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Hair Deep: The Cultural Appropriation of Black Hair

What even is appropriation and how does it tie into black hairstyles? The first thing that needs to be understood is what appropriation is. Merriam-Webster defines appropriation as “to take or make use of without authority or right”. This concept and idea of taking something from one for others to make sure of it and claim rights over the stolen item. Inside of the black community there is a rich and vibrant culture made up of music, dance, food and hair; traditions that go back all the way to when the first Africans arrived in America on slave ships. The one facet of black culture that time and time again is taken and misrepresented is the styling of hair. Throughout the diaspora one of the ways enslaved Africans could hold onto their culture, family and home is through hair. The cultural appropriation of black hairstyling is harmful to the black community; it is more than just hair, it is survival and the black story, hair is art that keeps generations connected. Through appropriation of hair it causes the erasure of cultural history and significance. Along with causing deep seeded hatred of black women and men when they look at themselves it causes disconnect within the black community as a whole, coming to the idea of texturism and colorism.

Throughout history from Africans who reached these shores all the way to modern day black women's hair is something that is ingrained deep into the culture from a young age. Week after week sitting to get braids, twist or even a silk press; the smell of burning hair and loud buzzing conversation with that week's newest gossip then to getting out of the chair feeling like a whole new girl. That is black culture that is love and acceptance. For some that say “it is just hair” or “sharing culture is how we as a society move forward together” that is the furthest from the truth, even from slavery days black women had their hair policed from white slave owners,

having their hair shaved off or wrapped up. It goes deeper than just hair, the styles in which the black community wears are rooted in African customs and traditions According to writer Tabitha Ajao “Cornrows helped enslaved Africans put up small acts of rebellion and resistance by not only allowing them to keep their heritage close, but also providing a discreet way to transfer information. Cornrows soon became used as a way for slaves to secretly communicate with one another. Slaves would style their Cornrows, in different patterns as a means of communicating in code written messages” (Ajao). From using braids to rebel to having secret messages sometimes regarding plans for freedom, it was part of the reason many survived during the long nights on the underground trail. Once freedom was reached the black community continues to this day to modernize but still carry those traditional values of the styling to remember the sacrifices made to be alive today. However in the modern day, we are seeing more and more use of styles such as cornrows being done on non black people who will never truly understand the fight and struggle behind that style. For them it is a trendy, cute braid pattern but for the black community it was how many of our ancestors found their way to freedom while holding onto what little culture from Africa they had left. In America, white people and non black POC have been able to hold on to their culture, language, art and traditions for black people in America they had to rebuild and create a new one. The sentiment behind stealing styles such as the cornrow brings about a feeling of once again losing culture, to have them reduced to “boxer braids” or “Kim K braids” is disrespectful and harmful.

In the same vein the thief of black hair brings about the idea of cultural erasure. To have from styling and naming being taken for others use without credit to original creators is pure thief, if this was a priceless painting that someone took and recreated with no credit to the original it would be a crime but why is it different for hair? In taking hairstyles and renaming

them to fit with the modern times by non black people it takes away from the history and significance of said style. In Africa where most styles have come from, hair was a way to differentiate between tribes, status, mood etc. “Hair grooming played a significant part in African tribes. It was a way to identify”... a person’s marital status, age, religion, ethnic identity, wealth, and rank within the community” (Oenal 14). It was important to remember that each tribe had their own set of rules and hierarchies with hair so it was easy to identify where everyone stood. Going deeper than just status was a rite of passage and bonding experience. Mother and daughter, husband and wife all sat with each other brading and bonding. It was something that brought people together to share stories of the past and share dreams for the future. Then to come to America and fast forward to modern times and to see that the styles that have been passed down generation to generation have been taken away once again is painful, especially considering that the beauty standard of the US is from a European point of view it is difficult to express the pain and harm caused. Black women and men for years have been told our styles are “unprofessional” or “unkempt”, then to have those same people appropriate the very same styles blacks have been told they could not wear is hypocritical. “They further point out that “Black women have undergone many pressures that shaped their hair choices in various ways”. Byrd and Tharps state that this is due to the fact that black hair was considered to be “unattractive and inferior” by white people. Moreover, they point out that black hair was considered ‘bad hair’ and “Good hair was thought of as long and lacking in kink, tight curls, and frizz” (Oenal 14-15). After spending a lifetime being told your hair is “bad” and “ugly” that the styles you wear are deemed unworthy of respect to then watch as the world praised white women for doing the same styles; it feel like being knocked down all over again like those chains are still on your ankles holding you down.

More than just having to watch society praise those who steal from cultures they do not belong to, this level of appropriation leads many black women and men down a path of self hate and loathing. Throughout the course of history black women and men have created beautiful styles from a large, curly afro to locs all the way into modern day braids such as knotless or boxed methods. Each unique and intricate in their own right a beautiful marriage of styles of past generations and the current generation take on those. What happens when those are taken and black women and men are told they are unsightly. Self hatred and loathing of oneself is what is the end result, then confusion. Imagine from the day you are old enough to understand the world around you to be told your natural hair and styling is ugly and straight/ loose curls are beautiful, for a young child this causes a hate filled relationship with your hair. The desire to fit in and conform to standards set by society but not one black people have ever felt part of, a standard of telling black children they are not good enough, they are not beautiful with their natural curls and coils. Then growing older and seeing non black people wearing the same styles that you were just told were ugly and then getting the praise for being “high fashion” “avant garde”. That hate comes right back, the hate of ever being enough for society, the hate of being born with big curly hair and it seen as dirty and unmanageable.

“Consequently, it is not just unprocessed black hair that is being discriminated against and considered as “ugly”, but also the hairstyles that eliminate the curls and kink. This means no matter what African-American women do to their hair, as long as it is not straight, silky and fit the Eurocentric beauty ideal, it is useless. According to Joy DeGruy Leary, black women started to internalize the idea of their hair being bad or worthless and thus developed negative connotations of their physical appearance. The idea that black hair is an issue or something that needs to be changed is also due to the fact that African-American women “... still face much

imaging and commentary in the media and advertising that suggests that black bodies are not as beautiful as other bodies” (Oenal 15-16). It seems and feels as if in America black hair is never going to be accepted or have value placed in it unless it is in close proximity to the European beauty standards set, meaning loose curls, long, silky and or straight. Being told looser curls are best and coily hair is dirty and unkempt stems all the way back into slavery when biracial people were given better treatment and their hair was seen as desirable meanwhile other black people with darker skin and coily hair were seen as subhuman. “After shaving the "bad" hair, Black men and women often were forced to wear headscarves to hide their hair from the sight of the slave owner. In the early 1700s, Louisiana Creole women had to wear a Tignon by order of the Tignon law for the simple reason of marking inferiority among Louisiana women of African descent. Creole women, often referred to as a mulatto, were very light-skinned, and their hair texture did not resemble hair typical to women of African descent. Therefore, creole women had to wear head dressing to identify them as African descendants” (Hopkins). How does this colorism play into modern day appropriation, by causing this rift between in the diaspora many white people took advantage of the rift seeing it as their chance to once again take something for themselves. Many biracial people in the black community saw nothing wrong with white women especially wearing braids and locs while darkskin women did thus furthering the gap. The divide and conquer method worked and is still working in today's world by causing tension and distrust in the community. It has been easy to break down and take the styles and change the history and memories behind it.

In the end, this cycle of taking and misrepresenting black hairstyles is not a new thing or concept. What it is, is old and exhausting. As a black woman I am tired of having to defend and explain why my hair styles are important, why my hair is beautiful, why seeing white women

wearing the same style as me is bothersome. My hair is my heritage, my family, my culture. I take pride in who I am and where I came from. My hair honors those before me who fought to be at the table to have their lives be theirs. By watching our styles be taken and misused it is killing our culture, a culture that has already once been ripped from us. Watching as white women walk runways and red carpets being called exotic and different but remembering as a child when a letter was sent home with me telling my parents that my afro was “unhygienic” that my braids were “distracting”. However there is hope, hope for better in the way of cultural appreciation, meaning instead of wearing the styles and pretending to not know the history behind them, to offer platforms and education about more than just hair but the history. To know that cornrows were a means of survival or that locs were thought to give power and strength. Knowing what is on the line if this erasure continues is the best way to combat this issue and to understand that it is more than just hair, it is culture, history and art.

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