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African Americans and the African world.

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The Other N Word: NAPPY

The Invisible Woman

By Sharon Kyle

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BlackCommentator.com is pleased to welcome Sharon Kyle as a columnist. "The Invisible Woman" will appear on a regular basis.

Good Hair

Like most blacks in America, I was raised in an environment where hair like mine, kinky hair, was called "bad hair." Straight hair or kink-less hair was "good hair." I grew up receiving messages that directly or indirectly informed me that kinky hair, broad facial features, and dark skin were marks of inferiority. It was common to hear disparaging words spoken of people described as having "dark skin and nappy hair." The infrequent black images portrayed on television, usually in the news, were invariably negative. Even today, subtle and not so subtle messages sent through the airwaves, in advertising, in movies, and in pop culture in general tell us whiteness is the preferred mode of being in America and globally.

In June of 2009 *the LA Progressive* published an article from BlackCommentator.com by K. Danielle Edwards ("[Get the Colonization Off Your Crown, Michelle](#)"), chiding the much admired First Lady for the message her straightened hair sends to young black girls. Not surprisingly, the article rankled some of our readers, reminding me how much pain and ignorance there is around black women and their hair.

Our hair — nappy hair — and the way we treat it could be indicative of how accepted we feel as a people by the larger society. It could, perhaps, be viewed as an indicator for the acceptance of blackness globally. These ideas bring to mind a story my mother

told me.

“I’m Black and I’m Proud”

Back in the sixties, when my mother was a young woman, afros were popular and James Brown’s “Say it Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud” was the mantra of urban America — we lived in the Bronx. But my mother preferred Diana Ross and the Supremes; she emulated their look by wearing socially accepted coifs that almost looked like helmets but were actually wigs.

In our home, wearing your hair in its natural state wasn’t allowed. When I asked why, I was told, “It’s just not done”. Weekly, my mother would straighten my hair with a straightening comb that was heated directly on the stove. The hotter the comb, the straighter the hair. Occasionally the comb was left on the fire too long, resulting in burnt hair and sometimes a burnt scalp. This was an unpleasant and frequently painful experience but it was drilled into me that it was necessary.

When I was finally old enough to care for my own hair, I decided against straightening it. This was not an easy decision. I was bucking against hundreds of years of conditioning – pun intended. But I wanted to rid myself of the burden that comes with straightening. Whether using a thermal method or a chemical one, the cost was more than I was willing to bear. So I challenged the conventional wisdom and started wearing a “Fro”.

Initially, my mother was unhappy with my decision. She tried to get me to change my mind but I wouldn’t. At one point, she had her mother — my Granny — fly coast to coast from Long Beach to New York to discuss my hair, but to no avail. In time, my mom accepted my decision. Back then we rarely saw eye to eye on issues of racial and gender identity. Now its something we hardly discuss.

Hair in Africa

But recently, my mother visited Kenya and Tanzania.

It was her first and only trip to Africa. Her standards for beauty have not shifted with the times. She continues to define “good hair” as straight hair. And she still straightens her hair almost every day. When she went to Kenya, she took along her trusted friend, the straightening comb though now she has an electric one. Unfortunately for Mom, the transformer she brought along for the trip didn’t fit into the sockets in Kenya. So she couldn’t use the comb. More importantly, she couldn’t straighten her hair!!!

I cannot emphasize enough how big a deal this was to my mother. And to make matters worse, it was extremely hot and humid — weather conditions that are the bane of a nappy headed woman’s existence — especially when she’s ashamed of her naps. My mother told me that she even considered staying in her room for the entire 10-day excursion because she didn’t want anyone to see her. Then she thought, “hey, I’m in Africa. My natural hair will probably be accepted here. I should be able to just fit in.” So, she ventured out wearing her hair in its natural state. Later that afternoon after she had taken a brief tour of the city and visited an open market, she telephoned me. “Sharon”, she said, “you’re not going to believe this. I have the nappiest hair in Africa!!”

Turns out, every woman she saw, – and she saw hundreds — wore synthetic hair (wigs, extensions, weaves or fake braids). She talked about one young girl, who she’d met at the market. The girl was very poor but had won a scholarship to attend a college in the

United States. All of her expenses were paid, including air fare. The only thing not covered was the cost of getting to the airport. The girl didn't have the fare and was trying to sell a few things so that she'd be able to scrap up enough money to get to the airport. My mom was touched but couldn't help but notice that even though she didn't have enough money to get to the airport, she had enough to get her bright red synthetic hair extensions!

I had a good laugh when my mom told me she had the nappiest hair in Africa but I also felt some sadness. American women, especially those of us who are black, brown, or Asian, are in a position to redefine and broaden the boundaries of beauty to be more inclusive of the many variations of humanity. Black Americans often set trends that go global. Just look at how hip-hop culture has been embraced around the world. We could celebrate nappy hair instead of disparage it. Some women are doing that and it's a good thing because the impact is global.

Nappy Headed Hoe

A couple of years ago, when I heard that Don Imus had called the Rutgers' basketball team a bunch of "nappy headed ho's", I told my husband there would be trouble not so much because he called them "ho's" (although that was a serious insult that shouldn't be minimized) but because he used the N word — nappy. Even today, the word "nappy" can evoke painful emotions and bad memories for many blacks, something that most non-blacks are oblivious to. Sure enough, Imus was fired. He has since been rehired and is, no doubt, more careful with his language.

Black Hair at Work, in School

When my daughter graduated from Georgetown Law School and began her legal career in Washington D.C., she called me to ask for career advice about, of all things, her hair. Black women who are reading this article will undoubtedly understand. My daughter went to a prestigious college and a prestigious law school. She graduated with honors from both. She was the publisher and founder of her college magazine. She went on to become editor and then editor-in-chief of the *Georgetown Journal on Gender and the Law*. Her list of accomplishments at the tender age of 25 were long enough to fill a couple of pages yet she knew that, with many in the power structure, her hair made more of a statement about her than her educational pedigree or hefty resume. Knowing she was in a position that could take her places, she didn't want to risk the damage that could be caused by a hair misstep. We weighed her options.

She could either spend \$300-\$500 and dozens of hours per month to keep her hair straightened similar to Michelle Obama's or she could spend considerably less money and a fraction of the time and wear dread locks. As a young attorney, time was something she was always short of so the dread locks option was the most attractive but we had to consider how that decision might affect her career.

While it can be argued that all people must make decisions about what is an "appropriate" look for the office, no group is as challenged as black women when it comes to finding a way to care for and present your hair that is both accepted by the dominant group yet isn't overly burdensome on your time and pocket. This challenge is rarely understood by non-blacks.

When my step-daughter, Nea, was in middle school, she quickly was tagged with the name "Afro-dite". She attended a school where she was a racial minority. The kids went crazy when they saw her hair, free from her everyday ponytail, for the first time. My husband, who is white, didn't understand why that experience led Nea to hide her

afro for several years. The need to “fit in” and look appropriate extends to every area of life, not just in the office. Nea was barraged with people trying to touch her hair. She couldn’t handle that at age 12. (Though once she got to high school, poof!, back came the ‘Fro — perhaps because she got more self-confidence or cared a bit less what people thought, or perhaps because her now more mature classmates began to accept her as she is.)

Googling Black Hair

To prepare for this writing, I did a Google search using the key words: “black women and their hair.” This resulted in over 42 million returns. I did the same search but replaced the word “black” with the word “white” this resulted in 5 million fewer returns. When I did this same search two more times but used the words “Latina” and then “Asian” I got 41 million fewer returns than I had gotten using the word “black” where many of the articles addressed the hair issues black women face.

Today, nappy is an N word that continues to conjure up negative images but we can change that. I stopped straightening my hair years ago but every once in a while I’ll change my look. When I do, I get immediate feedback especially at my place of employment. White male senior managers, in particular, who are from a different generation feel the need to tell me how attractive my hair looks — but only when it’s straightened does this happen.

Michelle Obama has been criticized by some for always straightening her hair. She has, however, allowed the Obama girls to wear their natural hair most of the time — except on special occasions which also sends a powerful message and not necessarily a good one. But I think Mrs. Obama knows exactly what she is doing and I trust that we will, in time, see her set trends that will make life easier for a lot of black women.

I know too many black women who dedicate an entire day of the week to the care of their hair. I’m not quite sure how to close this article but I have a feeling it won’t end here. Let’s see how many comments this one gets. I’m sure there will be many because as the Google search demonstrated, black women’s hair is a hot topic. Take a look at this video and then please drop me a comment. And, by the way, this issue doesn’t only impact women. Remember the photo of a little boy who when meeting President Obama only wanted to know if the president’s hair felt like his (the little boy). I think that image was better than a thousand words. Lets keep this discussion going and click [here](#) to check out the a little video humor from Chris Rock.

BlackCommentator.com Columnist Sharon Kyle is the Publisher of the [LA Progressive](#). With her husband Dick, she publishes several other print and online newsletters on political and social justice issues. In addition to her work with the LA Progressive, Sharon is studying law at the People’s College of Law in Los Angeles. She is also mother and step-mother to four children, Wade, Deva, Raheem and Linnea and has three children-in-law, Dan, Kelli and Yoko. Click [here](#) to contact the LA Progressive and Ms. Kyle.



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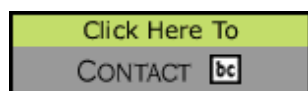
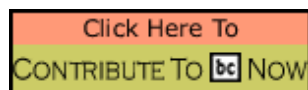


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