

City University of New York (CUNY)

## CUNY Academic Works

---

Capstones

Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism

---

Fall 12-15-2017

### Hair is The Root of a Revolution: How Black Women Are Embracing Their Identity With Hair

Shanel Dawson

*Cuny Graduate School of Journalism*

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: [https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gj\\_etds/227](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gj_etds/227)

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

---

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).

Contact: [AcademicWorks@cuny.edu](mailto:AcademicWorks@cuny.edu)

## Hair is The Root of a Revolution: How Black Women Are Embracing Their Identity With Hair

By: Shanel Dawson

Last August, I stood before the mirror looking at my hair. It was brittle and thinned, but it was straight.

It had been several days since I had gotten a fresh relaxer, which had burned parts of my scalp. I ran my fingers through my hair and felt a few scabs. I picked at the scabs. I pulled out strands of hair with every sore.

This was a routine after every relaxer treatment I received monthly over the last 20 years of my life. In fact, extracting scabs from my scalp had become something I did to pass time in the weeks after straightening my hair.

I couldn't help but be disgusted with myself: disgusted that I had paid \$60, sat for over 20 minutes while chemicals ate away at my scalp and then endured a scorching hair dryer for another hour. I never told my beautician that my scalp was burning because I wanted to ensure the straightening chemicals stayed in my hair long enough to work.

That summer day, I shook off my thoughts, telling myself this was a necessary evil to be accepted by society. Beauty is pain, and straight hair, difficult as it is to maintain, makes life easier, or so I had thought for so long. In my mind, straight hair meant better treatment by everyone, even by some black people. Straight hair meant less trouble at work. Straight hair meant beauty. Straight hair meant acceptance.

But a few weeks later, I had an epiphany: straightening my hair meant rejecting my identity. It meant altering parts of me that make me unique.

So, after extensive research, pep talks with myself and conversations with my black girlfriends, I decided to transition from relaxed to natural hair.

My experience connects to a phenomenon: African-American women, nationwide, are rejecting straightening chemicals and embracing their natural hair as a point of pride. For years, black women have been demeaned for their features---their noses, complexions and hair. Straight hair and wavy hair have been considered "good hair." And for centuries these ideas have been perpetuated by images in the media, cultural messages and even policies in schools and professional settings.

The negative connotations associated with "nappy hair" have led to generations of black women trying to achieve European standards of beauty with straight hair. Women of today's generation are attempting to distance themselves from these negative narratives by, quite literally, honoring their roots.

In Bedford-Stuyvesant, Tamara Albertini has built a business, Ancestral Strands, around the idea that embracing natural hair and tribal braiding styles is a way for women of African descent to connect with their heritage.

When she showcased her braiding styles at arts and style festivals like Afropunk and CurlFest, the response was so overwhelming that she had no need for the marketing plan she had developed.

“I had this whole big plan,” said Albertini, 32. “I’m going to hit up Vogue and Cosmopolitan and all these other black hair magazines.” But when Albertini opened her doors, demand was already surging for what she was offering.

“There’s women out there who need that” connection, she said. “It’s like some of us are lost. Some of us don’t know where we came from, where we’re going, where we are.”

“It’s nice to have that connection with my clients,” she continued. “Them sitting down in the chair and actually forming a conversation and a feeling about being proud of who they are, having a connection to their hair and learning about their hair.”

For many women, accepting their natural hair has been the easiest way to connect on a deeper level with their heritage. And the proof of the trend is in the diminishing power of the “creamy crack”: Sales of relaxers are on the decline while sales of natural-hair products are soaring.

“The black haircare market is in transition, as soft sales growth is wedged between two, very different consumer trends: one, a booming natural and regimen-focused product segment vs the precipitous sales free-fall of relaxers,” wrote Toya Mitchell, a market researcher, in a recent consumer report on the black haircare industry.

This is not the first-time that black women have gone natural as a point of pride. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, many wore their hair in Afros and draped themselves in African-inspired prints as the Black Power movement advocated for racial pride. Today, the Black Lives Matter movement has inspired a kind of reboot of the themes and styles that inspired an earlier generation. Young African-Americans, in particular, are drawing inspiration from Africa, and talking and writing about Afrocentrism, Afro art, Afro beauty, black magic, and black girl magic in response to a continued feeling of marginalization from mainstream society.

In the past, salons and homes have been places for black women to discuss issues around hair, but today the conversations have moved outside of these safe spaces and into the online world. “Naturalistas” provide support systems for each other through blogs, Instagram posts and other forms of social media.

Albertini said most clients find her through social media – as did I.

Like many women transitioning, I sought a support group that could help guide me through my natural hair journey and stumbled on “Brooklyn Naturalistas,” a meetup group Albertini had created.

Albertini attributed the natural hair and black pride movements to the many injustices blacks have witnessed in recent years.

“We're starting to really question ourselves and what is it about ourselves that these white folks or whoever is being racist don't like about us,” she said. “That's where self-imagery comes in and that feeling of not accepting ourselves. That's when we're like, okay, let's get back to our roots.”

Sakeenah Kinard, a spokeswoman for another popular Brooklyn natural salon, Nu Wave Kulture Kreations shared the same sentiments.

“There's just been an overall coming together to say, you know what? No. Wait, I love my people, I love myself. I'm going to embrace my heritage and embrace who I am on a deeper level.”

Despite the energy, surrounding natural hair and black pride there's evidence that indicates there are still biases against “kinkier” hair and protective styles like braids and twists which--- allow women to grow their natural hair healthily.

In October, Destiny Tompkins, 19, an employee of Banana Republic, was taken off her work schedule after being told her braids were “too urban” and “unkempt.” And in May a Boston charter school threatened detention and suspension for Deanna and Mya Scott, 15-year-old twins who wore box braids to school.

I have yet to encounter overt discrimination for wearing my natural hair and protective styles, but as I leave graduate school and enter the workforce I wonder how to style myself for interviews. Should I flat-iron my hair? Should I buy an expensive straight-hair wig? Should I install a weave, which is costly --- the cost of hair alone is over \$300.00. Will I turn off my potential employer by coming off too ethnic?

I've been told by my white peers that I shouldn't think in such a manner but the reality is I do. The good thing is I don't have to make a decision about my hair immediately. I'll have to cross that bridge when I get there.

For now, I will continue to embrace my identity and love my natural coils.

### **A Naturalista You Should Know:**

Shannon Wright, a 23-year-old, African-American illustrator and cartoonist, has tapped into the movement with her illustrations and her hair. Wright, who transitioned from relaxed to natural hair in college, said some of her illustrations are inspired by her personal journey.

“When I got to college I became more socially aware of things,” she said. “I just wanted healthier hair and I realized a lot of my practices with my hair had stemmed from what was acceptable to white people.”

“Once I let that go, I just felt more comfortable in my skin. My hair was happier. I was happier. But for the most part I became more aware of myself and my roots.”

In April, Wright gained publicity from illustrations she made of black women depicted with natural hairstyles. A lot of black women reached out to her expressing their admiration for her pieces.

Wright said she didn’t understand the attention the drawings received.

“It's just so natural to include a diverse set of people and backgrounds because it just makes stories and pieces richer.

“Being inclusive, it's just normal and it's natural.”