Resistance in My Strands and a Pick in My Hands

Curated by Kaylah Christie | 2022

Curatorial Statement

Protests, sit-ins, and boycotts; all things that come to mind when asked to give methods of resistance. Those that are more creatively inclined might consider music, poetry, dance, and visual art. *Resistance in My Strands and a Pick in My Hands* asks you to consider adding one more thing to that list: hair. Black women's beauty practices in Canada and the U.S. have served as cosmetic, visual stamps of identity, and as tools of resistance to beauty standards rooted in Western-European colonialism. This exhibit features artifacts and archival material from the early 1900s to early 2000s that begin to reveal the deep roots of this internalised toxicity within Black communities, and how it is perpetuated.

Throughout the height of chattel slavery, Black women were considered innately promiscuous, sexually immoral, primitive and in need of saving. These preconceived notions along side their general inability to align with European beauty standards, were used as justification for their mistreatment. For example, many Black, enslaved women were not quite as dainty as their western-European counterparts, which justified their use as intensive labourers (Bush 14). The varying natural textures of Black women's hair added to their "Otherness." It became yet another factor that abased them within Canadian and U.S. societies. These ideologies concerning ideal beauty have been passed down within diasporic Black communities and are still present today, although sometimes acknowledged under different terms such as colorism or "good hair." In many Black families and communities, "good hair" is used to describe long hair with looser textures that takes less time to maintain. This demonization of many Black women's

natural hair textures is often internalised and instilled from a young age. Little Black girls are frequently told by mothers, aunts, and other female role-models that their hair must be straightened for a special event, or that their hair needs to be tamed in some way in order to be acceptable. This discrimination has also affected academia and the workforce, and many Black women choose daily between leaving their hair in its natural state or remaining financially stable; "An afro, especially after the movements of the 60s, could stand between employment and social mobility. For many, hair was [is] quite seriously a matter of survival" (Gibson).

Historically and contemporarily, hair serves as a tool to facilitate assimilation. In fact, the first female millionaire in the United States, Madame C.J Walker, made her fortune on products that facilitated Black women's altering of their hair texture to "achieve smoother styles" (Pitts 717). Chemical alteration of hair texture went alongside mid 20th century efforts of integration (Pitts 717). It was believed, and proven, that integration would be facilitated by doing their best to look "visually acceptable to Whites" (Pitts 717). These products were advertised as a way for "African American women to use their appearance to help raise the collective and individual fortunes of black people" (Walker 9). Businesses like Madame C.J. Walker's were established and flourished, even in Canada. Notably, the first location of Mascoll Beauty Supply (est.1973) is a two-minute walk from the exhibit venue. Many of the products sold in this beauty supply were created with the intent to chemically alter Black women's hair as a method of facilitating assimilation into Canadian society (Gibson). In further connection to consumer culture, advertisements became a way to document societal ideals within the beauty industry. An abundance of advertisements for skin lightening products and hair straighteners have been circulated, some of which are present within the exhibit. Here, resistance through beauty advertisements can also be shown; "Whereas white-owned companies often described African

American hair and skin color in derogatory ways, assuming that darker skin and kinky hair were defects that needed to be 'fixed,' black-owned companies strove to counter negative images of African American women's appearance and to glorify black womanhood" (Walker 9). Amidst the Black power movements of the 1960s and 70s, Black communities in Canada and the U.S. "embraced Afrocentric hairstyling as a symbol of unity, collective identity, and Black pride" (Pitts 717). Although considered controversial due to its potential political affiliation, the afro loudly embraced its "Otherness" as a protest against "Eurocentric ideals of professionalism and beauty" (Pitts 718). The emergence of the afro also led to the development of styling products and tools. The most notable of these tools being the afro pick, which is also featured in the exhibit.

Today, many Black women and girls have experienced, and are experiencing, effects of this history both within and outside their own communities without knowing the vast history behind them. The 21st century Natural Hair Movement has gained increasing popularity, as has the appropriation of Black hair styles within pop culture. Styles such as cornrows, are deemed unprofessional and "ghetto" on Black women, but on a white supermodel they are suddenly considered cool and trendy (Pitts 718). Appropriators are applauded for their creativity, and Black wearers are ridiculed and policed (Pitts 719). My hope is that this exhibit will act as a place of education, and reckoning for all who attend and knowingly, or unknowingly perpetuate these harmful ideals. For the Black girls and women who have been discriminated against because of their hair, this is a place of healing. It is not "just hair." It is a part of identity, of self-care. It is resistance, it is strength, it is weakness. It is both history and the future, all at once.

Works Exhibited & Descriptions

BLACK SKIN REMOVER.

REGISTERED IN PATENT OFFICE U.S.

BEFORE AFTER

A Wonderful Face Bleach.

AND HAIR STRAIGHTENER.

both in a box for $1, or three boxes for $2. Guaranteed to do what we say and to be the "best in the world." One box is all that is required if used as directed.

A WONDERFUL FACE BLEACH.

A PEACH-LIKE complexion obtained if used as directed. Will turn the skin of a black or brown person four or five shades lighter, and a mulatto person perfectly white. In forty-eight hours a shade or two will be noticeable. It does not turn the skin in spots but bleaches out white, the skin remaining beautiful without continual use. Will remove wrinkles, freckles, dark spots, pimples or bumps or black heads, making the skin very soft and smooth. Small pox pits, tan, liver spots removed without harm to the skin. When you get the color you wish, stop using the preparation.

THE HAIR STRAIGHTENER.

that goes in every one dollar box is enough to make anyone's hair grow long and straight, and keeps it from falling out. Highly perfumed and makes the hair soft and easy to comb. Many of our customers say one of our dollar boxes is worth ten dollars, yet we sell it for one dollar a box. THE NO-SMELL thrown in free.

Any person sending us one dollar in a letter or Post-Office money order, express money order or registered letter, we will send it through the mail postage prepaid; or if you want it sent C. O. D., it will come by express, 25c. extra.

In any case where it fails to do what we claim, we will return the money or send a box free of charge. Packed so that no one will know contents except receiver.

CRANE AND CO.,
122 west Broad Street,
RICHMOND, VA.

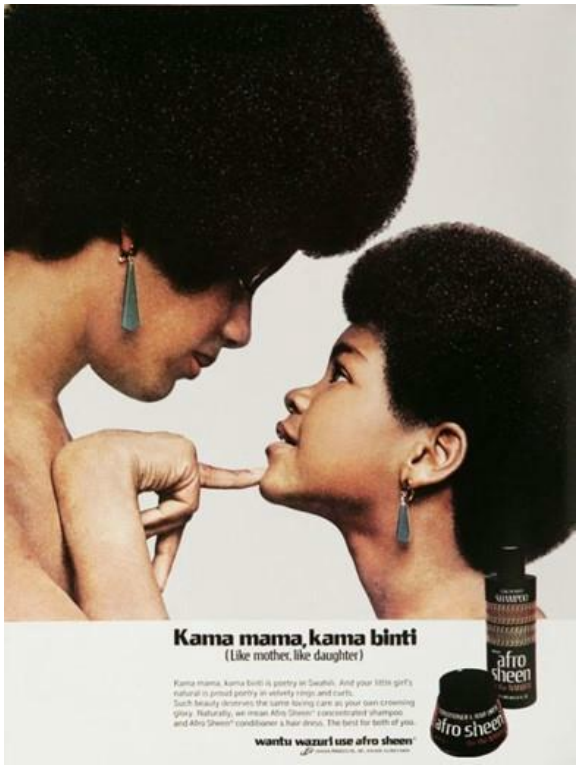
1. Unknown, Crane & Company: Black Skin Remover & Hair Straightener, Richmond, VA, 1903. Black and white newspaper ad with a before and after showing the effects of the products. 32" x 72". Courtesy of University of California, San Diego.

This newspaper ad is one of many that circulated promoting skin lightening and hair straitening. Fairer skin tones and looser hair textures were the idealised beauty standard and rooted in Eurocentric views. The ability to read and afford these products would make these products especially apply to the emerging Black middle class. These products could be considered a way to "pass" as White, or at least be more accepted within their societies. From these beliefs rise the concepts of colorism (preferring lighter skin tones) and "good hair" (looser textures, takes minimal time to maintain).

2. Charles "Teenie" Harris, *Woman wearing dress with zigzag pattern embroidered on front, standing in front of wall with iron railing*, 1920 – 1940. Grayscale. 32" x 72".Courtesy of the Carnegie Museum of Art.

Women's hairstyles in the 1920s to 1940s changed and varied. One thing that remained constant, however, was that they were easily achievable by those with looser hair textures. This is because White women defined the status quo beauty standards. The woman in this image does not have her hair straightened or relaxed to achieve the style. Nevertheless, she poses and smiles; proud of her look. This image illustrates refusal to alter natural hair texture as a type of resistance. It also provides proof of a hairstyle in these periods that challenges the status quo. The image was taken by Charles "Teenie" Harris; a Pittsburgh

photographer for "the Pittsburgh Courier, one of the nation's most prominent Black newspapers" from 1935 – 1975.



3. Afro Sheen, *Kama Mama, Kama Binti (Like Mother, Like Daughter),* 1971.Magazine advertisement with a mother and daughter sporting afros. Product is depicted in the bottom left beside a text stating the importance of caring for one's hair. 24" x 36". Courtesy of Retro Musings.

Afro Sheen products began production in the late 1960s by Johnson Products Co. (est. Chicago 1954). These afro hair care products became well-known amidst the surging popularity of the afro in the 1960s and 1970s. This ad is part of the *Wantu Wazuri (Beautiful People)* campaign, which features different Swahili headlines. In this ad, the mother is proud of her daughter's 'fro, as shown by the headline *Kama Mama, Kama Binti (Like Mother, Like Daughter*. The daughter's absorption of her mother's pride is evident in the way she gazes up into her face. This archival document is multifaceted as it shows the afro as mainstream in Black American popular culture, and it also shows the impact that Black mothers have on their daughters concerning beauty standards and self-esteem.

4. Duke & Raveen, Black Combs, 1972. Two-page Afro pick magazine advertisement with an orange background. Feature "Raveen" and "Duke" alongside 11 comb options. Order form on the bottom right. 72" x 24". Courtesy of Retro Musings.

Supreme Beauty Products categorized their products by gender. “Duke” hair care products were for men, and “Raveen” for women. This 1972 ad combines the two branches, as these combs are considered to be unisex. The variety of styling tools and the fact that both “Duke” and “Raveen” are wearing afros, shows the prominence of style at the time, and its function as symbol of unity within Black communities in Canada and the United States. It also illustrates willingness to deviate from Eurocentric beauty standards, and create an ideal that aligns more closely with the natural textures of Black hair.

5. Eden Enterprise, Inc., Afro hair comb with black fist design, 2002. Black plastic afro pick with a fist as the handle. Metal teeth. 6 ¾” × 2 ¾” × 7/16”. Courtesy of the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Alongside the hairstyles themselves, tools that contribute to how they are achieved can also provide insight. This afro pick was used as a tool to achieve the iconic style, and as an accessory. This pick has a black fist as the handle, which is a prominent symbol of the Black Power movement. Although this comb was made in 2002, these style picks began mass production in the 1970s, and are still being made and sold today. This comb simultaneously represents some of the racial political climate of the 1960s and 70s in Canada and the U.S. alongside symbolism of Black pride and identity found in the Afro hairstyle.

6. Charles “Teenie” Harris, *Female teacher in high school classroom with students with afro hairstyles,* 1970 – 1975. Grayscale. 36” x 24”. Courtesy of the Carnegie Museum of Art.

This photograph, taken c. 1970-1975, is an illustration of the Afro and resistance through hair, as a form of unity. Most of the students, have afros, yet they are not “Others.” In this environment, they are a

community united by the styles they chose to adorn. Alongside persisting thoughts that most natural Black hair styles were unprofessional, the afro itself became heavily associated with the Black Power movement regardless of actual political affiliation. Nevertheless, the Black is Beautiful movement (est. 1962) emerged with the afro at its forefront, still relevant and symbolic over a decade later.

7. Left: Unknown, *Beverly Mascoll in her beauty supply store*, 1973 – 2001. Beverly is posed in the bottom left arm resting on boxes of product. Shelves of organised products are arranged beside and behind her. 24" x 24". Courtesy of Heritage Toronto.

Right: Patrick Cummins, *West side of Bathurst Street, north of Bloor Street*, 1997. Grayscale image of storefronts. Printing shop to the left, pharmacy in the centre, and Mascoll Beauty Supply to the right. 24" x 24". Courtesy of Patrick Cummins.

Collage dimensions: 48" x 24".

Mascoll Beauty Supply, founded by Beverly Mascoll in 1973 was ground-breaking because it filled the hair care gap for a neglected market; Black women in Canada. According to Heritage Toronto, the business served as a supplier of desired hair products for Black women in Canada, a market that was thought to be lacking by major hair care companies. The site of the first location is a two-minute walk from this exhibit venue. It is important to acknowledge that many of the products provided were created to alter hair texture in order to aid Black women with their assimilation into Canadian society. As a result, the venue is also a site of reckoning with Black women's respectability politics in Canada.

8. African Pride, *Dream Kids Olive Miracle Relaxer Kit, Regular*, 1980s – present. Pink and green box of lye-free relaxer with a young Black girl smiling on the left. Her hair is smooth and shiny. 4" x 6" x 4.5". Purchased via Amazon.

This brand of children's relaxer is still in production. However, lye-free relaxers were first produced by Johnson Products Co. in 1981 and by the turn of the century, the entire relaxer market had made a general shift. The absence of lye in the relaxer led to less breakage yet can still cause chemical burns on the client. This box was purchased right before the opening of this exhibit. These dangerous products are still being mass-produced, marketed, and used on children.

Floorplan/Map

Archival documents such as print advertisements and photos will be enlarged and displayed on posters/banners hanging within the exhibit space to facilitate viewing and perception of detail. Physical objects will be held in clear cases. If possible, the actual archival documents will also be in cases, albeit underneath the enlarged images. Item number one will be suspended from the ceiling, and it is what viewers will be greeted with immediately upon entry. The middle of the gallery space will be left open to facilitate movement and leave space for reflection.

Works Cited

Curatorial Statement

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