

# “Who Cares How I Wear My Hair?”



We're *thisclose* to a woman president, yet we're still giving other women grief about their hair. **Andrea Arterbery** asks why.



**IT WAS A SUNNY DAY** when I approached her at the AfroPunk Festival in Brooklyn. This annual music and arts extravaganza was full of colorful fashion and tons of black women rocking some of the most beautiful natural hairstyles I'd ever seen outside my Instagram feed. This woman's was particularly amazing, with textured, air-dried waves tossed into an intricate updo and arranged beautifully with bobby pins. I had to know how she achieved it. So I asked—and got an earful.

“Your hair is relaxed, right? You can’t do this,” she snipped. “What are you? Mixed?” she said, referring to my straight hair and warm vanilla skin tone.

“No,” I said, telling her I was black and straightened my natural curls with a blow-dryer and flatiron.

“You put heat on it—that’s *not* natural,” she replied, then walked away.

I stood there, stunned. I felt like my Black Girl Card had been revoked. Not natural? C’mon, it’s growing out of my head! I always believed that when black women used this term, it meant they didn’t use a chemical relaxer. To me, it’s possible to have natu-



## Natural Wonders

ral hair and still straighten it with hot tools, wear braids, or—in my definition—even add extensions.

### Make Mine Straight

As a girl living in a tiny Texas town, I quickly learned the importance of having nice hair—*nice* typically meaning *straight*. It made people in my mostly white—and mostly racist—town more comfortable. The consensus among black people was that straight was better too: No one wanted to be labeled as having “nappy” (i.e., unmanageable) hair. I don’t recall any girls at school rocking baby hairs or Afros. That’s why I—and many other black girls—straightened my hair.

Some girls did so with a perm, a lotion or cream infused with curl-breaking chemicals. My mom wouldn’t allow that and simply straightened it the old-school way: by heating up an iron comb on the stove, slathering my scalp with hair grease, and running it through each section. It hurt! My ears, scalp, and nape would often get burned, and it wasn’t as good as relaxer. A drop of rain would revive my curls.

Once I got to college, I used a relaxer, but the chemicals were so strong, my hair started to fall out. I tried to wear it curly, but I just couldn’t shake the “nappy” association. I started getting regular blowouts instead.

### Natural Evolution

I wasn’t the only one who’d had it with relaxers. In 2009, Chris Rock’s film *Good Hair*

examined the black hair-care market, which hit \$2.7 billion in sales last year, and the lengths black women go to for straight strands. It was a cultural game changer. Since then, lots of black women have kicked what Rock calls “the creamy crack.” In fact, in the past five years, sales of relaxers declined 37 percent to \$563 million. Taking their place: natural-hair products. Sales of those spiked by \$25 million between 2014 and 2015, and that figure doesn’t even include beauty-supply stores.

It’s not lost on me that the hair I’d avoided my whole life is now everywhere. Everyone from “influencers” to average girls are posting natural hair-themed inspo and tutorials. Angolan model Maria Borges eschewed glam extensions in favor of her own T.W.A. (teeny weeny Afro) while strutting the runway of last year’s Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show. Willow Smith, known for rocking her natural texture in everything from tiny dreads to braids, was recently named Chanel’s newest ambassador. But one of the biggest moments in natural hair? Beyoncé’s “Lemonade,” which featured her in more than a dozen natural-looking hairstyles (which had to be more fabulous than whatever Becky had going on). To me, that video is a reminder that there was a time when my ancestors couldn’t wear their hair the way they wished. I vividly remember

my grandmother telling me why, for so much of her life, she wore her hair pulled back into a bun or braided. It was a tribute to our ancestors’ styles—that’s how they wore their hair. “Lemonade,” however, is a celebration of the choices we have today.

### Practical Matters

While going natural is often a matter of black pride and hair health, make no mistake: Doing so can actually be more high-maintenance than relaxed styles. Transitioning from relaxed to natural hair can be tricky (you’re dealing with two textures). Natural hair needs special care: To prevent tangles, frizz, and breakage, you have to wash and prep with a product cocktail (leave-in conditioner, heat protectant, serum), you may have to sleep with your hair in curls and twists, and in the morning, you have to arrange it all so it looks effortless. My weekly straightening sessions are a time suck too, but once they’re done, I don’t have to think about it for the rest of the week. (I sleep on a silk pillowcase and, in the a.m., spritz a bit of sheen spray.) And the truth is, some days I love rocking my curls.

My straight hair has nothing to do with denying my blackness—that’s absurd. Every woman has her own story when it comes to hair. Straight, relaxed, or curly: Black hair has come a long way. It’s time to stop the side-eye. ■

Gently cleanses without drying hair.

**PANTENE PRO-V Truly Natural Co-Wash Cleansing Conditioner**, \$5, drugstores



So minty, it gives my scalp a zing!

**PAUL MITCHELL Tea Tree Special Conditioner**, \$13, paulmitchell.com



My favorite mask—it leaves strands soft.

**CAROL'S DAUGHTER Monoi Repairing Hair Mask**, \$28, carolsdaughter.com



When I do go curly, this stuff is magic.

**BUMBLE AND BUMBLE Bb. Curl Conditioning Mousse**, \$31, sephora.com

