

Curly, kinky, nappy. These are just some of the labels society has attached to Black hair over the years. Throughout history, Black hair has been stigmatized to the point that many Black people were either forced to or chose to alter their natural hair. Not only has this issue stirred high emotions, it has also led to movements, legislative policies and a push for a new national holiday.

But what society says and thinks about Black hair can differ greatly from what Black people themselves feel.

So what do Black people think of when they hear “Black hair”?

To understand what Black hair is, one must first understand curl patterns. The curl chart uses both numbers and letters to differentiate the shapes hair naturally takes.

This chart ranges from:

- 1a, 1b, 1c — fine straight to coarse straight
- 2a, 2b, 2c — slight waves to wide waves
- 3a, 3b, 3c — loose curls to corkscrew curls
- 4a, 4b, 4c — defined coils to indistinct coils

Type 4 hair, known as afro-textured hair, is typically only seen among Black people. However, Black people can have other curl types. Type 3 hair is also strongly associated with the Black community, particularly in those of mixed races.

For most Black people, this knowledge comes with a multitude of experiences and a story to tell with it.

Ellen Smith, a recent UK graduate, has 3c hair herself, and she has been actively trying to learn more about her hair’s roots.

“There’s just so many different textures within that whole diaspora of black and

BLACK HAIR:

BACK TO THEIR ROOTS

BY AKHIRA UMAR



PHOTO BY ISAAC JANSSEN

Mercy Kajo Evanson shows off her hair design on Friday, Sept. 25, 2020, in Lexington, Ky.

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Genesis Lorjuste swings her hair on Wednesday, Sept. 30, 2020, in Lexington, Ky. This was Lorjuste's first time having her 4c hair in passion twists.

natural hair, and I think that's the beauty of it," Smith said. "Everyone has a different natural hair journey. It all depends on the person. And I think there's a lot of history within black and natural hair as well, and learning about that is such a beautiful experience for everyone to explore."

Smith didn't always embrace her natural hair though. She is biracial with a white mom and Black dad. This difference in race and, in turn, hair textures made for complications growing up.

"God bless my mother, she just never knew how to do my hair," Smith said.

This, in combination with attending a predominantly white school, led to Smith's struggles with self-confidence. In middle school, she had gotten so tired of being the odd one out that she decided to relax, or chemically straighten, her hair.

"My hair was beautiful and kids would still be like, 'Why does your hair look like that? Why isn't your hair straight?' I think it's those little comments that can have such a profound impact on kids," Smith said. "During high school, there wasn't any huge comment where I felt like I was being discriminated against for my hair, but it was always just that unconscious thought, just the surface level 'I don't look like these

girls' so I need to try to look like them as much as possible."

Though relaxing her hair was a temporary fix, Smith said at the moment she had much more confidence in herself.

When UK sophomore Mercy Kajo Evanson thinks of Black hair, she thinks of "a little bit of self-hatred."

"When I was younger, a lot of my friends and cousins were trying to grow their hair out so they could flatiron it or perm it," Evanson said, using the term perm in place of relax. "And I also saw hair in general as like a burden. Like the more hair you have, the more feminine you are. That's just something that's been in society forever. And with Black women, our hair, our kinks and curls, you don't see the full length. And in a society where we're often not valued as much made me feel not feminine enough and feel the pressure to flatiron it."

Evanson has 4c hair, the curliest of them all. As such, it can be hard to grow, maintain, and keep healthy. But instead of feeling judged by non-Black people, it was within the Black community that Evanson felt the most judged for her hair. So to fit in a bit more she had gone from proudly wearing her natural hair as a child to self-consciously getting

box braids and extensions. She believes some of the ideals Black people have regarding hair preference stem from racism and, consequently, colorism.

UK senior Genesis Lorjuste subconsciously felt this same pressure within her own family. Her grandmother grew up in a fairly conservative town in Virginia where she felt her hair always had to be socially acceptable. Lorjuste believes this mentality transferred to her mom and now herself. She typically wears her 4c hair in protective styles like braids and weaves.

"I feel like I don't have the confidence to embrace my natural hair yet," Lorjuste said. "I just never grew up with anyone having their hair natural or wearing their hair out."

Women aren't the only ones who battle issues surrounding Black hair. Black men also face consequences for rocking their naturally curly locks.

UK alum Savon Gray faced more than a blow to his ego when he was in high school. As valedictorian of his graduating class, Gray was a model student who never got in trouble. However, once he grew out his 3c hair passed his ears, he was breaking his school's dress code. His options were to cut his hair or face in-school suspension until he did so. In the end, he cut his hair.

"When you get older, you start realizing the rules kind of only apply to you," Gray said, calling the

experience traumatizing.

If hair discrimination seems like it's only a personal problem that affects self-esteem, this issue goes beyond the individual. It affects professional environments as well. There are many examples of how society's dislike of Black hair can negatively affect opportunities for Black people.

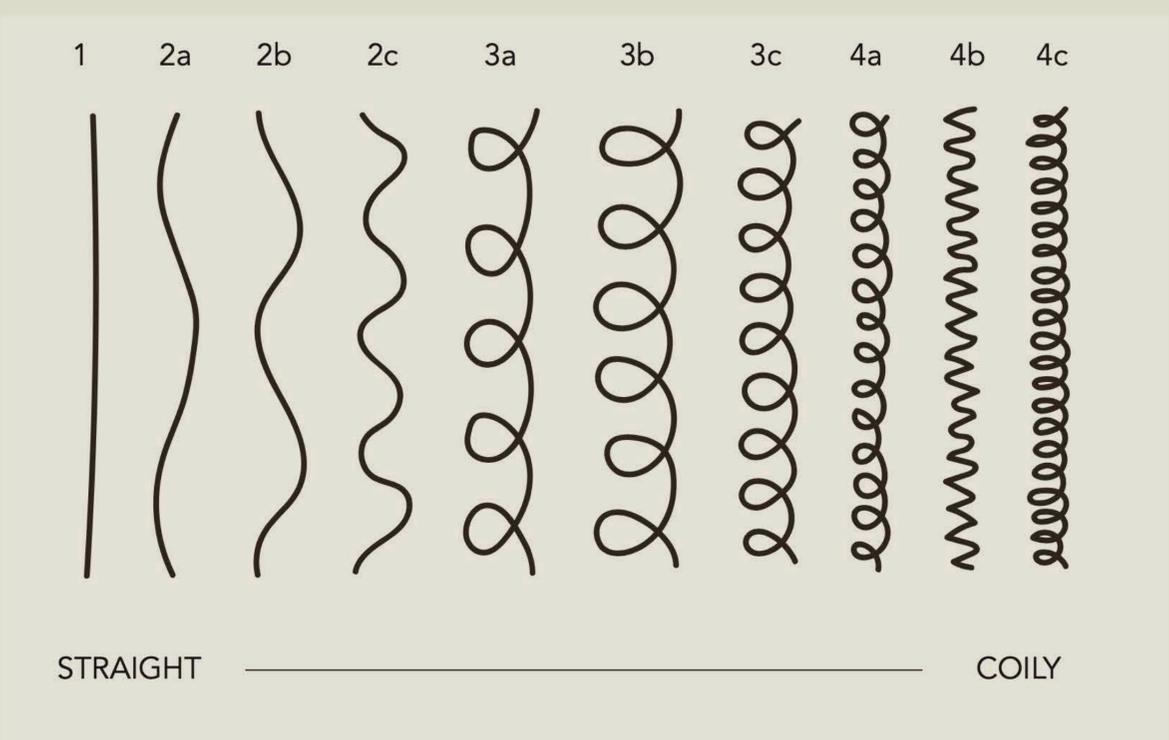
Smith, who models on occasion, said most of the photoshoots she's been to don't have hair stylists who are trained in Black hair. Evanson said if her curly baby hairs weren't laid, or gelled down, her hair was deemed as messy. Lorjuste expressed her concern about appearing unprofessional during interviews if she has braids. Gray said that Black men are always expected to keep their hair short.

"Society pretty much for my whole life has told me, 'Hey, you want to get a job, you can't have long, curly hair, even if it's well-kept together,'" Gray said. "Don't tell me what I can't do with my own hair."

Experiences like these have led to legal action across the country.

On July 3, 2019, California became the first state in the nation to make hair discrimination illegal by signing the CROWN Act into law.

According to the CROWN Act website, "The CROWN Act, which stands for 'Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural hair,' is a law that



prohibits race-based hair discrimination, which is the denial of employment and educational opportunities because of hair texture or protective hairstyles including braids, locs, twists or bantu knots.”

The CROWN Coalition self-proclaimed July 3 as National Crown Day to honor the occasion. Since then, six other states have passed the act. Kentucky is not one of them.

Inspired by California passing the CROWN Act, Kentucky State Rep. Attica Scott took the first step in seeking Black hair liberation for the Bluegrass in the 2020 legislative session. House Bill 33 called to amend Kentucky Revised Statutes 344.010 to “provide definitions of ‘protective hairstyle’ and ‘race’ that include traits historically associated with race.”

Scott is currently the only Black woman serving in Kentucky’s Congress. As such, she knows all too well the struggles that come with Black hair.

“For so long, in order to be ‘accepted,’ whatever that meant, by society, I was wearing my hair straight,” Scott said. “I wanted to make sure my white coworkers and colleagues felt comfortable. It wasn’t even about me anymore. It was about how can other people accept me versus how am I accepting myself.”

It wasn’t until she became an executive director in her late 20s/early 30s that Scott felt comfortable enough to stop straightening her hair. At that point, she also knew that she was in a position to encourage her employees to show up as their natural selves as well.

“I want you to show up as your true, whole, authentic self because that’s how I’m showing up every single day,” Scott said. “People should be able to show up the way that they are. As long as I am being productive and getting the work done, you don’t need to worry about my hair, right? That’s the last thing that should be on your mind.”

Leading up to the legislative session, Scott traveled around the state garnering support for the bill. She ended up with 19 co-sponsors, including white men and women. She said she was glad to have their support so their constituents could learn about the importance of fighting against



PHOTO BY ISAAC JANSSEN

Mercy Kajo Evanson sits outside on Friday, Sept. 25, 2020, in Lexington, Ky.

hair discrimination.

However, by the end of the session, Scott’s bill was never heard. She believes “institutional, systemic racism” played a part in that. Even so, she plans to bring the bill back next year.

“Natural hair may not be what you think is your issue, but it’s your friend’s issue, it might be your family member’s issue,” Scott said. “Somebody you work with is probably struggling with whether or not they want to do the big chop or whether or not they want to let their perm grow out, but they’re concerned you might judge them. So if you don’t speak up they’ll never know they’re safe in that environment.”

In late September of this year, the

U.S. House of Representatives passed the CROWN Act. If the bill is also passed by the Senate, it will become law. This will make hair discrimination illegal in all 50 states.

On a smaller scale, hairdressers have also been helping Black people embrace their hair.

Tyanah McNeil attended UK for two years before deciding to become a full-time hairstylist in July 2020.

Like many other biracial Black girls, McNeil had to learn how to do her own hair when her white mother could not. She went through a relaxer and bleached hair phase, cutting her hair multiple times to get rid of the subsequent damage. However, it wasn’t until after she had done the big chop that she began doing hair.

“All hair is good hair. You should love yourself, love your hair and know that it’s yours.”

– Tyanah McNeil



PHOTO BY ISAAC JANSSEN

Ellen Smith's 3c hair blows in the wind on Thursday, Oct. 1, 2020, in Lexington, Ky.

She started braiding her own hair since most stylists won't braid hair under four inches long. When she posted the results on social media, she had people lining up for her to do their hair.

Since then, she has started her own website where clients, both men and women, can request a variety of styles. She also adopted a one-year plan to get 25-30 clients at \$3,700 a month in hopes of meeting an annual income of \$44,000. In August, her first month going full-time, she exceeded her goal, making \$5,000.

Despite the economic opportunity hair provides her, McNeil said she does hair because she has a passion for it and she wants to help make others feel good.

"It's really like a trust thing because people come to you in like their most natural and vulnerable state, and they are trusting you with something that's so valuable and something that's been criticized so much," McNeil said. "And they're trusting you to care for it, and they're trusting you to, you know, not judge them like they may get judged in society. And they're trusting you to take the time and attention to care for their hair and, you know, make them feel beautiful and confident."

Former UK student and part-time barber Ahmad Cochrane feels much the same way. Though he only does hair on the side when he has time, his clients' mental and emotional states come first.

"Even if I receive the money for the service I did, I really like to see that I embrace people in their own skin and their own way, something that they were born with," Cochrane said. "The only thing I did was kind of fix it a little bit to make it look neat and clean in a certain sense of what they like. It doesn't necessarily have to be like universally clean. It's however they want to look or feel special. That's what I feel like the barber's role in the world is to do because that can boost a lot of people's energy to talk to a girl, to apply for a job, to anything. It gives another person the confidence to go out and appear and do something and feel safe and comfortable in their own skin."

After debating for over a year whether or not to do the big chop, Evanson decided to



PHOTO BY ISAAC JANSSEN

Kentucky State Rep. Attica Scott combs through her hair on Friday, Sept. 25, 2020, in Louisville, Ky. Scott has been wearing locs for 10 years.

cut off all her hair. She was tired of the constant pressure to change her 4c hair, but she had only ever seen looser type 3 hair accepted as natural. Despite the fear, she went for it. Now she says she never wants to go back.

"Everyone was very encouraging. They made me love it more. They reassured me that, no, you still look feminine, you know? You still look good. You look great. And it was just really nice to hear it because I felt like it but I was scared that maybe that's not what I'd be putting out," Evanson said. "So I'm still learning that part, trying to appreciate every phase of my hair without feeling inferior. And I just feel like 4c kinky hair has just so many negative connotations to it. It's just so hard to undo. It's been embedded in society, in me, in the Black community, and I'm really trying to like untie it."

When Smith decided she was leaving her home state for college, she wanted to drastically change her relaxed hair. She felt inspired by natural hair YouTubers, thinking to herself that if they could do it then so could she. With that, she did the big chop, too.

"When I say it was the most liberating experience I have ever had, it honestly was," Smith said. "It was almost freeing in a way just because it was like all those history of just not feeling confident in yourself, not feeling beautiful enough, and then having those curls brought back my self-confidence. So ever since, I've been natural."

Not only has Smith embraced her natural hair, she has modeled with it, too. In September 2020, she was named as one of five women to vie for the cover of the 2021 Hooters Calendar. Smith believes that representation at every level matters.

After Gray's row with his high school, he stopped cutting his hair upon graduating and again after job interviews during his junior year at UK. He now sports locs and a beard, both of which were frowned upon at his alma mater.

"I feel confident. I feel better when my hair is long. I feel powerful. And it's probably because I'm making the decision to keep my hair long and not having to cut it because someone's telling me to," Gray said. "If you can't control your hair, what can you control?"

Despite struggling to embrace her natural 4c hair, Lorjuste still encourages others to



PHOTO BY AMBER RITSCHER

Savon Gray poses for a photo with his 3c hair in locs on Tuesday, Sept. 8, 2020, in Lexington, Ky.

appreciate their own.

"If you are confident, continue that and encourage others to be confident and proud of their natural hair. And for those who feel like they haven't reached that confidence yet, just realize that you're you and you really can't change that," Lorjuste said. "It's just going to be that way, so you need to accept it and don't let society try to get you to change it."

What Black people want is for their hair to stop being marginalized and oppressed. They don't want their hair

to cause controversy or discomfort. At the same time, they don't want to have to conform to Eurocentric beauty standards. Black people just want their Black hair to be accepted just as any other hair is.

"All hair is good hair," McNeil said. "No matter what type of hair you have, no matter what it's been through, no matter the background of your hair or what you've heard from other people about your hair. All hair is good hair. You should love yourself, love your hair and know that it's yours." •