

Nappy edges and goldy locks: African-American daughters and the politics of hair.

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Neal A. Lester

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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Nappy Edges and Goldy Locks:

African-American Daughters and the Politics of Hair

Neal A. Lester

Oh give me a perm
Where the waves all roam firm--
And the style and the body will stay.
While seldom is heard--
A bad, blasphemous word
As my scalp becomes toxic sauté.

Anonymous (to the tune of "Home on the Range")

Soft & Beautiful Just for Me! By Pro-Line: America's #1 Children's Relaxer . . . The Answer to a Mother's Prayer. A New Formula for Coarse Hair! Try the new Just for Me Coarse Relaxer today . . . created in part by mothers, especially for their daughters!

--Jet (27 October 1997)

Until the birth of my daughter, Jasmine, some ten years ago, I had never given head hair much thought. Whenever my wife (Italian and Argentine) and I (African American) were out with our baby daughter, we were almost always complimented by blacks and whites alike on our daughter's hair.¹ Whites generally commented on how "nice" or "pretty" Jasmine's hair is. More like my wife's hair in terms of texture, length, and grade than mine, Jasmine's is about mid-back in length, bouncy, thick, and in ringlets. While complimenting, whites almost always impulsively touched her hair, presumably to feel if its texture is more like her dad's or her mom's. African Americans generally described Jasmine's hair as "good" hair. Our daughter's friends, both black and white, loved playing with her hair. One of Jasmine's then seven-year-old black girl friends, whose own **[End Page 201]** hair was processed chemically and about shoulder length, always commented that she wished she had hair like Jasmine's. As Jasmine and her hair grew, some blacks even asked if Jasmine wears a hair weave. When our second child, Jared, was born three years after Jasmine, this emphasis on his head hair as "good" hair resurfaced. Jared's hair, like Jasmine's, is fluffy and in bigger, looser curls. In fact, because of Jared's abundance of curls, many assumed him to be a baby girl.

Nearly all my life, my mother has worn wigs. Though her own hair is short and somewhat thin, she has never experienced problems with balding or hair loss. She maintains that she is not very creative with her hairstyling and that wigs allowed her more styling options. What interests me even now as I reflect on these early years at home, the 1960s and 1970s, is that neither my mother nor any of her many wig-wearing women friends owned afro or braided wigs, or wigs anywhere close to black hairstyles and textures. Their wigs were always straight, long, and flowing.

As a college freshman in the late 1970s, I had my first white roommate whose admittedly limited contact with African Americans had been with his family's housekeeper; one of the first things he wanted to do as we were getting to know each other was touch my hair. He was noticeably surprised to discover that my short afro hair did not feel like steel wool. My wife, before we dated and married, requested and concluded the same.

In graduate school in the early 1980s, I experimented with relaxing² my own hair. I, too, wanted the smooth, slicked-back Billy Dee Williams look and experienced the scalp burns and physical discomfort often

necessary in obtaining it. I concluded though that the physical and psychological gain was well worth the physical discomfort and pain,³ an experience not unlike Malcolm X's with congolene, detailed so vividly and even humorously but not with any less emphasis on the extreme physical discomfort:

The congolene just felt warm when Shorty started combing it in. But then my head caught fire. I gritted my teeth and tried to pull the sides of the kitchen table together. The comb felt as if it was raking my skin off. My eyes watered, my nose was running. I couldn't...



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