hair

An African American History

IN FIFTEENTH-CENTURY AFRICAN CIVILIZATIONS, hairstyles were markers of identity. Hairstyle could indicate everything from tribe or family background to religion to social status. Elaborate hairstyles designated power and wealth. A subdued style could be a sign that you were in a state of mourning. More than that, hair could have spiritual importance. Because it's on your head—the highest part of your body and closest to the skies—many Africans viewed it as a passageway for spirits to the soul, a way to interact with God.

That history was erased with the dawn of slavery. On slave ships, newly captured Africans were forcibly shaved in a profound act of dehumanization, an act that effectively severed the link between hair and cultural identity.

Postslavery, African American hair took on complex associations. "Good" hair was seen as anything closer to European standards of beauty. Good hair was straight and smooth. Curly, textured hair, the natural hair of many African Americans, was seen as bad. Straight hair was beautiful. Tightly curled hair was ugly. In the early 1900s, Madam C. J. Walker, an African

American, became a millionaire by inventing and marketing hair care products to black women. Most famously, she improved on the design of the "hot comb," a device for straightening hair. In the 1960s, George E. Johnson marketed the "relaxer," a chemical product used to straighten otherwise curly African American hair. According to some estimates, the black hair care industry is worth more than one billion dollars annually.

Since postslavery days and through to modern times, debate has raged in the African American community. What does it mean to wear your hair natural versus straightened? Is straightening your hair a form of self-hatred? Does it mean you think your hair in its natural state is not beautiful? If you wear your hair naturally, are you making a political statement, claiming black power? The way African American women wear their hair has often been about much more than vanity. It's been about more than just an individual's notion of her own beauty.

When Natasha decides to wear hers in an Afro, it's not because she's aware of all this history. She does it despite Patricia Kingsley's assertions that Afros make women look militant and unprofessional. Those assertions are rooted in fear—fear that her daughter will be harmed by a society that still so often fears blackness. Patricia also doesn't raise her other objection: Natasha's new hairstyle feels like a rejection. She's been relaxing her own hair all her life. She'd relaxed Natasha's since she was ten years old. These days when Patricia looks at her daughter, she doesn't see as much of herself reflected back as before, and it hurts. But of course, all teenagers do this. All teenagers separate from their parents. To grow up is to grow apart.

It takes three years for Natasha's natural hair to grow in fully. She doesn't do it to make a political statement. In fact, she liked having her hair straight. In the future, she may make it straight again. She does it because she wants to try something new.

She does it simply because it looks beautiful.