

Kinky, curly hair—a tool of resistance across the African diaspora

October 19 2016, by Chelsea Johnson



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Across the African diaspora, stigmatising kinky and curly hair was a central way that European colonisers and slave-owners [subjugated black people](#).

In many places, like [Brazil](#) and the [US](#), hair texture later became a key marker of racial classification and social status. In apartheid South Africa, the "[pencil test](#)" was used to determine proximity to whiteness, along with access to political, social and economic privileges. It involved inserting a pencil into the hair and testing whether it would hold or fall out.

Persistent, disdainful ideas about natural, black hair are the legacy of this history.

National independence and civil rights protections have brought citizenship rights to many black people. And yet hair texture continues to determine access to [employment](#), [romantic relationships](#), [educational institutions](#) and [freedom of movement](#).

Over the last decade, black women around the world have grown a movement centred on validating, celebrating and caring for their hair in its natural kinky-curly state. Natural hair expositions, pageants, salons and bloggers can now be found in cities across the globe – in Sao Paulo, Johannesburg, Madrid, Atlanta, Paris, Amsterdam and Havana. There's even a holiday – [International Natural Hair Meetup Day](#) – that attempts to coordinate these geographically separated natural hair communities.

Over the last two years I've travelled around the US, Spain, the Netherlands, France and South Africa unpacking why the natural hair movement has become a political rallying point across the African diaspora. And establishing who participates in it.

Awareness, social media and environmentalism

Natural hair has been transformed from an unpopular and outdated style option to a full blown lifestyle movement. This can be explained by the convergence of three factors: a heightened concern about the ethical

implications of hair straightening, the rise of social media and environmentalism.

In 2008, Chris Rock's documentary [Good Hair](#) revived a global conversation about the politics of black hair. The film explored the physical, emotional and financial toll that straightening hair takes on black women's lives as they try to fulfil Eurocentric beauty ideals. The documentary harshly criticised wearing weaves and using chemical relaxers. But it left viewers without clear pathways for change.

This gap was filled by the rise of visually rich, interactive social media platforms. YouTube (released 2005), Tumblr (2009) and Instagram (2010) enabled black women to create communities and exchange information about styling natural hair, creating products at home and fostering self-acceptance. Popular music has also played a part in drawing attention to the significance of hair for identity and self-esteem.

At the same time, [green movement conversations](#) piqued concerns about sustainability and chemical toxicity in food and cosmetics. The word "natural" came to describe the integrity of ingredients in products in addition to texture. Some "naturalpreneurs" have created entire careers importing raw shea butter, virgin coconut oil, and other organic concoctions to sell to health-conscious black women. In the process of marketing their products, they have also been involved in marketing natural hair politics.

Individual resistance and collective struggle

In racially diverse places like Brazil, Canada, the US, South Africa and Western Europe, natural hair has inspired responses ranging from [fetishisation](#) to [confusion and disgust](#).

These reactions highlight the fallacies of post-racial "colourblind"

thinking. This post-racial thinking asserts that race no longer explains social and economic obstacles faced by people of colour. In doing so, it denies the powerful ways that institutionalised racism and cultural racism continue to maintain white privilege.

For example, many older South African women described feeling pressure to straighten their hair in the post-apartheid "rainbow nation". They did this to assimilate into newly accessible elite institutions. But today's natural hair trend mirrors a rejection of post-racial thinking. There is a [growing demand](#) to combat enduring racial inequality through race-conscious strategies.

In societies that are dealing with the legacies of settler colonialism, slavery and apartheid, black women are usually underrepresented in boardrooms and elite classrooms. In these contexts, wearing natural hair allows upwardly-mobile black women to assert their identity despite white supremacist norms. For these women, natural hair politics often takes the form of individual resistance. Women attend monthly or annual meet-ups, and follow black women's online media.

But in places with large enough populations of black women in formerly white spaces, natural hair politics can form the basis of a collective anti-racist politics. The [protests](#) that broke out in 2016 at South Africa's Pretoria Girls High are evidence of this.

The class question

It is significant to note that working-class and poor women tend to be underrepresented in the natural hair movement. Its green ethos is difficult for poor and working-class women to buy into. Poor black neighbourhoods are less likely to have grocery stores, let alone speciality health food stores that stock organic products.

Women in poverty and women in developing nations are also less likely to enjoy reliable internet access. This limits their ability to interact with the blogs, vlogs, and think-pieces integral to natural hair culture.

Likewise, natural hair spaces tend to organise themselves around buying, selling and reviewing natural hair products. Many of these are expensive and inaccessible outside of the US.

In these contexts, the symbolism around natural hair is different. Sporting natural hair is more likely to be interpreted as an inability to afford chemical relaxers rather than as a personal or political choice.

Black Hair Matters

The exclusivity of the movement does not diminish the transformative impact that "going natural" has had on the lives of thousands of black women across the African diaspora. It is an issue of aesthetics and representation. But it is also more than that.

I've met women around the world who link their breastfeeding advocacy, midwifery, yoga practice, veganism, reiki work and improved fitness habits back to their choice to embrace natural hair.

For some women, natural hair communities simply disseminate more culturally affirming images and pleasurable options for styling black hair. For others, "going natural" is one way to mobilise against the lived experience of white supremacy. For many more, the natural hair movement has provided [black women](#) with a set of ideas that allow them to live more fully, freely and joyfully in their own bodies.

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). Read the [original article](#).

Source: The Conversation

Citation: Kinky, curly hair—a tool of resistance across the African diaspora (2016, October 19)
retrieved 26 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-10-kinky-curly-hair-tool-resistance.html>

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