

## **More Than Just Hair**

With this coat, I am considering how the natural hair movement has impacted my identity. The natural hair movement has influenced many black people to embrace their natural hair texture, myself included.

I constructed a trenchcoat because my hair is a very important part of my identity and I wanted to do something symbolizing the protection it has over my identity. My design was inspired by a young New York designer, Samantha Cobos, Kanye West's "Yeezy," and Alexander Wang. The back piece with painted puzzle pieces symbolizes how non-black people tend to be confused with natural hair and the surrounding culture.

I hope viewers see strength, protection, and power when looking at my design. I think that it's important that people see this coat and the meaning it has. There are many little black girls in the world being overwhelmed by society's Eurocentric beauty standards and they need an influence to tell them that their black features are good enough and worthy of pride.

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# More Than Just Hair

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“Can I touch your hair?” “Your hair is so nappy/messy?” “Are you going out with your hair like that?” These are the many things people say about natural hair. The definition of natural hair is black hair that hasn’t been damaged by chemical relaxers and perms. Different hair types can be defined by numbers. 1A through 1C would be fine textured hair, 2A through 2C would be wavy hair, 3A through 3C would be looser curly hair, and 4A through 4C is coarser curly hair. This paper will address the meaning behind natural hair and the movement as well as my personal journey with natural hair. The natural hair movement has so many different stories and I want to share and compare my experiences with other people. I’ll also explore the history of the movement from the ‘60s and ‘70s as well as the ‘90s and 2000s.

Growing up, I’ve always heard the phrase “good hair” from family members, friends, and hairdressers. My mom, being an expert on braiding, would frequently braid my hair in all different types of styles from since I was a baby to now. I still remember the scent of “Just For Me” moisturizer and the tightness of bangles and barrettes in my head. Since I never put any “creamy crack” (relaxers) in my hair, it was pretty healthy and curly. Because of the curl pattern and length of my hair at the time, people would say I have “good hair”, but what I saw on the covers of magazines was totally different. These magazines had white women with fine textured hair, but no pictures of black women wearing kinky, curly hair. Girls with long, bone straight hair were the “look” and the more influenced I was by it, the more I wanted to achieve that. Once middle school came, I had a slight addiction to straightening my hair. I would get so many compliments on my fried hair that I continued to fry it more. In seventh grade, I had an epiphany after a hair salon appointment. My hairdresser asked me, “What did you do to your hair? It was so much longer last time?” I had no words. My once armpit length hair turned to ear length and I was devastated. How could I allow myself to damage my “good hair?” A few weeks passed, and I came across the first natural hair video I’d ever seen. I was amazed by the curls she had and how she managed to keep it that way. I told my mom about the natural hair movement on Youtube and she ordered some products for me. I started out pretty bad. I’d slap leave-in conditioner in my hair and rub it in hoping it would do something but my hair was just really damp and smothered in the product. It wasn’t a good look at all. I found some tutorials on twist-outs and braids outs. My mom would do them on me at night and in the morning I would wake up and have nice curls like the ones I would see in the videos. I would do this routine a lot but in sophomore year, I started brushing my hair thoroughly for an Afro look that had my curl pattern. Now, in my junior year, I’ve fully grasped



the skill of taking care of my hair without my mom’s help. This year, I got box braids for the first time after a very long conflict I had with myself and the concept of “fake hair” (weaves, box braids, extensions, wigs, etc) and they helped my hair a lot. I dyed and bleached my hair a couple times which caused me to moisturize it daily. I also cut off all straight and scraggly pieces of my hair, giving it a new, fresh start. As I’m typing this, I look at the curls hovering above my forehead. I feel a sense of pride now that I’ve accomplished a goal that I’ve had all my life. Good hair that’s actually good hair. Healthy, big, poofy, half purple and half blue, good hair. As my mom has told me, my hair is my beauty. My hair is my armor and shield. These strands have so much history. Although I wish I could go back in time and keep the flat iron in the bathroom cabinet, I wouldn’t have it any other way



*Figure 1 Conspicuous Fraud Series #1- Kehinde Wiley*

Europeans. When Africans were brought to the Americas, women were even forced to cut their hair short. After slavery was abolished, African American women would often wear fancy hats to cover up their coils. Madame C.J. Walker became the wealthiest black businessperson and invented products such as the relaxer and hot comb in 1905 for African-American women to have the desirable straight hair. For many years, relaxers and hair straightening tools have damaged black hair; causing hair thinning, hair loss, and elimination of curl patterns. Now, many black women have reclaimed terms such as “nappy” and turned them into a positive light.

The natural hair movement became popular in the 60s and 70s with a prominent member of the Black Panther Party, Angela Davis, wearing her Afro as a symbol of cultural independence. As Rastafarian culture became mainstream in the 80s, dreadlocks also became a very important force in the movement. Today, the natural hair movement has made its mark in the media with celebrities such as Janelle Monae, Solange, Tracee Ellis-Ross, and Viola Davis sporting natural hair looks in music videos, television, and the red carpet. Now, the natural hair movement has made its way to other countries like Canada, France, Great Britain,

because I wouldn't be able to see my hair turn into something that once society deemed “beautiful” to something I, myself see “beautiful”. The natural hair movement shaped me into a woman with a sense of cultural pride and confidence.

The natural hair movement was created by black women (specifically black women) that is to embrace and educate others on the concept of natural hair. Natural hair is typically defined as the many textures black and mixed-race women have that is taken care of without the use of relaxers, perms, etc. The movement encourages people to reject these harmful chemicals by doing product reviews, hair tutorials, blogs, and simply offering advice.

Since the slave trade, natural hair was seen as “nappy” or “ugly” by



*Figure 2 Untitled- Lyle Ashton Harris*

and South Africa. As harmful hair products are declining in sales, more organic natural hair products have been selling. Protective hairstyles like box-braids and faux-locs have become very trendy; hitting mainstream media. Overall, the 2000s has been a pinnacle for the progress of the natural hair movement.

As more people are embrace their natural hair, more people are being discriminated against in schools and in the workplace.

Artists that inspired me to make my final project on natural hair are Barkley L. Hendricks, Kehinde Wiley, Lorna Simpson, and Mickalene Thomas. Barkley L. Hendricks piece, Lawdy Mama, was a painting that caught my eye immediately in my recent trip to the Museum of African Diaspora. It features a woman with an afro in the center with gold. The portrait evokes so much power and that is exactly what I would like to portray in my piece.

I want to use this topic for my final project because I want to present a topic to a demographic that isn't fully educated on natural hair. My hair and its texture have always been a very big component of who I am as a person and artist. I want this project to be a platform to express my political views in specifically black culture. My personal views in black culture is that I believe black parents should teach their children to embrace their natural features regardless of what has been deemed beautiful for centuries.



*Figure 3 Jacket Designed by Samantha Cobos*



*Figure 4 Untitled Face #155 Lyle Ashton Harris*

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Figure 5 Wigs- Lorna Simpson



Figure 6 Portraits of Quaniyah- Mickalene Thomas

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