

Black hair culture, politics and change

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Since the period of black enslavement in the Americas, Diaspora people have used their bodies as a canvas on which to articulate their presence as subjects. This propensity to use the body as a key medium of creative and political expression emerged from an amalgam of African retentions and new, grounded syncretisms in the West. It was further influenced by their denial of access to the academies and cultural institutions such as music halls, galleries, theatres, museums and even clubs. But more than an embodied locus of creativity, the black body has been a site of political struggle since the antebellum period. Whether generated by an oppressor who sought to condition the black subject for labour by inflicting pain on his/her body or driven by the conflicts within some black subjects for physiognomic valuation, the body of the diasporic settler has been and remains a key site of political contestation. This paper will explore these two themes through the medium of black hair culture. In the process, it will look at the centrality of hair to diasporic aesthetics and hair as a symbol of black resistance to oppression. In doing so, it offers students and educationalists with an interest in issues-based enquiry in art and design education a pathway to project development with a focus on hair culture that could be developed in a variety of media, while opening up avenues for dialogue that should enhance understanding.

Black body aesthetics

Black body aesthetics have been central to Diaspora¹ expressivity since the beginning of the slave trade. A Dutch traveller to Surinam in the 17th century witnessed the arrival of a slaver 'at the end of the nightmare of the Middle Passage' and noted how:

'All the Slaves are led upon deck ... their hair shaved in different figures of Stars. Half-moons, &c./ which they generally do the one to the other (having no Razors) by the help of a broken bottle and without Soap/.' It is hard to imagine a more impressive example of irrepressible cultural vitality than this image of slaves decorating one another's hair in the midst of one of the most dehumanising experiences in all history.

(Mintz & Price, 1992, p. 48)

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It is hard to envisage a situation where even before disembarkation from a slave ship and after the nightmare of the middle-passage, enslaved peoples felt a need to tend their hair in the manner described by the European traveller. This determination to dress their hair even in such extreme conditions by the people off the Surinam coast had an echo in subsequent years in the behaviour of the enslaved on the plantations and other sites of bondage. Diaspora people in those early days created a language of style that drew on their African past, the new creative initiatives that emerged from within their own communities on the plantations and elsewhere, and from practices borrowed from their enslavers. They also absorbed new ideas from the indigenous peoples they encountered alongside those of other oppressed groups such as indentured labourers from South Asia. As such, they functioned as 'bricoleurs' (White & White, 1998) by taking from different traditions and creating a new mode of expressiveness. In referencing Adair, White & White (1998, p. 51) give an example of borrowing from European style in saying that:

What appears to have happened quite often, however, was that slaves styled their own hair to resemble the wigs worn by members of the dominant caste. Some runaway advertisements are quite specific on this point. John Van Dyke of New York noted that his slave Hamilton sometimes craped (that is, frizzed) his hair and that 'when craped, it appears like a cut wig.' Pompey, a Maryland runaway, was said to wear 'his wool combed back on the top of his head, forming a toupee.'

Arogundade (2003, p. 162) controversially asserts that with emancipation:

blacks throughout the colonies had the opportunity to be aesthetically self-determinant, but instead they chose white beauty values. Out of the ashes of black beauty a new look emerged. A mutation. A hybrid of black and white — of Africa meets America. Blacks took the basic canvas of their Africanness and grafted on a new kit of components transplanted from white beauty values. And so *transracial* beauty was born. It was not black, it was not white, it was a brew of the two. It was category three.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, depictions of the black as beady eyed and thick lipped with wild unkempt hair were popular in comic cartoons, in children's stories, and in food, soap and other advertising (Congdon-Martin, 1990). Often in these problematic constructs the hair of the black subjects was used as a symbol of their supposed degenerate, simple or savage presence (White & White, 1998). The development of the film industry in the early 1920s and 1930s elaborated the genre and took it to new levels of popularity among white consumers. Black subjects in films were constructed within the prevailing myths of black savagery, simplicity and brute physicality (Bogle, 1994). The eager-to-serve spear-toting 'savages' who were the backdrop to many Tarzan movies were often suitably unkempt, simple and apparently eager to be led by a white man. More especially, the popular character Farina in *Our Gang*, his hair dressed with tightly twisted 'pickaninny pigtails' (Bogle, 1994, p. 21), was an encapsulation of the degradation of blackness. Though in many ways a character of 'heroic demeanour' with his 'husky voice and arrogantly pleasant way about him', who often came to the rescue of 'little white damsels in distress' (Bogle, 1994, p. 23), through the treatment of his hair, he was depicted as 'a sexually ambiguous character', the pigtails

so bizarrely styled that they served to foreground white constructs of his 'race' and culture in a particularly strident manner. It is almost as if the creators of the character were saying that this young person might have positive qualities but lest we misread his true position in life check out his hair.

Hair straightening with lye

Conking² as a trend style from the early to mid-20th century was bitterly opposed by some members of the black community for the message it conveyed about internalized diasporic inferiority. This chemical means of straightening African hair became fashionable among black entertainers in the pre- and post-war eras (Figure 1). Nat King Cole, Fats Domino, Josephine Baker and many other black American entertainers treated their hair in this way. But the process is painful: the lye used in the treatment burns and even blisters the scalp. Adams (1996) quotes Malcolm X, who in the 1950s conked his hair and said of the process:

The congolene just felt warm when Shorty started combing it in. But then my head caught fire.

I gritted my teeth and tried to pull the sides of the kitchen table together. The comb felt as if it was raking my skin off.

My eyes watered, my nose was running. I couldn't stand it any longer; I bolted to the wash-basin. I was cursing Shorty with every name I could think of

(Malcolm X, 1964)



Figure 1. Gerald, the author's brother, in a conk hairstyle (c.1968)

Twentieth-century technologies and new black opportunities

In this climate of greater access and freer public communication, the Harlem Renaissance or the Negritude movement was formed in the USA in the 1920s. A key figure in the Harlem Renaissance was the Jamaican born activist Marcus Garvey. He formed the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), making the 'reclamation of an African-based aesthetic a central tenet of his political platform' (Byrd & Tharps, 2001, p. 38). Martin (1991, p. 1) asserts that:

Marcus Garvey is well known for having organized and led the Universal Negro Movement Association, the largest Pan-African organization of its kind ever. The U.N.I.A. flourished in the years after World War 1. ... He wanted to reach out to his brothers and sisters in suffering throughout the African world. Garvey more than anyone else, provided for the New Negro an avenue wherein he might vent his feelings and realize ambitions.

Garvey's Back to Africa strain of Negritude encapsulated a greater pride in our connections with an African past, and implored black people not to 'remove the kinks from your hair. ... Remove them from your brain' (Byrd & Tharps, 2001, p. 38). He galvanized sections of the black community in Harlem and elsewhere in the USA into a committed, politically aware group of activist. Through his work the Rastafarian movement was formed.

Rastafarian dreadlocks

Rastafarian hairstyling came to prominence with the success of Bob Marley, a Rastafarian and wearer of dreadlocks. The Rastafarian's treatment of hair is one of the key signs of their pride in the natural qualities of African physical and cultural attributes (Figure 2). Byrd & Tharps (2001, p. 125) assert that 'The word *dreadlocks* signifies "unholy people's fear of the dreadful power of the holy"'. They further suggest that:

The name derives from the days of the slave trade. When Africans emerged from the slave ships after months spent in conditions adverse to any personal hygiene, Whites would declare the matted hair that had grown out of their kinky unattended locks to be 'dreadful'.

(For that reason, they continue, 'many today wearing the style choose to drop the *a* in *dreadlock* to remove all negative connotations'.)

Importantly, though associated with Rastafarianism and seen by many as a unique feature of their culture, locking has been around for a long time and is associated with people from different continents and 'races'. From the Kikuyu soldiers of the Mau Mau, who inspired the Rastafarian adoption of the hairdo, to 'Japan's Rasta-Buddhists and Maori warriors in New Zealand'. They further state that 'the style dates to before the fifth century, when Bahatowie priests of the Ethiopian Coptic church locked their hair' (Byrd & Tharps, 2001, p. 129).

Today people across continents wear long, often matted locks to create a distinctive Rastafarian look. However, many diasporic people who would not countenance the adoption of values that go against universally accepted Western norms, regard the Rastafarian way of life as extreme. Even Marley's mother Cedella is said to have



Figure 2. Student with locked hair

eschewed the style when her son Bob adopted it. As Stephen Davis, Marley's biographer, is reported to have said, 'the Rastafarians ... were looked upon with revulsion and real dread by the masses of Jamaicans' and so 'The idea of her son wearing dreadlocks was almost too much for Cedella to bear' (Arogundade, 2003, p. 76). But dreadlocks were a key feature in the struggle against white oppression and the celebration of a renaissance in black pride, black physiologies and culture (Byrd & Tharps, 2001).

The Black Power movement and Afro style

The Black Power movement brought articulate and focused leadership to the American and to a lesser degree the broader African Diaspora. It critiqued black popular culture and demonstrated how our lives in the West had been marked by the slave trade and the dehumanizing effect of racism. Importantly, too, it exposed the manner in which we were sometimes complicit in our own degradation as a people. Hair conking and straightening were perceived to be emblematic of internalized self-hatred. The Afro, on the other hand, by its celebration of the materiality of African hair, emerged as a marker of black pride (Figure 3). This style first appeared in the 1950s as a chic black style:

The Afro has partial roots in bourgeois high-fashion circles in the late 1950s and was seen by the black and white elite as a kind of new female exotica.

(Kelley, 1997, p. 341)



Figure 3. Jascinta Dash in an Afro hairstyle (c.1968)

Willis (1990, p. 92) puts it succinctly in saying that:

In the 1960s black liberation movements proposed the slogan 'Black is beautiful' to contest the hegemony of this white aesthetics with a grounded aesthetics of its own. Fully aware that such hegemony depended on the subjective internalisation of these norms and values, the Afro hairstyle was adopted by Afro-Americans as an outward affirmation of an empowering sense of black pride.

The Afro is a style that draws on qualities intrinsic to curly African hair: the coil of the hair, its capacity to grow in a thick mass. 'Shaping the Afro was like sculpting a hedge or a piece of ice. You could cut styles into it and they would hold. They would stay frozen in the broccoli matrix like art' (Arogundade, 2003, p. 171). By the 1960s, Afro or '*au natural*' was being 'sporting by rock-throwing black males and black-leathered militants armed to the teeth' (Kelley, 1997, p. 344). Angela Davis of course was arguably the most famous exponent of the 'fro. Arogundade (2003, p. 72) theorizes that:

Never had a hairstyle struck so much fear into white America as the Afro did during the late 1960s. News bulletins of angry-faced Afro-Americans, violent demonstrations and race riots threw the media into a tailspin of hysteria that succeeded in associating the style with hardcore militant behaviour.

Our post-modern, intercultural world

Young people are today borrowing and appropriating many of the styling characteristics intrinsic to the coiffure of other groups. Techniques such as braiding, plaiting and bleaching proliferate across continents and the result of them can be seen in Dakar, Chicago, Kingston and London (Figures 4 and 5). Traditional styles in Africa are merging with American and Caribbean looks to create a rich new strand of black

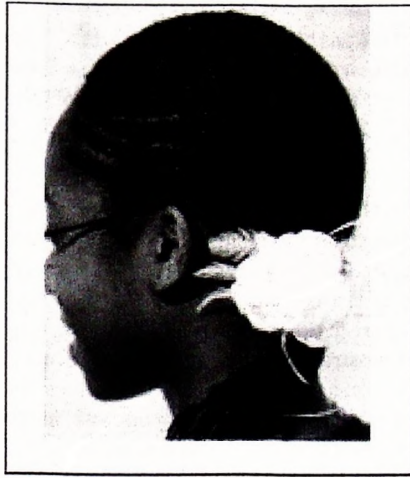


Figure 4. Camilla Mussington's cornrowed style

expression (Biaya, 1998). Styles on the streets of Dakar can be inspired by political events in Paris, the demise of an American rap artist or a new import from Kinshasa (Biaya, 1998, p. 91). David Beckham's famous cornrowed hairdo with all its echoes of Bo Derek's plaited style in the movie *10* is an example of white appropriation and commercialization of black 'natural' hair looks (Byrd & Tharps, 2001, p. 102). But today many black celebrities and members of the wider public dye their hair blonde,



Figure 5. London youth with plaited or braided hair

an act that would have met with derision in black communities in the 1960s. As Adams (1996, p. 99) states:

What we are currently witnessing is a proliferation of hairstyles among both blacks and whites. No longer do blacks necessarily style their hair in an effort to look white, and whites now often style their hair in an effort to look black, which, to them, suddenly seems more stylish. The self, whether black or white, adopts, adapts — appropriates — the look of the other.

The popularity of jet travel, and in many countries easy access to the Internet and the media, have brought about an unprecedented mingling of cultures, values and practices. What was once regarded as separate and in the unique ownership of, say, the Japanese is now donned in Senegal or sampled in New York City. The Reggae rhythms of Kingston are as much a part of the experience of the Tokyo teenager as the Brixton music fan. In this climate, hair straightening, dyeing and curling are practised by young people everywhere as options on a palette of styling techniques. Such access contributes to a notion of heritage, which culls ideas and styling options from traditions and peoples everywhere. As such, it is an encapsulation of an emerging creolized notion of community, which draws on ideas and principles from people of like mind everywhere. While black hair styling has developed from its unique textural qualities, long-standing African heritages and the history of oppression, it is today located in an environment of mix and match that often shows little regard for such politics.

Hair and art practice

Schemes based on the politics of hair styling could be the starting point for issues-based work or conceptual enquiry in art and design departments. Such foci need not deal solely with the black body as such but could engage wider forms of symbolic representation: the way we are manipulated by advertising to purchase particular products in the quest for a media constructed look; the projection of women as objects of desire, and its corollary, their exclusion from arenas of power and control, being a few examples. However, the demonizing in the media of the black body and black physical characteristics, could form the context for more focused enquiry with a bearing on the construction of identities through hair styling.



Sonia Boyce, the Black British artist, has produced a wide range of work that deal with African hair. In her piece *Do You Want to Touch?* (1993),³ African hair is problematized as specimens on display. As such the black figure is symbolically objectified for the scrutiny of the viewer. Certainly, the arrangement of hairpieces in a museum-like setting suggests the type of scholarship normally associated with Western display of ethnographic specimens. Different types of hairpieces are shown including synthetic and real hair formations, some plaited, others in a straight style, a few are decorated with beads and shells. Thus the piece signals an entanglement of relationships and histories, referencing for example our African past in the choice of decoration and styling arrangements, while evoking memories of Jim Crow segregation and Darwinism. The title *Do You Want to Touch?* is a reminder of the peculiar relationship white people have with 'black' hair, and the black body. Black hair is seen

as alluring yet threatening, something *they* seek to touch, as a result of a fascination with difference, or maybe because it symbolizes a distant other world detachment and the perceived lower 'racial' status of the black subject. The act of touching could indeed by this means be perceived as a peculiar form of *power-knowledge* (Foucault, 1980).⁴ The choice of hair materials — synthetic and real — also raises questions of authenticity. Clearly, many black women wear synthetic hairpieces and at one level one could read the piece as making reference to that. Other questions of fake and real come into play that could lead to other enquiry into forms of symbolic representation.

Joy Gregory's *Blonde* (1998)⁵ problematizes 'blondness' as a sign of beauty and good looks in the black British community. It consists of a number of photographs of black people who have dyed their hair blonde or who are photographed in blonde wigs. The piece when displayed in 1998 consisted of a website and an exhibition, and according to Doy (2000, p. 190), it investigated:

the reasons why non-Europeans go blonde. 'Their reasons for being blonde were both political and personal, ranging from the serious to the superficial. The main aim was a personality change, be it temporary or permanent'.

Activities driven by this history of resistance and play embedded in black hair culture could lead to other developments in the classroom. Some involving research on headpieces from different cultures could focus on sculptural projects in clay, mod-roc, papier-mâché, filmic or other media. Students could create their own designs for hairdos using as a starting point, say, Stedman's observation of slaves off the coast of Surinam shaving patterns into each other's hair. Comparisons could be drawn with present-day patterned hairstyles, so popular among youths around the world. Schemes devised for more advanced students could emphasize conceptual approaches building units around, say, locks of hair through which key moments in history could be woven. Different ethnic or 'racial' hair types could signal a wide range of meanings in different contexts, from those rooted in Caucasian styles to issues inherent to African, Chinese, South Asian and other hair types.

A scheme that swaps hairdos, possibly with reference to the photographs of, say, Sonia Boyce, Maud Sulter or Joy Gregory, could be planned, placing styles normally associated with specific groups of people on the heads of others, questioning the apparent character change brought about by this, and the way we categorize people by their look. Design-based projects drawn from the popular music industry could elaborate schemes that look at the use of the bandanna in hip-hop video productions. Similarly, the use of baseball caps could add a new dimension to the range of possibilities for making. It is for curriculum designers to show the imagination to draw on this range of possibilities to make hair-culture central to teaching in the arts and other creative areas of the curriculum.

Conclusion

Popular culture is an arena in which Diaspora people have excelled since emancipation. Shut out from mainstream cultural institutions and acculturated to creative

modes that privilege personal expressivity, they, often in collaboration with other oppressed groups, have created new popular languages that are today influential on the way people everywhere assert their subjectivity. This influence can be felt on the streets of communities as diverse as Tokyo, Tangiers and Montreal, and is driven largely by black music and black style.

The aesthetics of black hair culture is integral to black popular music and body style. An appreciation of the lengths to which many black entertainers and celebrities have gone to style their hair would demonstrate this. But the aesthetics of black hair styling is also linked to a history of repression and resistance in African Diaspora communities. Through issues-based enquiry with a focus on hair culture, children could compare hairdos from different times and different social groups to see how social positionalities whether black or, say, English working class are encoded in such styling. But hair grooming could also be used as a starting point for classroom research into other embodied forms of repression, be they Chinese foot-binding or the wearing of corsets in 19th-century England. Different ways in which the body is shaped and honed for political and aesthetic reasons could by this means open areas of enquiry that could broaden understanding and create productive contexts for making.

Issues-based, conceptual and other contemporary approaches offer opportunities for a fruitful exploration of the body as a political and aesthetic resource in art and design education. Such practices could draw on embodied and other popular and historical experiences of children and the groups with which they identify as a starting point for enquiry, providing by this means a space for their individual voices to be heard. Diaspora styling trends have a meaningful part to play in such artistic enquiry. It is for the resourceful teacher to place teaching and learning in the ownership of all children by engaging such cultural material through contemporary practice and, in the process, make the experience of making art a more inclusive and rewarding activity.

Notes

1. The term 'Diaspora' is used to refer to those people of largely African ancestry in the West who are the direct descendants of slaves.
2. Conking is a form of styling in which the hair is treated with lye or other chemicals to straighten it artificially. The process is often painful and can damage the skin. When completed, a conk can last for several weeks if properly maintained. Hair straightened in this way can acquire the temporary glossy sheen favoured by many wearers.
3. For the INIVA website, which features Sonia Boyce's *Do You Want to Touch?*, see <http://www.iniva.org/archive/resource/402>
4. Atkinson (2002, p. 104) postulates that 'Foucault's integration of power-knowledge invokes the idea that the acquisition, transmission or use of knowledge ... implicate different forms of power'. I am using this theory to reference the patronage implicit to some filmic and literary creations including the character Farino, in which the black subject is depicted in a less than complementary way by members of the white hegemony who think they *know* the Negro and have, by this knowledge, the authority to represent them.
5. For Joy Gregory's *Blonde*, see <http://www.iniva.org/archive/resource/141>

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