

Black women who chemically relax their hair are emulating whiteness today or during previous generations. “Even when the larger majority of Western Black women were straightening their hair from the 1920s to the 1980s, they found ways to create styles and looks that were unique to them and communicated a Black aesthetic,” she says.

There’s an opportunity now to bring lesser-known hair stories into the larger conversation as well. “Angela Davis’ Afro is one of the most iconic representations of that style during the Black Power Movement, but I have heard her say more than once that she was certainly not the first and she wished some of these other women also got this attention,” says Hyppolite, noting that Miriam Makeba—the South African singer, songwriter, actor, United Nations goodwill ambassador and civil rights activist—prominently wore an Afro in the 1960s. Also noteworthy is Pamela Ferrell, a Black entrepreneur who is featured in the “Cultural Expressions” exhibition at the National Museum of African American History and Culture. “In the 1980s, she and her husband, Taalib-Din Uqdah, opened Cornrows & Co., one of the first natural haircare salons in Washington, D.C.,” says Hyppolite. “They have been instrumental in fighting the complex licensing issues surrounding Black women’s hair braiders and their right to practice.” Many U.S. states require hours of unnecessary and expensive beauty school instruction, which doesn’t even include hair braiding in the curriculum and instead creates a barrier for African American business owners and the artists they employ. Ferrell and Uqdah have also fought to change inequitable policies against Black hairstyles in the workplace and the military. While progress has been made—Tharps points to the Crown Act, a recent bill that prohibits race discrimination based on natural hair or hairstyles—more widespread change is needed to have meaningful impact.

On the one hand, Black hair is judged and criminalized, yet on the other—ironically—it gets appropriated by white culture, whether it’s Kendall Jenner wearing cornrows or Kim Kardashian showing off Fulani braids, all without acknowledging the origins of such styles. “It’s a bitter pill to swallow,” says Tharps, noting that certain aspects of Black culture that serve the majority are adopted while others are criticized. Hyppolite finds that cultural influence occurs in every medium—art, music, dance, food, and language—and is not unique to Black culture. “However, when the historical sources of these influences are either benignly or purposely obliterated in the process of being co-opted, and they are economically commodified, it is certainly problematic,” she says. When magazines and fashion designers showcase an Afro on a white model, for instance, and “never mention it as a Black hairstyle, and act like it’s something they invented, that’s so offensive,” says Tharps. “If you’re wearing a style that comes from the Black community, recognize where it comes from, honor that community.”



Everyone has a voice—not just influencers and fashion designers—and in today’s increasingly global world, authentic knowledge about different cultures is not hard to come by. “It’s not that the information doesn’t exist,” says Hyppolite, pointing to the plethora of YouTube videos from Black hair experts as one example. “It’s that there isn’t enough of an interest outside of Black media channels and their communities to explore and normalize it.” Tharps, for her part, prefers to focus on the beauty of Black hair and the larger work that needs to be done to change systemic beliefs. “We still live in a racist society, so our hair culture won’t be perfect until we get in a better place.”

Each style conveys ideas that extend beyond mere physical beauty and touches on deeper issues related to gender, race, politics, and individualism.



LEFT
Colored and spiked hair was a signature of the punk look.

RIGHT
Berlin-based hair and makeup artist Janina Zais uses the head as her canvas.

FOLLOWING PAGE
Japan-based wigmaker and hair stylist Tomihiro Kono’s rainbow-colored creations demonstrate the power of wigs in influencing perceptions of a person’s character.