

Tangled and Nappy

David Hobdy

My parents ask me all the time, “Why you wanna keep your hair so nappy?” I always answer with the same things: “Because God made it this way” or “Because Kunta's was just as nappy.”

My parents always say the same thing in response: “It just looks so niggerish.” Good. I'm glad it does.

In the twists and tangles of my hair lie the stories of my ancestors. Lion skin coats, gold chains with diamonds as black as the skin they lay upon, Box Chevys with spinners, slave boats and whip cracks, sacks full of cotton, sacks full of crack, Million Man marches, and the screams of my brothers dying in the streets. I keep my hair like this to remember all of that. It didn't always look like this. My parents used to keep my hair cut very, very low. My classmates constantly made jokes about me not having hair at all (Screw you guys, it's called a fade.) That was my life until I came across a book about African art in 7th grade.

It was full of Xhosa masks and all kinds of statues. I was amazed that no one had told me about this part of my culture. All I had been told before then is how lazy and inadequate we were as a people. I looked more into our history and learned about how we were sold by our brothers, how spirituals came about, how the Black Panthers formed. Armed with all this new knowledge, I decided to start growing my hair out and grow as a black man in America.

By 8th grade, I had a baby fro going, and I was loving it. The fact that I could twist my hair and run my hands through it was something that was totally new to me. This feeling was amplified by the fact that Kendrick Lamar had just dropped *Section.80*. So not only was my hair totally different and new to me, but I also had a new sense of black pride because of Kendrick's music. Something about the line “I wrote this record while thirty thousand feet in the air, stewardess complimenting me on my nappy hair” resonated with me in a way I'd never felt before. I finally felt like I was a part of something that was better than the usual “lazy black people” trope. I felt like a black

version of Samson from the Bible. Except my locks didn't flow. They were kinked and twisted together.

Then, before I knew it, I was a novelty. It happened so fast. People just started feeling my hair constantly. They didn't even ask. That didn't bother me as much as their reactions. It was always some asinine comment like, "Oh! Eww it's soft!" or "Oh wow that doesn't feel like my hair!" (No shit it doesn't, you halfwit!).

Then the comparison's came. I got compared to so many people that it made me itch: Steve Harvey, Bernie Mac, Jim Kelly, Don Cornelius, that guy who washes cars on Morgan Road. If they were black and had a small to medium sized afro at some point, I was a dead ringer for them. Kids started trying to put things in my hair like I couldn't feel it (I can, and you're a dick!) I remember one day when the girls in the class kept putting bobby pins in my head, and I was finding bobby pins in my hair for a week or so afterwards. I can say with all seriousness that I hope their kids never learn to read.

Fast forward to 11th grade. Other people's hairstyles have come and gone. Mira's had short hair, which had grown back down to just above her shoulders. Rakim has cut his afro that once matched mine. My hair only keeps growing in size however slow the rate of said growth may be. Now it's the spring of 2015, and my hair "looks like a cloud" in the words of Mira.

Some days I pick it out in the morning and let it do its own thing for the rest of the day because "God made it that way." Some days my hair never sees the light of day because it is concealed by a beanie or hoodie. I notice a common theme amongst all of my idols at this time: They all have nappy hair—Kendrick Lamar, Chance The Rapper, Donald Glover, etc. They all let their hair flow as it was given to them, and they are all strong black men in America.

The other big thing about this year was that it was when I realized that I was grown enough to be considered a man by strangers. I don't have to explain how a tall, skinny black man who constantly wears hoodies is perceived by most of America. Take that perception and add nappy hair into the description. To much of white America, that's downright terrifying. I started noticing people locking their doors more, following me around stores. After years of being feared and

trying to make white people comfortable with me, I simply got tired of accommodating them and began to stop pretending not to be what they fear. I just don't have the energy to make everyone comfortable with me 100% of the time, especially when what I am terrifies them a little.

As you can imagine, striving to be the proverbial bump in the road for white people can lead to some interesting situations. It happens. One time I got followed around Michael's Art Supply store by a lady that could only be described as a thicker, squat version of Reba McEntire. I guess she was afraid that I would make off with all their Prismacolor pens and velcro strips. Obviously I was wearing black jeans and a black hoodie with the hood up, so I can see why she was following me. Still, it rubbed me the wrong way entirely. I watched her out of the side of my eye. She'd check a price and look in my direction in as sly a manner as she could manage. I remember asking her, "Are you just gonna check stock on every shelf on the aisle I happen to be in?" The Imposter gave her response by way of moving an aisle over and checking her phone. Smooth. It's fine, I get my comeupance by sitting in parking lots and locking my car doors and making eye contact with white people as they walk by.

Another thing about the year 2015 is that Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp A Butterfly* had also come out. This album was a major milestone for me. All the pride in my race that *Section.80* brought was taken to a whole new level with this album. The album was full of anthems like "Wesley's Theory," "The Blacker The Berry," and "King Kunta." I began to identify myself with quotes from the album such as "A little nappy headed nigga with the world behind him" and "I want you to recognize that I'm a proud monkey." Being black and having this nappy hair became something that could never be taken from me. I felt that my hair was a symbol for everything we've been through as a people.

Still, my parents give me grief simply because they don't see the beauty in an imperfect mass of "niggerishness" (that's an actual quote. Eloquent, I know). I don't care though. I'm dug in, and I'll never change. My hair is one of the few ways I know to be true to myself and my culture these days. Buried in the curls, twists and tangles of my hair

are the voices of the tribe that my ancestors belonged to, the voice of my grandfather and eventually myself. It was gifted to me by my forefathers, and I will follow their tradition and pass this nappy, niggerish hair onto my children.

Racist Sandwiches

David Hobdy

Have you ever had a racist sandwich? I have.

It was last week. I check out of school at noon because I'm sick. On the way home, I stop at the Subway by my house to pick up some oatmeal raisin cookies to make me feel better. Long story short, I go in to get those sweet, warm, soul-saving cookies. So, I tear into them in my car right? Then the taste of those gifts from God hits me, and I remember the last time I had cookies from Subway—February of this year.

Now I'm no longer smashing the life out of these cookies in the front seat of my Jaguar. Now I'm standing in line at Subway, glassy-eyed as usual. It's 8:00 at night, and I'm wearing a black hoodie and black sweats. The Sandwich Artist looks at me when I walk in and looks back down at the sandwich she was so diligently preparing for the lady in front of me. No "hello." I can't prove that racism was a factor, but in the words of Rakim Ali, "You can just tell."

I look at the menu, even though I know exactly what I want. I want that meatball marinara sub with jalapenos. Yeah, sure, the sauce and meatballs may have been sitting there since noon (at the latest), and the meatballs could be made of horse. Nevertheless, it hits the spot 90% of the time. In my mind, this sandwich is going to be the panacea to all my problems. The flaky, lightly toasted bread will make my paranoia go away. The sauce is going to make me an A- average student. The crunchy jalapenos are gonna make my dog stop pissing in the living room. Everything is gonna be okay. I'm so preoccupied thinking about this sandwich that I can't hear the Sandwich Wizard trying to get my attention.

"Sirrrr... *SIR*." She says, cocking her head to the side in a manner not unlike my Aunt used to.

"Aw, shit. My bad. What were you saying?" I say, feigning embarrassment.

"Did you want something to eat?" She says, rather sarcastically.

I'm not in love with your tone but I do want this sandwich, I think to myself before deciding that it wouldn't be wise to be a smartass to the person preparing my food.

Just as I was telling her my order, a short, sweaty white woman walks in the door. The Sandwich Craftsman unsurprisingly looked up and gives her a happy, "Welcome to Subway!" before grabbing my bread. I think to myself, *That's kinda effed up, but I need this sandwich in my life right now*, and deal with the disrespect. Before the Sandwich Slave toasts my sandwich, I tell her that I want jalapenos on it, and the odd blob of a person behind me has a small nervous breakdown.

"You mean to tell me you put jalapenos on a marinara sub?" she said, severely mispronouncing marinara.

"Yeah..?" I say confusedly.

"I just don't see how you can eat that. I hate jalapenos."

"Well, you and I are obviously very different."

The Sandwich Artist then asks her what she wants. Then it all went to hell.

"I want tuna salad and black forest ham, American cheese, lettuce, all on the wheat bread and toast it."

She says it proudly, as if she's completely unaware of just how profoundly screwed up that sandwich is. I feel my brow furrow as it does when I can't make sense of something. I can feel my thoughts mutate from (relatively) intelligently conceived to slurred insults tossed in her direction. *My sandwich is weird, but her toasted tuna-black forest ham-American cheese-lettuce sandwich is totally normal? My mind slipped into roast mode:*

You wanna judge my sandwich but you basically putting the contents of Oscar the grouch's trash can on rye bread and then toasting that shit? That's why you shaped like a stack of sweaty pancakes. You shaped like Jesse Jackson's perm.

All of this vitriol is flying around my head like that scene in the live-action Scooby Doo Movie where there's that huge vat of souls while I pay for my sandwich. I begin to leave, mentally tossing even more roasts at the She-witch and Sandwich Concubine:

That's why you look like an ugly version of Casey Anthony too. Racist ass. Look like a donut hole that was left underneath the counter.

Then I got in my car with the most evil roasts known to man in my mind and all my food. So that's what Subway cookies taste like to me: a 12-inch sub tainted with racism, a strawberry Fanta, and two oatmeal raisin cookies, equally tainted with racism.

I'm fine with that, though. I've been a black man living in Alabama for 17 years now. There have been many racist foods before that sandwich, and there will be many more. I'll gobble them down greedily and smile in the faces of those who prepared them.