back to simple braids and straightening their hair with less corrosive methods than before, hot combs and blow dryers were popular picks, but outside of that, we saw the influence of the black panther party stick. They were one of the reasons that the 70's were so influential, but it was also due to the rise of different media. From roller skating, to new music, TV shows and most importantly Disco. This was the decade of self exploration and rebellion for everyone, including black hair. As women as a whole fought for their rights, black women in particular chose to show up as their natural selves, not even attempting to blend in anymore; and much like the 60's an afro represented a kind of F-you to anyone who wanted them to tone it down, so

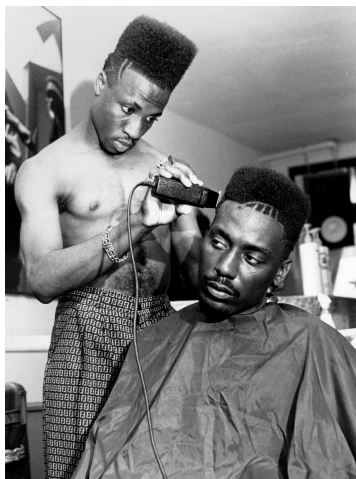
that's what they wore. It was a type of protest. In the 80's African Americans explored more textures and styles, it seemed like they remembered where they came from, a country of creation, and this creativity gave birth to yet another 2 decades of innovations tech wise and community wise. We can see some of this influence in the Ebony magazine, founded in 1945(f.6 & 7) and here we can officially put the "black hair doesn't grow" debate to rest because trust, it does. I grew my hair down to my waist by time I started 3rd grade, that was before I went to a black salon for a trim and they cut half my hair off, more on that later but anyway besides me, there were thousands of black women growing their hair out again. Black people had the time and resources to take care of their hair for the first time in over 300 years and it didn't take long for it to grow, like a lot (F.8, 9 & 10) but for some reason people still to this day claim the opposite. I've heard the arguments but outside of internet comments and people playing in my hair to make sure it was growing from my scalp when I was younger, I haven't seen anyone say this in real life. So to learn more about others' experiences I asked for hair stories from the black community group on the anonymous app, Yikyak. One user replied to my post saying, **"It was frustrating af growing up and even now being accused of wearing a weave or wig. Like people approaching my parents disrespectfully accusing them of putting a weave on a 8 year old."** This bias is so deeply rooted in some people that black women are constantly having to defend themselves to people they owe no explanation to. I guess some things never change.



Ebony Magazine 1980 publications (F.6 & F.7)



Radaronline-
[PHOTOS: The 20 Most Iconic Celebrity Hairstyles Over The Years](#) (F.8)



History- [A visual history of iconic black hairstyles](#) (F.9)



[Writing with color](#)

The 90's were also drowning in what would later become cultural looks for the black community. With people coming out of their shells with new designs on a number of things from clothing, to tattoos, Grillz, piercings and of course, hair. Remember what I said, black people

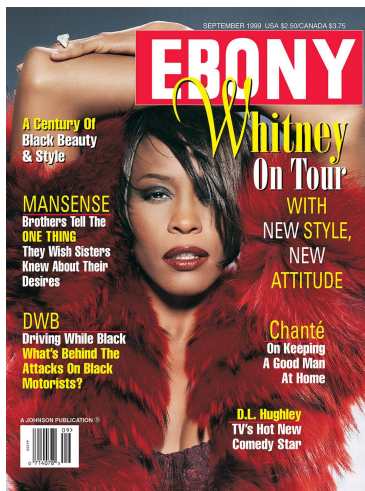
were remembering where they came from and this new knowledge and curiosity drove well into the 21st century but not without repercussions. One user who DMed me on that app I mentioned told me a story. She wrote, **“I'm wearing cornrows in my hair. One of the white boys in my English class looks at me and says “You look ghetto with those braids.” I replied “No I don't.” one of the white girls who had copied my hairstyle the months prior (A braided half up and half down look) chimes in on the conversation and said “Yes you do.”.... This bitch looks me dead in my face and starts pulling on her ponytail as if to show off how much better it is.”** This happened to this user in middle school where self expression is basically a sin in and of itself and many others go through the same thing or at least some other form of hair discrimination before they reach adulthood. I myself grew up in a very diverse school district so I didn't run into this specific problem but I didn't start wearing braids consistently until highschool, so more often than not you would see me in my afro and as another user said, **“When i had my afro out..people would always say “what you gone do with that hair” orrrrr they would say “lordd you need to do something with that...”** I was used to those comments from friends and family alike. I guess I still am, but I know now that this is the price of self-discovery which was what the 90's was all about and even today people are still finding themselves this way. African Americans specifically are using their natural hair as a medium while lots of others are working to experiment with the very style that served as our survival tactic after slavery: straight hair.

To make it more than a way to blend in, African Americans started coloring and curling their hair or wigs as we can see in figure 11 & 12 to stand out and as times progressed the methods got more intricate. We moved on from half wigs and v-parts to lace fronts which come in most hair textures nowadays and are often available in any beauty supply store. For decades

African American women practiced on this hair type and now have gotten so efficient with these wigs and so creative with the styles that, as shown throughout history, white women are once again making stupid claims about us. The most abundant one I've seen is white women comparing black women wearing straight lace fronts to white women wearing braids, as in to say it's immoral and just as disastrous in terms of social and cultural significance. After all I've said I hope you can see the stupidity in that. Though, the true hypocrisy is that these people didn't have a problem with black women wearing straight hair purely for the sake of their reputations and appeasing their oppressors, they only started making this unbelievably naive point when black women started out doing them. These people refuse to admit that anyone can manipulate their hair to be straight but curls are hard to mimic and when they are able to copy tighter curl patterns, it's not nearly the same as a person of color doing the opposite because once again, hair discrimination is a thing. An Afro was seen as a joke for hundreds of years, that's why there was a comedic laugh when a white character got electrocuted in a movie and their hair frizzed up. That's why there's Afro wigs in Halloween stores because black hair has always been seen as a joke and straight hair was always just hair, not "wool", not often shaved as punishment, not something to repress and control. So, no a black woman wearing a straight wig is not the same as a white woman trying to rock 30 inch senegalese twists and it never will be.



Refinery29-[These Notting Hill Carnival Photos Are Pure '90s Nostalgia](#) (F.11)



Black History from the Pages of EBONY: [The African-Americans of the 1990s](#) (F.12)

Janetbrsite- [Poetic justice](#)

[Babytresse blog](#)

Now we're here, in the 21st century after having the craziest plot armor known to men, and things could be better. I go out with my afro and people still see it as a political statement rather than me just wanting to wear my natural hair, but in any other decade I would not have this level of artistic freedom so I guess I'm just being picky. It could be worse, I could say that nothing has changed and we are still only spectacles in cages, which looking at the prison system

I wouldn't be too far off but, ladies, gents, and everything in between, we have reached the light at the end of the tunnel. And it's telling me that the vikings could never make a comeback like this, and for the last time, it's not Just hair. Now I release you from this lesson, don't be a little gremlin, go kiss your mother and touch grass, I gotta go do my hair.

Pretty in black- Honorable mentions



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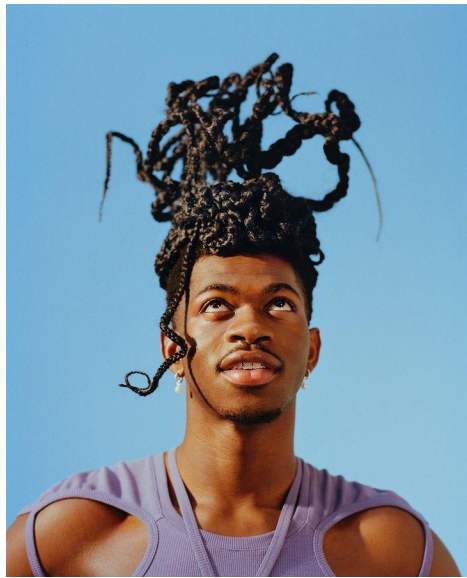
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