

Wigs and Race: It's Personal

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Whenever someone comes to me to critique their outfit, I always suggest accessories. Accessories allow anyone's outfit to pop. Wearing plain clothes and adding the sparkle of a necklace or a pair of exuberant earrings can do so much more than a lot of people think. The same, however, goes for hair. When we do our hair, it is because we desire a particular look on that day or for a special occasion. Our hair, in its own special way, is an accessory. A lot of hairstyles can be damaging to human hair or generally hard to do, so plenty of women (and even men) turn to artificial hair. One of the oldest kinds of artificial hair is the wig.

Throughout history, wigs have had significant meanings to different societies. During ancient times wigs were first worn by most upper-class ancient Egyptians (Fletcher 2002). In the span between ancient history and today's modern times, wigs were used mostly for vanity and entertainment. Plenty of European men sported powdered wigs, periwigs and toupees (French for "tufts of hair") on a daily basis, because it was a trend. In Japan, Kabuki actors wore wigs on stage. Wigs were worn by Shakespearean actors to show the age and statuses of their characters. Wigs were used in minstrel shows by blackface actors like Eugene d'Ameli and Rollin Howard, to mock African American femininity. Indeed, while wigs have been around for centuries enhancing beauty and entertaining the masses, they have developed a negative connotation today for one specific group of people: Black women.

Last semester for my marketing research project, I came up with the idea for my group to do a study on protective hairstyles. A protective hairstyle is a hairstyle where the ends of someone's hair are tucked away. This can be a bun, braids, twists and of course a wig. The project was intended to find the most popular kind of hair protection method, and deem what consumers really preferred and spent the most money on while protecting their hair. We included options that were hairstyles, hair lotions, or other techniques. While collecting the data, however, I realized that there was so much bias and ignorance when it came to artificial hair, particularly against Black women. Initially, we were not thinking solely about Black women; we just aimed to be inclusive. We were looking for whether consumers were buying heat protectants, scarves, wigs, etc. However, for many non-Black women, these questions went over their heads. Race seemed to be the bigger issue.

One girl looked at me in confusion and said, "This is a survey for black women. Not all women ..." then proceeded to walk away. Another girl said she "wasn't black" and didn't "need fake hair" because she "grew her own." These two responses had absolutely nothing to do with what we were asking from them. It just showcased a bit of misogynoir.

This opened my eyes to an entire world of ignorance. I realized how little people think of Black women and our choices. People who aren't Black women (Black men included) believe that our choices to wear artificial hair is a "need," because we "can't grow our own." In an article titled "Let's Talk About Wigs and Race," Ebere Nweze writes, "... the Catch-22 situation many women of colour find themselves in: chemically straighten their hair or wear wigs and they are still seen as self-hating, vain liars; wear their hair naturally and they are scruffy, unkempt and at a disadvantage in the workplace" (2017). It's almost like we can not do anything, even simply wearing a wig without a chance of criticism. Black women aren't the first and maybe won't be last people to adopt wigs into their culture, but we will always be the people who "needed" it, the race who thinks that, because we aren't good enough naturally, we "need" to conform.

This subconscious idea that Black women don't love themselves and thus turn to wigs has its roots in slavery. This idea had become more prominent in the post-slavery Black Reconstruction period, leading into today. In her book *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, Bell Hooks dissects the devaluation of Black women:

They chose to ignore the fact that the great majority of black women and men attempted to adapt the values and behavior patterns deemed acceptable by whites. During the years of Black Reconstruction, 1867-77, black women struggled to change negative images of black womanhood perpetuated by whites. Trying to dispel the myth that all black women were sexually loose, they emulated the conduct and mannerisms of white women. But as manumitted black women and men struggled to change stereotypical images of black female sexuality, white society resisted. Everywhere black women went, on public streets, in shops, or at their places of work, they were accosted and subjected to obscene comments and even physical abuse at the hands of white men and women... They reminded her that in the eyes of the white public she would never be seen as worthy of consideration or respect. (Hooks 55)

When Black women sought to assimilate into white American culture, they were, to state it simply, mocked. After their African heritage was deemed savagely and sexually loose, they tried to adapt to the prevailing lifestyle, a choice that resulted in their ridicule. As history progressed, black men and women continued their efforts to assimilate. Our clothing, our vernacular and

especially our hair changed in the process. As Professor Mercer writes, “Historically in the United States, a cultural preference for Eurocentric features deemed as beautiful has dominated values of appearance. As race was often tied to biological aspects, elements such as hair and skin were politicized and given negative or positive connotations and meanings, which were often internalized socially and psychologically” (qtd. in Garrin 24). For African Americans and other marginalized groups, adherence to dominant standards was often employed to avoid persecution and to “fit in,” thus attempting to increase social mobility (Walker, 2007). “African Americans implemented numerous strategies to move beyond the prejudice, discrimination, and oppression they faced from the dominant society, including changing their physical features ...” (qtd. in Garrin 25). Blacks began to innovate the way they changed their looks. They turned to presses, perms, relaxers and hot combs. This included the invention of the hair weave by Christina M. Jenkins in 1951.

Black people continued to alter their looks until the rise of the Black Panther party in the 1960s. They began to embrace their natural form, while fighting on the grounds of peace. “For African Americans, historically and contemporarily, hair has acted as a means of representing themselves and negotiating their place in the world” (qtd. in Garrin 23). Furthermore, “Black hair is an expressive element of appearance, and the body that offers insights into the individual and the collective culture (qtd. in Garrin 23). Black women and men proudly wore afros and even dashikis, exploring a culture that had been stripped away from them.

As time progressed, Black women wore their natural hair, wigs, weaves, relaxers, extensions and whatever else they desired, even though they are continuously scrutinized. This scrutiny has not come to an end, and we will probably have to continue to endure as time goes on. But here is something that I firmly believe not many will understand: our hair is our choice. As Kristin Booker writes, “Taken to foreign lands and forced to submit to European standards of beauty, we've had incredible strain placed upon our hair to look and behave a certain way. The varied styles that have evolved have seen a return of more natural textures with a nod to the versatility that the choice is ours now and ours alone” (2014). I have never met a fellow black woman who exclaimed, “I'm getting this weave because I want to be white.” I have never met a fellow black woman who has said that her daily choices of what she wears, how she talks, or how she wears her hair stem from wanting to emulate a person of another race. It's a personal choice. Some of us are experimenting, and some of us just enjoy wearing one. It's a lot more simple than many people think.

General Conclusions

Wigs have come a long way in history. When we survey them

from their introduction in ancient Egypt to now, we find that wigs today seem to be making a comeback. The production of synthetic wigs boosts an already booming business. The hair industry made \$85.5 Billion U.S. dollars last year and continues to grow (American Fiber Manufacturers Association, 2017). "Over the past five years, advanced technology has improved synthetic hair capabilities, and consequently, demand for this hair product segment has grown" (IBIS World, 2017). Plenty of celebrities have chosen the safety of wig wearing over damaging their hair with chemicals or dyes. Black women have adopted wigs into their culture and embrace the idea of wearing any as a form of protection. Wigs have no con, and continue to prove to be a fun, safe, product in the beauty industry. I have always seen wigs as just accessories, but discovering that many people see them differently triggered my curiosity. With all the attention wigs are getting nowadays, I wanted to uncover the history, shed some light on biases, and create reassurance in myself that wigs are nothing more than an accessory and a prop. Through this synopsis of my brief research, I hope any nescience anyone has ever had about wigs is cleared.

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