

How Dare Anyone Call Black Hair Unmanageable?! An Autoethnography Regarding My Hair Journey

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Abstract: This paper, via autoethnography, details events which led to the author's adoption of natural hair care and styling.

Introduction

Writing a paper on the topic of hair styles is not difficult. However, writing an autoethnography on my personal hair story is difficult because I am taking my story and making general applications to its relationship to societal culture (Ellis, 2004). My gaze in this story should move outward, centering on the socio-cultural component of my individual experience and then inward, baring the vulnerabilities of my character as I reinterpret the social constructs that impact me (Ellis, 2004). In this paper, I tell how a decision to change my hair texture became a complicated and painful examination of detrimental beliefs about Black beauty I unconsciously harbored.

Some time ago, I came upon a website for Black hair care which made me furious. The site advertised a product called *Kerasoft 'Wash and Wear' Relaxer*: a hair-care system for women who want to "embrace their natural hair texture" but want more "manageability and versatility..." (<http://www.jazma.com/semi-natural-relaxer>). I stopped at this line introducing the product. I was outraged. For me, the offensive word was *manageability*. How dare anyone call Black hair unmanageable?!

"FRANKLIN!" I called out. I got up from my computer and stormed into the kitchen where my husband was. When he saw me seething in the entryway with my hand on my hip, he stopped sweeping the floor and waited for me to talk. "You know, I don't really like to say the word 'never' but..."

"But what?" he asked patiently, waiting for the daily outburst that was to come.

"I will never, NEVER, put a relaxer in my head again! Do you hear me?! NEVER! The more I read these websites and articles about Black hair, the more I determine my standards of beauty will not be based upon Eurocentric standards! Worse of all, Black folks have totally bought into the lie that straight is beautiful! I just read a site that carries a line of hair products for women who want their hair to be manageable! Manageable...*really?*" My indignation began to mount.

"Humph," Franklin replied. He did not need to say anything. He knows when I have moments like this, I just need to rant a little to blow off steam. After nine years of marriage, he had learned how to handle my loud and expressive reactions for anything that provokes an emotional response from me, good or bad.

"Why does Black hair have to be deemed unmanageable?! Why do we just accept this belief our hair needs to be managed? I reject that idea...I *REFUSE* to accept my hair needs managing like it's some... wild... unkempt *animal!* I will *never* perm my hair again! I know too much about oppressive hegemonic standards to even think about putting that stuff in my hair! Ooooh! Never again, I tell you, NEVER!!"

By the time I finished my speech, I was pointing angrily at Franklin. My husband, with a smirk on his face, shook his fist at me in mock ridicule. Tension left my body and my face broke into a smile. My tirade was over and I returned to the office to continue my work. I chuckled to myself about my outburst. Sometimes I can be so over-the-top in my reactions but fortunately, in the safety of my home, I am free to me.

A Negative Response to Black Beauty

Words like *unmanageable* trigger a negative response in me when it comes to Black hair. This word, along with *ungroomed*, *nappy*, *woolly*, and *unprofessional* are just some of the unfavorable connotations associated with Black hair in its natural state. One would not think the act of allowing one's hair to naturally grow out her head would be so controversial, emotional and value-laden, but in this racialized society, an African-American woman is not free to wear her hair in a natural state without experiencing some form of prejudice. The standard of beauty is defined by the hegemonic criterion of a dominant Eurocentric ruling class (Patton, 2006).

Due to the history of racial oppression in the United States that is still prevalent in the present, Black women deal with several issues of identity and beauty. In the days of slavery, slaves were valued according to their features. Women with skin color, hair and facial features that were similar to Caucasians often became house slaves while those that did not were left to work in the fields (Patton, 2006). This form of privileging and alienating Black women has been internalized down through the generations and can be seen to this day. Black women have long struggled to adjust their appearance to match the White ideal of attractiveness. Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) have coined this term the *Lily Complex* to describe the "altering, disguising, and covering up your physical self in order to assimilate, to be accepted as attractive. . . . As Black women deal with the constant pressure to meet a beauty standard that is inauthentic and often unattainable, the lily complex can set in" (p. 177). The result is Black women learn to hate their own facial appearance. They internalize the idea they should strive to look like someone else because Black features are not beautiful (p. 177). One manifestation of the Lily Complex is the straightening of the hair. Even though natural styles have become trendy again, most Black women still continue to straighten their hair (Byrd & Tharps, 2001).

Before Becoming Natural

Before I transitioned, I thought I had a healthy racial identity. I encountered racism on many different levels in my past and strove to overcome them. However, I only viewed oppression as an external force and did not take into account I had internal issues about beauty I had to combat. Growing up in a predominately White city had its challenges for me. I was usually the only Black person in my class, so naturally I stood out. I would be embarrassed about my ethnicity because it seemed like every aspect of me was picked apart and analyzed by my classmates. My lips, skin, body shape and especially my hair fell under their scrutiny.

My mother spent a lot of time doing me and my sisters' hair. The kids found it funny when my hair could stick straight up in the air and were very curious why it was so oily. I tried to explain to them my hair required more moisture and Black people used pomades as part of their hair care regimen. When I told them the slang term for any generic moisturizer was called *grease*, I was teased unmercifully. The kids would tell others I put car grease or bacon grease in my hair. Often, someone would sneak up behind me, grab my ponytail and pull it upwards to watch it stay in place. I struggled with finding an appropriate response to this because I was torn between relishing the attention and being proud my hair was different from the others or feeling angry and humiliated because my hair was not *normal* and being tired of it being brought to my attention.

Because my hair was one of my most noticeable features, it was the part of me I wished the most could conform to the norm. Before I turned ten, I wore my hair naturally but my mother pressed it every week. Pressing hair or *hot-combing* is a technique used to temporarily straighten Black hair. A hot comb is a metal comb that heats when it is plugged into an electrical socket. Some hot combs are not electrical; they are heated on the stove or some other heating device. The heated comb is carefully applied to the hair at the root and straightens the kinky strands as it is pulled through to the root. I have vague memories of sitting in my mother's lap while she hot-combed and braided it. If mom was not careful or if I was too jumpy, the result would be a burn on my scalp. My mother always compared my hair to jute every time she handled it; she still does to this day. She always said it was beautiful but

incredibly thick. My mother and father helped to instill a positive racial identity concerning my physical characteristics, but I still internalized unconscious negative views about Black beauty.

My time in high school was a period of establishing a positive racial identity. I had experienced racism from my teachers and fellow students but I determined not to allow them to affect my self-worth. I had accepted White notions of beauty were different from African-American standards and I decided to align my sense of beauty with my race. I determined not to let *White beauty* tamper with my self-esteem. Although I found the attractiveness in fuller lips, rounder hips and all the various shades of brown skin, I still considered beautiful hair to be straight or loosely wavy. By the time I got to high school, my hair had grown to chest length. I was extremely proud of my hair and treasured the fact it was long. There was and is to this day a misperception Black hair does not grow long.

I have always been a person known for my different hairstyles. I felt it distinguished me from my classmates. I was constantly questioned about my wearing my hair in a different style each day. I did not think it was a strange thing. I guess it was just me being creative, but I always thought it had something to do with me being one of the few Black people in my neighborhood. When I was around other Black girls, their hairstyles were so elaborate and different, I knew I did not even fit in their category of creativity. In Black circles, I was known for having long hair. The fact my hair was chest length naturally, not as a result of extensions, made me stand out among them as exceptional. I accepted my hair as a part of my identity.

My hair became more attached to my identity when I realized the benefits of having long hair in college. For the first time, I received a lot of attention from the opposite sex! Black men wanted to date me; many of them stated the physical feature that attracted them the most was my hair. Black women openly stated they were jealous of me because of the length of my hair. In fact, the vast majority of African-American women who were considered to be beautiful on campus had long hair. There was a small contingent of women who wore their hair in their natural state but I associated their hair with their personal statements. These women fit into categories like *radical Black activist* or were simply considered unkempt; either way, none of them were considered attractive.

My boyfriend at the time sported a large afro, which was popular with the current hip-hop music trends. One day, we had a discussion about Black hair. He asked me if I would ever go natural. While I felt all expressions of Blackness should be accepted as beautiful, I did not think the natural look was for me. I felt at the time I could never have natural hair and be a professional. The two did not seem to go together. Additionally, Black hair seemed unmanageable and unruly. Deep down, however, I believed if I wore my hair naturally, then I would no longer be attractive.

My beliefs fell in line with Ingrid Banks' (2000) ethnographic study focused on African-American women's perspective on hair. She found women still held to beliefs that *nappy* hair is bad while straight hair is *good*. Many of them also believed Black hair is not manageable or professional. The power to be independent and self defined was undermined by mainstream cultural standards of attractiveness, especially in the workplace. Moreover, Banks asserted Black women attributed a part of their identity to their hair.

Turning Thirty

Days before my thirtieth birthday, I determined I would not grieve about becoming thirty. Many of my friends relayed to me the anguish they felt about going into the thirties and being old. They complained of not feeling attractive anymore and not being where they wanted to be socially and professionally. When I looked back over my life, I felt grateful to be out of my twenties because I left a huge period of insecurity and had recovery from some of the mistakes I had made. As I began to evaluate my life, I felt I could be at peace with myself. I was learning who I was and was learning to accept and even like myself.

On the day I turned thirty, I had a revelation. I decided I wanted to be what God made me to be: an African-American woman with thick coily hair. Until this point, I had chemically straightened (also

called *relaxing*) my hair since I was ten. Unfortunately, I made this decision the day after I had permed my hair. Once hair has been relaxed, its condition is unalterable. I would have to wait for my hair to grow out and cut off the relaxed part. The waiting period is called *transitioning* from relaxed to natural. During the transition period I began to research everything I could find on natural hair on the Internet because, embarrassingly, I did not know how to care for natural Black hair. It was in my search for knowledge my reason for *going natural* transformed from wanting to try a new look to making a statement of active resistance of Eurocentric standards of beauty.

During the Transition

“Franklin, I need to have a talk with you”, I said to my husband while slinking onto the couch next to him. I knew I had to have a discussion with him soon after I decided to go natural. It had only been a few days since I made the decision and I did a lot of online searching to try to figure out the best way to transition without shaving my head bald and starting over. During my investigation, I read photo diaries posted by Black women who went natural and wanted to track their progress physically, emotionally, and psychologically. As I began to read online about other's hair journeys, I began to realize that, for many women, the decision to go natural was a big deal and impacted them in many ways. Many women shared their stories of being rejected by Black men. I was somewhat nervous about my husband's reaction to my decision. Although he loved my hair when it was long, what was more important to him was that it maintained a nice appearance regardless of the length. Franklin sat on the couch in our family room working on his laptop.

“What's up,” he replied. I paused and waited for him to stop typing.

“I've decided to go natural,” I spit out. Franklin did not even look up from the computer screen.

“Eh, I give you six weeks”.

“Huh?”

“After six weeks of being natural, you'll be opening that box of relaxer cream you have under the sink,” he declared nonchalantly. Franklin returned to typing on his laptop without skipping a beat.

I was stunned into a moment of silence. I was prepared for him to object so I could give my list of reasons why I should go natural. By this point, I had read enough information about being natural to know this change in hairstyle was going to reflect more than just a desire to be trendy. I knew once I cut off my relaxed hair, people would make negative remarks and I would have to prepare myself for them. One thing I did know, however, was if I did return to relaxing my hair, I would feel like a sellout. As a graduate student, I had learned about systemic and institutionalized oppression and its direct impact on people of color in this nation. I had begun the process of examining the reasons why Black women straightened their hair and recognized Black women are under extreme pressure to physically conform to White standards of beauty.

With that new understanding, I knew going natural would be an act of resistance against Eurocentric notions of beauty. However, I questioned if I could maintain my new hair texture for the rest of my life. It seemed daunting. So I looked to my husband for support. I expected my husband to react negatively because he liked my relaxed hair. I was not prepared for his disbelief.

While I was pondering his words, he continued, “You are going to give it a try but once you get tired of it, you'll go back to the relaxer. It will be just like any other project you start and don't finish.” End of conversation.

I abruptly got off of the couch and left the room. In that instant, I made a decisive vow to make him eat his words. Suddenly, it did not matter to me that relaxing my hair again would go against my principles; I was now hell-bent on proving Franklin wrong. I went to our master bathroom, pulled out the relaxer from under my sink and walked over to the trashcan. For a moment, I hesitated. I just bought this perm; to throw it away would be a waste of money. Perhaps I should save it for just in case, I thought to myself briefly. Then I thought about my husband's words and tossed the box into the trash without another thought. *Six week, indeed! He'll see....*

For the next five months I read about and researched Black natural hair care. There were two websites I returned to often that made the biggest impact in my decision to natural. They are considered to be some of the top websites across the nation for Black natural hair. The first website I found was Motowngirl.com. The creator of the website, alias *Motowngirl*, founded the website because when she decided to go natural, she discovered there were no Black hair websites that would help give her insight into her hair journey. From this site I learned how to develop a daily hair care regimen. I realized I had to unlearn certain practices, like using grease, and switch to natural moisturizers.

I was also shocked to learn that, with natural hair, I could get it wet more often. Hair washing can be damaging to relaxed Black hair. First, Black hair needs all of the moisture it can get. Because of its thickness, Black hair tends to be dry, which adds to its fragility. Washing the hair daily strips it of its natural oils and causes breakage. Secondly, water makes relaxed hair lose its straight form. When my hair was straight, I avoided the pool, the beach and rain as much as possible.

I highly anticipated the day I could take a shower, wet my hair, and let it air dry without repercussion and without having to apply a blow-dryer or flat iron. I marveled at the thought the *wash-and-go* could be a reality for me. Then I became annoyed. Why shouldn't it be a reality for me? Women of other races can do it, why can't I? Motowngirl.com showed me caring for my hair is not and should not be complicated. Through that website, I realized natural hair is manageable, beautiful and versatile.

The second website that had an even bigger impact on me was Nappturality.com. It is a website dedicated to embracing Black hair and helping African-American women as they make the transition. It states, "We are here to help and support you in your decision to go natural. It is a personal journey, and if you are deeply embedded in the *straight hair mindset* (emphasis not mine), you will find the challenges can be daunting at times but the rewards are great if you hang in there." Nappturality.com helps women to deconstruct the psychological and sociological reasons for relaxing one's hair. The writers and members of this site discuss the harmful influence White standards of beauty on Black women's identity and self-esteem. They openly oppose any ideas that give credence to oppressive ideologies concerning Black beauty. The website also states that since it devoted only to natural hair care, any posting that tries to convince people to change the texture of their hair will be deleted.

This site contains several forums for African-Americans to gather info, share their newfound pride in their hair, or to discuss painful experiences regarding their hair. They intentionally use the words *nappy* and *kinky* as positive descriptors for Black hair. Through Nappturality.com I was challenged to examine my unconscious attitude about Black hair. It was very difficult because I had to face the fact I harbored terrible and ignorant beliefs about natural hair and the people who their hair naturally. If I were to be honest with myself, I believed Black hair was acceptable but unappealing in many situations.

I was dismayed to find out I received a great deal of information about Black hair from White people. I am amazed I accepted what I heard at face value. For instance, a White friend in middle school told me people who wore locks were dirty because they never combed their hair and they used a mixture of mud and human feces to get their hair to lock up. I was an adult before I even questioned the validity of that comment! I learned to question the origins of my negative attitude and began to look for counter-frames for each one. For instance, seeing beautiful, professional women with natural hair countered my beliefs about Black hair being unfeminine and unprofessional. I did not realize how heavily encumbered I was by my destructive beliefs until I confronted them and freed myself. I began to hold resentment towards the elusive "Man" and the "system" because I had been bereft of positive images for so long, I had accepted it as normal.

Reading the forums and blogs of other African-American women clued me in to the depth and the pervasiveness of the rejection of Black beauty. It seemed like for every entry of newfound pride and acceptance of their own beauty, Black women wrote two entries about the hardships endured at

work, the unforgiving taunts from friends and families, and the constant temptations to relax their hair simply for relief. Another thing I noticed in many women's journals was it took several attempts to go natural and stay natural. For some, the issue of staying natural had nothing to do with external pressure to conform. They had conflict in redefining their ideals of beauty within themselves.

The Big Chop

After five months of transitioning, I felt I was ready to complete my change and cut off my hair. The slang phrase for cutting off the relaxed ends is called the *Big Chop*. I had read all I could about natural hair care and its maintenance. I informed my friends and family about my decision and received a lot of support and encouragement. My White friends did not really understand the significance of my decision but they did not try to dissuade me. My Black friends were not enthusiastic about my going natural; they simply offered their support and told me I was brave. I did not think they expected me to be natural for long. Three of my sisters and my mother were already natural and were my biggest cheerleaders. Despite my husband's doubt about my decision, he supported me as well. So when I walked into the beauty salon for the Big Chop, I was not prepared for the feelings that were aroused on that day.

My friend Jennifer, who is White, owns an upscale salon in my city. Occasionally, I would go to her so she could work on my hair. I could not afford to get my hair professionally done and she wanted to practice her skills on a live Black model and expose her assistant beauticians to a variety of hair types. It was mutually beneficial. When I told her about my decision to go natural, she was excited and asked if she could be the person to do the Big Chop. That was fine by me. However, on that day, I felt a lot of doubt. Maybe I should have gone to a Black beautician who is experienced in the matters, I thought to myself. Jennifer loves short hair and can get *scissor-happy* sometimes. I did not want her to cut my hair too short. I had about three inches of new growth and emphasized to her I wanted to have three inches on my head when she finished. Jennifer just smiled, said she would do the best she could, and passed me off to her assistant to shampoo my hair.

The assistant told me she was really excited to handle my hair; she always wanted to experience Black hair but never had the opportunity. Inwardly, I sighed to myself. I did not want anxiety while being scrutinized and studied by White people. My anxiety rose when the assistant washed my hair twice and after rinsing discovered the water and shampoo never reached within an inch of my scalp. I told her my hair was thick and she needed to make sure she thoroughly distributed the soap but I guess she underestimated how thorough she needed to be. She apologized and re-shampooed my hair, this time massaging my scalp. By this time, some of the other assistants came over to observe and I felt even more self-conscious.

I was returned to Jennifer after my shampoo and she began to snip away. My relaxed hair reached the nape of my neck. I reasoned to myself that, since my hair was short, the cut should not be too startling. I was wrong. When Jennifer finished my haircut and I saw my reflection in the mirror before me, I was mortified. What had I done?! My afro was much shorter than I expected. Jennifer and her assistants swarmed over me, patting my hair and making lots of oohs and ahhs. I immediately recalled the reactions of Black women I read about as they chopped their hair off. Many were dismayed and disappointed in their new look and felt ugly. I understood now. All of the negative sentiments came rushing back to mind: "I look like a man." "I am not attractive." "What can I do with this style?" "What will Franklin say? He often repeated he did not want me to have very short hair."

Despite my emotions, I remembered where I was and who I was. I was not going to allow these White women watch me denigrate myself! I put a convincing smile on my face, thanked Jennifer and told her my hair was beautiful. I also decided it did not matter what Franklin thought about my hair; I was not going to relax it again. Franklin's reaction to my hair was surprising.

"Your hair is a lot longer than I thought it would be," he said with relief.

"But what do you think about it? Do you like it?"

“It’s nice,” he replied and then reached out to touch me hair. “Hmm... it is softer natural than when it was relaxed!”

“That’s because it is healthy,” I replied.

“Okay,” said Franklin as he went about his business.

I sat down on the couch and began to process my feelings. I felt let down by the anticlimactic outcome of a long, soul-searching decision that caused a major paradigm shift. The world did not stop to take notice; everyone continued to go about their day regularly. After all of my research and mental preparation for other people negative comments, I was dismayed to find the biggest obstacle to me fully embracing my hair was myself. Even though I saw many Black women falter when they cut their hair, I determined not to go back to relaxing out of sheer will. After all, my husband had challenged me and I was not going to lose. I spent some time on the Black hair care sites and found some guides for styling *TWA*’s (teeny-weenie afros). I tried twisting my hair for the first time and received much praise from Franklin. Though I still harbored some negative beliefs about Black beauty, it would pass as I adjusted to my new hair.

After the Big Chop

It took about a week to weed out most of the negative thoughts about my hair and how it relates to my identity. When unexpected dilemmas presented themselves, I sought first to check myself for negative thought and extinguish them. For instance, I tied a scarf around my hair and pulled it back tight to achieve the afro puff look. I expected the hair I pulled back to lay straight and flat. Instead it coiled up and stuck out like frayed edges along the border of the scarf. My first instinct was to grab some gel and shellac it back so I did not have any fly-away hairs protruding from my head. Then, I remembered I did not have any gel that could hold up to my thick locks anymore. I reflected on one Black woman’s hair journal where she stated she had to learn having curled edges around her head was perfectly acceptable. I realized she was right. There was nothing wrong with curly edges! It did not take long for me to fall in love with my hair and fully embrace it as one aspect of my identity. I love the feel of it. I love how I look with natural hair and I love its easy maintenance and versatility. More importantly, I learned going natural was more than just a faddish trend for me; rather was a form of liberation that set me free from comparing my beauty to Eurocentric standards I could never reach.

Many of my Black friends love the way my hair looks but state they could never wear their hair naturally because it would not look *right* on them. I respond by asking them how God’s intended texture for them could not be right. Did God make a mistake? I always challenge them to ask themselves the question: “Who told you Black hair was inferior and where did they get that idea from?” Some of my friends told me they do not believe natural hair is inferior (that’s too strong a word) and they have a positive racial identity; it is just not for them. Well, I had a positive racial identity when I relaxed my hair too! However, now that I have fully embraced my *roots*, my identity is new and improved. My desire is for other Black women to experience the liberation of being themselves in their true physical form. My eyes have been opened to the depth of psychological harm of the Lily Complex inflicted upon Black girls and women.

Epilogue

I received a phone call from my sister one day during my long commute home from work.

“Hey Chines, you got a minute?”

“Sure, I’m just driving home, what’s up?” I could tell by the tone in her voice she was upset.

“Remember that lady, Ellen, at my old church who adopted a Black girl?”

“Mm-hm.” I never forgot the story she shared with me about the White woman that attended her church occasionally in Grand Forks, North Dakota.

My sister and her husband, an Air Force pilot, were stationed there for a few years. They had just moved to Spokane, Washington a few months ago. She often remarked about a White woman,

Ellen, who had a Black daughter named Erin with the worst hair she had ever seen. It was matted and broken off in several spots. She told me if she ever had the chance, she would offer the woman her assistance in grooming her four year old daughter's hair. They finally managed to meet and she spent the day at her home showing Ellen how to wash and style her daughter's hair. She noted Ellen spoke disparagingly at about Erin's hair in front her daughter. She bought Ellen Black hair products and directed her to some websites that would help Ellen learn about her daughter's hair. She also instructed her to speak positive about Black hair and take great care of it because she will have a hard time developing a positive racial identity while growing up in an overwhelmingly White rural town. Ellen thanked her for her help and said she would try the products.

"Well, I just got off the phone with her. She is frustrated because Erin's hair is so matted Ellen fears she may have to shave her head. She was asking me for help and wondering when I was going to come back to North Dakota."

"What happened?" I asked, feeling very sorry for the little girl.

"Nothing is what happened!" she snapped indignantly. "She has done nothing to her hair! She told me she only puts olive oil in her hair but she has only tried to style it once since I moved away...that was *three months ago!* Erin's hair is so knotted up now she screams every time Ellen attempts to comb her hair."

"What is her problem?" I demanded. I was so angry. Why would a mother do this to her daughter?

"She told me she decided not to do the maintenance on Erin's hair because it took so long and she did not understand why she couldn't just treat Erin's hair like her own. China, she hardly cares for her own hair. All she does is just wash and go. She used the same shampoo on Erin's hair and does not condition it so now, it is dry and brittle. She doesn't comb Erin's hair because Erin cries and runs from her."

"But it's a trade off," I interjected. "If you spend a couple hours on her hair on one day, it will last at least a week or two! She doesn't have to wash and style her hair daily!"

"I told her the first time but apparently she did not want to do it."

"Why doesn't she send Erin to someone else to do it?"

"Ellen thinks Black hair services are too expensive and her husband just got laid off."

"Let me get this straight, Ellen doesn't want to do her daughter's hair and she doesn't want to pay for others to do it for her, right?"

"Yup," she said with a sigh.

"So what did you tell Ellen?" I asked.

"I was not very nice to her, Chines. Honestly, I've got to do better in giving Ellen with love. I told her not only was she being irresponsible with her daughter but she damaging her psychologically. Ellen got defensive and said, "Hair is just hair and it is not a big deal". How can you argue with someone about the importance of their child's hair care when she does not care about her own? I told her I would mail her a hair care package and gave her the number of an African lady I met just before I moved. After I got off the phone with her, I contacted the African woman an asked her to check on Ellen. She agreed. They go to the same church."

"How did Ellen respond?" I asked.

"She said thanks, but I got the feeling she was hurt and angry with me. I know I gave her the impression she was not a good mom by the tone in my voice, but she just doesn't get it. I should have been a little more tactful. What do you think I should have said, China?"

"I think you did the right thing. I would probably have been too harsh with her. I would have told her failure to maintain her daughter's basic appearance is a form of neglect and abuse and if that child isn't psychologically damaged now about her hair, she will be! I would have questioned why she even adopted a Black child if she did not want to meet her most basic needs. How is she going to grow up with a positive self-image if her only exposure to Black people is through the media?! Her mom

won't even affirm her! What kind of mess is that?" I had to stop talking because I could feel my outrage rising.

"I know...I know...Every time I replay that conversation in my head, I get upset. I'm just going to have to stay on her and make her see the light."

"Please do, for your peace of mind and little Erin's." We talked for a little while longer and then ended our conversation. I spent the remainder of my ride praying for Erin and her mom, hoping Erin would learn her hair and her features are beautiful and she would develop a healthy self-esteem.

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