

# Hair Debate Rages On as Natural Styles Take Root

Contributed by Ashley McDonald - Black College Wire  
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Afros, braids, locks making a comeback

Each morning at the start of the day, two women prepare to perform their daily beauty rituals.

One woman reaches in her drawer and pulls out her flat iron to smooth out her chemically-straightened tresses. The smell of oil and burning hair rises to the ceiling. Once done straightening, a cloud of oil sheen surrounds her head. The fog clears and after 30 minutes in the mirror, her hair is finally presentable.

Just down the street, the other woman stares into her bathroom mirror. She does not have a bone straight mane resting on her head. Instead she reaches for her afro pick, detangles her tight coils, applies some natural oils to her kinky mane, ties her headband securely and marvels in the beauty of her natural texture.

When it comes to African-American women, hair can be a touchy subject. Some women cling tightly to the implications that surround having long silky hair, while other women choose to display what nature placed on their heads.

Black women have long tried to "correct" the natural texture of their hair by applying chemicals to permanently straighten their hair. A change in recent style has created a different breed of woman. Whether you call it nappy, kinky or textured, natural hair is on the rise among African Americans.

Celebrities like Jill Scott, Erykah Badu, and India.Arie have helped put natural hair back in the spotlight.

The Tennessee State bookstore recently began carrying a line of beauty products that 'natural heads' have been buzzing about.

For 15 years, Carol's Daughter has provided a natural line of products for the hair and body. Some students look at the price tags on the bottles that range from approximately \$10 to \$30 and are taken aback at the higher price, but Treece believes that you get what you pay for.

"Those that are familiar with the product understand the price point," bookstore manager Treece said. "This really is a high quality product and Carol's Daughter is intentional about their display and marketing. We're fortunate to form this relationship with the company."

Treece said he remembers a day when students were ridiculed for going natural and quality products like Carol's Daughter were not available. Now he said he believes that natural hair is making its move into the mainstream.

"With the right products and the right beautician, natural hair is more manageable," Treece said.

While some have successfully gone natural, others have started the journey only to return to the comfort of a relaxer.

Brandy Rogers, a Tennessee State sophomore electrical engineering major from Clarksville Tenn., has selected the natural option two times. She first decided to go natural during her high school senior year.

"I was looking through some pictures and I noticed how bad my hair looked," Rogers said about her relaxed hair. "I like the look of my natural hair when I was a child and I wanted that look again."

Rogers said she opted to relax her hair for her high school graduation at her grandmother's request. After six months, Rogers cut her relaxed hair off again and returned to her natural roots.

"My grandmother and my aunt both died of cancer," Rogers said. "They were beautiful women with and without their hair."

Students like Tai Clark feel it's something that you have to grow into.

"It's something that comes with time," said Clark, a freshman biology major from Nashville. "I haven't matured enough yet. I may consider it one day."

Treece agrees and believes that choosing to wear your natural hair is not just about getting rid of the chemicals. It's about an awareness of self. Self-confidence is crucial.

"Follow your heart," Rogers said, advising others that want to make the transition. "No one but you has control. If you think that you are confident enough to do it then do it."

Typically, when we think of going natural or anything concerning hair, we think of women. But men are also making the choice to show their roots.

Men typically keep their hair cut into shorter styles. With the endless array of braided styles and the popularity of locks, men are saying no to the clippers.

Justin Jenkins, a freshman psychology major from Atlanta, and Corterrius Pittman, a freshman biology major from Memphis, said they have been growing their shoulder-length and beyond hair for five years now.

Jenkins wears his hair in locks that extend down his back while Pittman's shoulder-length hair is styled in two strand twists and flat twists.

"I didn't like haircuts," Jenkins said. "It cost too much money."  
Pittman also admitted that he wasn't a fan of the clippers.  
Blacks have been pinned with several negative stereotypes.

In the 1960s and 1970s, natural hair, and the afro in particular, were almost synonymous with the black pride movement. The afro became a sign of black beauty. With the racial tension inherent to the era, mainstream America viewed the afro in a negative light and attached unfavorable connotations to the natural style.

"People think that I am unintelligent," Pittman said. "But once I open my mouth they see that I am very intelligent. People sometimes think that I am in a gang, but you can't judge a book by its cover."

Locks also carry negative stereotypes. Though locks date back to ancient Egypt, they have become almost synonymous with Rastafarianism. Stereotypes associated with the "Rastas" include smoking marijuana and militant attitudes.

Jenkins said that because of his choice to wear locks, he has been the victim of these stereotypes.

"People think that I smoke weed and listen to Bob Marley," Jenkins said.

In college, especially at historically black institutions, the choice to be natural is not necessarily an issue.

"People don't think twice about it," said Gabrielle Jackson, a junior psychology major from Mobile, Ala.

But when students leave college and enter the workforce, employers may not see the beauty of natural hair. Lora J. Springer, the assistant director of the Career Development Center, said that natural hair could be an issue.

"It depends on the culture of the organization," Springer said. More conservative companies may frown on natural hair because of the stereotypes that surround it.

According to Springer, some companies may begin to crack down on smaller offenses in order to weed out a person because of their choice of hairstyle. A company cannot legally fire a person based on their hair alone.

But if a company is more conservative, naturals must make sure that they do not give their employers other ammunition to use against them. Many employers will not be that strict, but it pays to know what you are dealing with in advance.

Springer suggests checking a company's website for photos or paying a visit to the company to see how the company visually represents itself by the people that are employed. It also pays to know the company's policies regarding grooming and appearance.

"As long as the hair is well-groomed, it should be acceptable, but don't be surprised if you don't get the job," advised Springer about ultra-conservative companies.

Apparently, conservative America is not the only nation that frowns on natural styles.

In Barbados, where 90 percent of the population is black, Sen. Damien Griffin was ridiculed recently for wearing his neatly groomed cornrows while he appeared in parliament.

A career in politics does provide a conservative environment, and the opinions on his choice of hairstyle have been scattered.

But Griffin has insisted that he will not be cutting his hair.

For anyone who is thinking about transitioning from the relaxer into the realm of nappaturality, there are several resources available. Motowngirl.com is one of the leading Web sites for those seeking insight into the realm of the au naturale.

Motowngirl.com was started when Alisha Cole, owner and webmistress, began documenting the progress of her own journey from relaxed to natural.

"At the time, there were no other sites on the web that dealt with natural hair," said Cole, who started the site in 2000. "As time went on, I would get the same type of questions for different people.

"So instead of typing the same question over and over again, I would create new sections of my site," Cole continued. It just kept growing, and it continues to grow."

Cole's own transition took place when she was in college and her parents stopped giving her money to continue what used to be her biweekly visits to the salon. She said she attempted to go natural twice, but was not able to succeed until she began documenting her journey via her Web site. After 14 months, her transition was complete.

Currently, Motowngirl.com has approximately 55,000 unique visitors and 1.4 million page views each month.

"I do very well with my site combining advertising, affiliate programs, consultations, t-shirt sales and donations," Cole said.

"College life in general affects it," Treece said, about one's perception of natural hair. "It's more than just hair.

"A lot of times when people decide to go natural, they also make other life changes," Treece continued. "So going natural could be a part of a lifestyle change."

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Photos by Kenneth Cummings of The Meter.

Ashley McDonald is opinions editor of The Meter, the Tennessee State University student newspaper, which originally published a version of this article.