

BLACK HAIR IS COMPLICATED

Walking down the hall, I flaunted my black locks because they were mine. I grew them. My hair was what I believed other African American girls wish they had; it fell below my shoulders, I had long hair. I felt as though my hair made me superior.

That is how my peers identified me beyond the hundreds of other black girls in my grade: I was "That girl with the long hair," and more importantly to my culture, I had "good hair."

So, what makes hair "good?" From childhood, black girls are told they want their hair to look like the white girls' hair: long, silky, and flowing in the wind, just like the Pantene commercials.

But the truth is, that is not how black hair grows.

A black girl is born with silky curls on her head. But throughout childhood, they become thicker and more coarse.

This is when your family decides if you will have natural or relaxed hair. Relaxer, or a perm, is a caustic lotion that makes curly hair straight and straight hair curly. Black girls think it is imperative to get perms. After all, it makes your hair "like the white girls."

Black girls with relaxed hair get one relaxer at least every five weeks. Then the following two weeks, you cannot get in chlorine water, because the chemicals will make your hair fall out.

Wearing natural hair can also be painful. When I was younger, if I wanted it straightened, my only option was a hot comb. This metal comb is plugged in and heats up to 400 degrees, and with heat so close to the skin, you jump. That means you get burned.

Having natural hair is not good when wet either. Every time black girls are asked to go swimming, we have to make the decision between actually swimming or keeping our hair nice and straight. If not straightened, hair will grow like a Chia Pet: an afro. I spend about \$65 at the hair salon every two weeks to get my hair done. So if I must get it wet, I have to hope that I have a salon appointment soon.

But the efforts to have "white" hair go so much deeper than chemical damage.

Some girls start washing their hair everyday, which is a no-no. The hair will dry out and it can break off. Girls begin putting heat on their hair

every morning to make sure it is perfectly straight. The problem is, our flat irons have to be 350 degrees or they will do nothing. That is a lot of heat, and should only be done, at most, once a week. If done excessively, the breakage begins.

These are the reasons you see so many black girls with short hair. They will all tell you the same thing: "I used to have long hair."

And they did. They had long hair until they were old enough to understand that the texture of their hair was not "beautiful." Then in an attempt to "fix" the problem, they created a new one.

There are societal pressures for black girls to change their hair, too. According to an article in Time Magazine, the United States Military calls our natural hair "matted and unkempt." Natural hairstyles like twists and afros are banned, as they are considered unprofessional.

The United States Military does not get it.

Chemical-based products like perms that keep our hair straight like the military wants will lead

to balding. If you have a relaxer, you have to take special care of that. Besides the fact, natural hair will curl as soon as a drop of water hits it--that includes sweat.

A lot of black boys tell me "I like white girls' hair,

I don't want to deal with that nappy stuff," and I am baffled. Black girls hear this and run to get a perm. They've got to assimilate for the name of love.

My hair is not considered elegant. It is not in the definition of beautiful, or even professional. But it is mine, and I'm sick of caring.

My mother shaved her head last year.

She refused to get another relaxer to cover her curls, and harm her hair. I'm going natural too; love it or hate it, I'm not changing it.

We need to stop whitewashing the standard of beautiful. My frizzy hair on a rainy day, and my expensive sow-in are nothing to laugh at. For so long, good hair has been defined as hair resembling white hair, but one day--soon--we will get the world to fall in love with curly 'fros, too.

Then, just maybe, we all can work to write a new definition of good hair.

Makayla Richards,
senior

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