

## My Hair and I

Black hair, a concept that has frustrated me for the past 19 years of my life. I did not think that the amount of or the state of hair on my head would matter as much as it does in society, but the truth is hair has value; especially lots of it. In 2014 after moving to downtown Oakland, I experienced all hell being perceived as an object by men each day. I would walk down the street and be harassed by not one but a handful of men whether I was wearing sweat pants or not. It felt as though I was carrying a huge sign on my forehead that read "open for business" and my position in the restaurant industry did not help either. When I was a host my position was to be the first person to be shit on by whoever decides to stroll into the premise that day. It had been almost two years until I realized that this duty was taking a toll on me, and also tainting my perception of how women are viewed in society versus how they should be viewed. This inner conflict between whether I am sexualized and whether people see me as sexualized, tormented me until I decided to take a stand against conventional beauty.

After quitting my longest term job in San Francisco and committing myself to a local upscale Southern restaurant I knew that something would have to change. I was disturbed by the way that men viewed me because I did not understand what they were looking or why they were looking. An easier answer to my confusion could have been, "men are dogs", but I believe that there is a reason for every nature in humankind. On September 7<sup>th</sup> 2014 I shaved my head, I had been contemplating my decision for weeks, questioning whether things would change. I wondered if my boyfriend would lose his attraction towards me, if my work colleagues would prefer me not being at the front of the house, and lastly whether my friends would feel embarrassed to be seen with me in public. I questioned myself constantly about this but I knew in my heart that it was what I needed in order to feel like them, and when I mean them I mean men.

I wanted to feel like I did not care what I looked like, I wanted to blend into the background of a male centered society so that I could be at peace when I went for a walk or to get a bagel from Zaya Cafe.

The reactions that I received from cutting my hair as a woman was and still is shocking to me. I knew at that moment when I stepped out to go to the store that everyone was staring away from me. It felt that way for weeks after I cut my hair and I began to feel frustrated because a part of me missed the attention. My boyfriend recognized a shift in my physical insecurity and worried about me. My sisters reminded me to wear earrings which truthfully would define my identity in public. My best friend could not find the words to make any comment at all for I knew my decision to cut it off bothered her. My boyfriend and I actually became closer as my inner self started to shine as it was not hidden by my beauty, or shall I say my hair. Overall the way the world saw me changed and the way I saw the world transformed from being so exposed visually.

I embraced my growing connection with my partner and praised his persistence to continue loving me for me. I know a lot of people say that our significant others are blinded by how much they love us to tell us the truth, but my lover had only ever loved me for me and shaving my hair off taught him that too. In time I stopped caring about what the world thought about me and focused on how I view myself and how other women did too. I started to take women studies classes to figure out how power in society is divided and what makes women to me, seem like a second species to man. I uncovered the works of Bell Hooks, Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, Virginia Woolf, Laura Mulvey and more in order to shape my own opinion on society and phallogentrism. Once I had finished the courses with my amazing professor Doubiago I was scared as to what I could do to impact the future of women who feel a lack of control. A feeling that I have now learnt has been embedded within our role as women

since the beginning. In the end I quit my job as hosting, due to mistreatment as a woman from customers and my work colleagues. I began to notice the underlying tones of misogyny and the double bind of what is ok for women to do compared to what men can do. Those courses changed my life and that is why I am writing this essay not because I am bored, but instead I feel a pressing weight to take agency in that one day it will be acknowledged.

I enjoyed the peace of not being hollered at, of not having to care about how I looked because I knew that without my hair I was still beautiful and it mattered more to have that beauty on the inside. The responses that I got from people were the most intense part about cutting my hair. I was unable to find a job as a server because I was still underage to serve alcohol. My options became thin and I considered S&M torturers as an occupation to regain that feeling of being wanted by an employer. Although my friends from San Francisco loved the cut, my friends elsewhere did not feel the same and slowly moved away from me as my true self flourished. I started to become accepted by other black women and heard by men rather than admired or surveyed. I was pleased but also dismal in that I felt like I scared people away with being so exposed as a black woman.

It was during my trip back to my hometown, Los Angeles, when I really felt the pressure to get my hair back. My entire family was visiting from England and although the holidays are stressful those Christmas memories will forever live on. I got a fresh new cut from my cousin and was feeling good, elevated and happy a feeling that I get when my hair is completely off. I texted my best friend to share that good news and she responded with her opinion about my hair. She informed me that in her culture hair means power, she said that her mother views hair as a symbol of femininity and that she did not agree with my decision. My sister a hair fanatic suggested I dye it to a lighter color, my other sister explained to me that the way people

especially white people do not like to see black women with short hair. I did not care at first but the words sunk in and New Years Eve was approaching which meant I needed a hair, not only to fit in but mostly to feel comfortable.

New Years Eve I purchased my first wig, it was \$29.98 at Sterlings beauty supply on Fairfax. I chose the most flumbunctious, long and exaggerated wig to embody someone who I was trying to be for the sake of society. I immediately felt the change in energy of how people approached me quicker, the people I met were drawn to my personality without realizing that my down to earthness was due to being exposed. I imagined what it would be like if I just revealed my true hair, which is confused with identity, and how they would react to find out. When I recognized this change in how people responded to me I knew that the truth was that "Bad hair means you look like a slave"-Indie Arie. Although my short style was taken care of it still reminded those of the other race of what their ancestors saw as painfully ugly. A bare black woman with short hair shows the world today that she is not afraid to be who she is, whereas a bare black woman with long straight hair style performs her identity for white comfort primarily.

After that vacation to Los Angeles I began to wear my wig to go to my temp job which I found doing so gave me more tips. It is weird to think how much femininity is praised compared to female masculinity, the mental recognition that I would not receive money if I was not feminine enough was worrying. It is not enough for women to just be women as it is for a man to be man, and that is why I am writing this. We tend to put so much value in how people look and in the end,, we end up repeating our past mistakes by letting race, class and gender affect our perception of people.

Judith Butler in her essay about gender as a construction touches upon a similar concept that these binaries that women can do certain things that men can't and vice versa has led us to create subconscious barriers as though our world is heteronormative only but it is not. The constituting acts that we perform as women such as painting our nails, speaking softly, bending to the will of men to not cause conflict in the workplace, to be apart of our society caused me to lose myself in the beginning of my transformation. I lost myself because I was confused about the way I should see myself and present myself.

I now have braids and am realizing that hair, black hair, has become a white construction to enforce eurocentrism as the right way of living. This leads me to highlight history which shows that since the beginning white males have seen other cultures as savage or "the exotic other" rather than seeing humans as human. Due to this continuous abjection of difference we limit ourselves in extending our abilities and working together to move forward in the present for a better future. That being said my battle towards feeling comfortable in society is endless while our fear of difference in regards to gender, race, class or sex still stands. It should be known that my hair does not define my identity my words and my actions do; my hair tells me the story of where I am from, each kink tells a story which I uncover about myself as time goes by.