



pact's

point of view

The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

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Ask Pact

Black Hair and the Politics of Beauty

by Lisa Marie Rollins

Q: *I am a white adoptive mother in a partnership with another white woman and we have a daughter who is Black and Cherokee descent. Like other adoptive mothers, we have struggled with taking care of her hair, and finding the right hairstylist to support her. Yet our issue is somewhat different. We are very concerned with what we feel is an overemphasis by the black community on how her hair "looks" out in public. We both want our daughter to understand that she does not have to be defined only by her body, face or hair and that we want her to understand she is also valued for her mind. Can you help us think through this?*

A: This is such a great question. I did well at getting into a talk beyond a simple "white parents I did a talk this past summer at Pact Camp, titled "Black Hair, Politics and Culture: All Twisted on my Head" and I think his talk had several relevant points to your question. First we must open up space to discuss why is hair such a big deal for black men, women and children and to try to understand why as parents of black children it becomes a responsibility to understand how its deeply related to racial and cultural values hair and hairstyles are in African communities. In order to even begin to address the question of why hair is such a big deal, we have to understand the history behind how it came to be such a big deal. I'll only go into a few things here, but will suggest that you also read a few books on black hair to place it in context. These politics are directly related to self-confidence, beauty and a healthy self-identity for black children, and in your context black women. But what I will elaborate a bit is how black feminism comes into these conversations. For many of us (in both black and white cultures) that are traditionally educated and identify as feminists or for those of us who want to think of ourselves as being able to look beyond the physical, we struggle with having to wrestle with this thing of black women putting so much time, energy and

money into their hair. Keep in mind that each of these 'snapshots' of history could be a year-long university course on its own and that my recounts are simply summaries.

Pre- colonization – pre European contact

Black hair is inevitably a political question that is absolutely centered in history. In pre-colonial history, before the impact of slavery and colonization on African communities, hair was a sign of cultural identification. In different geographical areas there were and are different indigenous styles, and to many, hair is sacred and reflects personal cultural and social values. These cultural signs designate individuality, status, where you belong within the community, your age, your rank, what family you belong to, and were diverse depending on geography, different kinship systems, and different tribes.

One interesting fact was that then, as now, there were also kind of 'extensions' woven into hair. People wove boars hair, tree bark, rocks, and other magical or powerful symbols from their families that represented something about who they were or where they belonged in the kinship or family structures of their

personal history. These techniques were passed down from mother to daughter, from father to son because they had particular cultural and social meaning. Just like people passed down stories, or like songs griots passed down lineages of families hair was literally a holder of ones history and place within society and family.

Slavery and Hair

When slaves were captured and brought to Central and South America, the Caribbean and then finally the United States, their heads were shaved bald, removing any possible visual identification that might have been communicated without words. Since slaves were often captured from multiple geographical areas, they were purposefully separated by being placed with others who could not speak their language to minimize the possibility of slave revolts.

Along with branding the body, the demeaning practice of shaving the captives head erased any individualism or diversity from the multiple African cultures that were bound together. This assisted in the process of make one conglomerate of "Black" or "Negro" slave. In addition, since there was a stereotype of black bodies as dirty and spreading disease, captors treated slaves like chattel shearing sheep when they simply shaved off their hair as if it was of no consequence.

Diasporic Africans (and their European slavers and societies) were taught negative and disturbing, distorted messages about who they are as humans. What is also interesting is that during this time, (1500-1800's) the discourse of science began to take shape. Scientists were doing experiments on bodies of the European poor as well as people of color to begin to create a language to categorize humans racially. And if you know about the development of white femininity as this time, you also know that ideas about women's constitution, body functions, hysteria are connected to this scientific discourse and become directly related to their position in society, their position in the household, ideas about sexualization, what is 'normal,' and what is 'not normal' white femininity. For Black women, this kind of identity formation is happening through the opposite side of the racial lens.

The images of the → mammy, the black buffoon, happy darkie, uncle tom, tragic mulatto, black bitch/ welfare queen. These stereotypes aren't just categories that black bodies get put into, they become ways in which to hold black people in 'their' place in society, making individuality invisible and simultaneously setting up roles the have implications even today.

Early 1900's , Reconstruction Era and Hair

In the early 1900's black women fought against the stereotypes placed on their bodies to challenge racist ideas. During the time of reconstruction there were large groups of black women who become identified

as 'race women'. The National Association of Colored women was founded during this period and Black women were participating in the 'upliftment' of their people. What also comes out of this amazing moment as well is what is called in black feminism, "the Politics of Respectability". Black church women became middle class warriors, concerned about 'those other' black women who weren't getting 'proper' educations and didn't have the chance to become teachers, nurses, typists, secretaries or other 'respectable' professions. Education, employment opportunities, black women's suffrage, the defense of black female morality, and the condemnation of lynching were primary concerns.

Black women became participants in a discourse about beauty, cleanliness and morality – cleanliness is next to godliness, and hair again became a focal point of how these intra black struggles for identity played out. Pressed hair became a fashion and of course Madame CJ Walker's empire for black hair products provided jobs to thousands of black women, and at the same time had something to say about respectability and a presentable image to white people.

1960's, 70's and Hair

Later in the 20th century the reclamation of black hair became central to political and social changes for women; the phrase, Black is beautiful is about more than just skin color. It is about claiming beauty of the entire Black body. The shape of the body, the texture of 'African' hair and this claiming is reflected in the prominent hairstyles of the time like the afro, natural braids, cornrows, and dreadlocks.

Why Hair Matters for Black Women

A theme through all of these moments in history, is that black femininity and black beauty politics are always placed in relationship to white femininity and white beauty politics. They are always inextricably linked. So many times, our response as expressed through our hair embodies a response that is directly linked to years of being told we are ugly, being told we don't fit into normalized, white standards of beauty.

As a transracial adoptee, black feminist, and sometime diva, I continue to struggle with these questions. I've had a million hairstyles and I still to experiment with hair products, hair styles and struggle with what it all means to me. Throughout my young life as the only black girl in multiple predominantly-white spaces, I became very conscious of how my hair was just one more visible reflection of my difference and the sometimes negative messaging I was noticing about women and girls like me. It was very much about wanting to feel beautiful, and even though I was a tomboy, I certainly did not feel beautiful, confident, comfortable or even normal with my hair so uncared for and often 'hard' for me and my family to manage. As I was older, I experimented with relaxers and curling irons, curlers, gel, mousse and the

list goes on. Later, when I was in college, my answer was to 'go natural,' to embrace my natural waves, curls and texture of my mixed black hair. In response to years of struggling with my hair, I grew dreadlocks. It worked for me, alongside my refusal of straightening my hair, and also allowed me to claim a particular black feminist identity that at that remains very important to me. It was very much about rejecting a particular kind of black womanhood that was centered around white beauty. What I mean is, I had to learn, as most women do "what kind" of woman I was. Although I do not condemn women who choose to claim a black femininity that embraces these ideals, I wasn't a woman who went to the salon every week, a woman who wore lots of makeup or cared only about my appearance. Nowadays, I have reclaimed a part of my 'girly-girl' drag, but its about me feeling beautiful for me, not for others.

As your daughter becomes a young woman and she is making her own hair choices, she will take on both the legacy of your influence as her mothers, but also the legacy of how black identity and feminism empower and inform her, which necessarily includes how the black body has been implicated by history. Regardless of whether or not your daughter chooses to identify with your beauty politics, it is still your responsibility to understand how the politics of black identity have an impact on how she is viewed as a young girl and eventually a black or mixed race black woman out in the world. Can we afford to view Black absorption with hair issues and politics as an "over emphasis", or simply a different way of thinking about how beauty and black identity function, a different way that takes race and gender politics into account at the same time?

Lisa Marie Rollins was Pact's Educational Specialist from 2007-2009, she is also the founding president of AFAAD (Adopted and Fostered Adults of the African Diaspora).

Resources Pact Carries About Hair

(see our webstore at www.pactadopt.org)

- *No Lye: The African American Woman's Guide To Natural Hair Care* by Tulani Kinard
- *Going Natural* by Mireille Liong-A-Kong
- *Kid's Talk Hair*, by Pamela Farrell
- *Thunderhead, a Hair Care Video* for Parents
- *I Love My Hair*, by Natasha Harpley
- *Nappy Hair* by Carolivia Herron

Other Books I Suggest

- *The Truth About Black Hairstyles: The Whole Story Revealed* by Kamau & Janice Kenyatta
- *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* by Ayana Byrd (Author), Lori Tharps (Author)
- *Ain't I A Beauty Queen?: Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race* by Maxine Leeds Craig