

Getting to the Root: An Exhibition Catalog on Natural Hair

Jazmine Beatty

The idea of “good hair” has been perpetuated throughout time, directly affecting people’s quality of life. Black women specifically have been targeted because their naturally curly hair textures do not fit society’s white standard of beauty. So often, women’s self-esteem in US society is connected to their hair. Therefore society must redefine self-worth to be all-inclusive, allowing people to be true to themselves regardless of their hair’s texture.

The song “I Am Not My Hair” by Black singer-songwriter India Arie tackles the subject of self-acceptance in a world that is constantly segregating people by their appearance and frequently their hair. As the lyrics assert, “I am not my hair, I am not this skin, I am not your expectations, I am not my hair, I am not this skin, I am the soul that lives within. Good hair means curls and waves. Bad hair means you look like a slave. At the turn of the century, it’s time for us to redefine who we be.”¹

The desire to achieve this standard has been conditioned in the psyches of Black women, and as a result, enforces hair texture discrimination both within and outside the Black community. In order to eradicate this detrimental mindset, society must redefine self-worth to be all-inclusive.

Lack of Positive Representation

Since the beginning of slavery in the United States, Black people were put in a position of inferiority because of their physical appearances and Eurocentric cultural values were forced onto them. White European colonial settlers who purchased Africans for the purposes of enslavement and unpaid manual labor without regard for their well-being would shave the heads of the enslaved as a power-establishing practice to devalue and dehumanize the African captives.² In the decades that followed the abolishment of slavery, longer, straighter hair was not only desired but also expected. Like race, the notion of good hair is a social construct that has, through centuries of reinforcement, “become naturalized.”³ This limited view of acceptable hairstyling has made it difficult for Black people to develop positive self-images, particularly young Black girls.

How Might We Showcase Black Beauty

Based on my preliminary research about the impact of hair standards on the racial identities of Black women, I explored how to develop a project that showcases Black beauty as a way of thwarting the dominant white narratives of acceptable and beautiful. The following questions guided my research:

1. How can we utilize art and design to provide positive representation for young Black girls?
2. How has art and design been utilized to discuss hair, and how can those visual conversations be brought to the forefront?
3. How can art and design be utilized to give those outside the Black community a glance into Black hair culture?

Change the Narrative

On further research, I discovered a plethora of Black creatives who intentionally spotlight Black beauty in their work and looked at how their combined efforts could be amplified to inspire Black women while simultaneously educating others. I concluded that the development of an exhibition catalog could elevate Black artistic voice, thus decentering the dominant artistic voices in US society, which tend to be white, and instead centering Black voices to tell stories about Black art and culture.⁴

Breaking Barriers

Engaging in conversation is the first step to removing obstacles that hold people back from loving themselves or understanding one another. By utilizing catalog design, this project can incorporate varying Black voices from across artistic fields (i.e., multimedia, painting, sculpture, design, and photography) to visually communicate the tangible concept of Black hair. This catalog increases understanding about Black hair, highlighting its significance within people’s psyches and society at large through the use of storytelling

to confront misunderstanding and shame while also addressing how natural hair is embraced today. In addition, this exhibition catalog aims to enhance not only the self-worth of Black children and adults; it strives to change the negative social and cultural perceptions other people have about Black people. By showcasing Black artists and their celebratory artwork that illustrates the beauty of Black women and their natural hairstyles, this catalog begins to untangle the social construction of “good hair” that continues to suppress people. No one should have to change themselves, especially their hair, for the sake of prosperity.⁵

The Exhibition Catalog



“Love” and “Culture” Artist Spreads. Graphic design by the author, 2017.



"Beauty" and "Strength" Artist Spreads. Graphic design by the author, 2017.



Artwork References and Front/Back Cover. Graphic design by the author, 2017.

Biography



Jazmine Beatty receives her BFA in communication design from Texas State University in 2020. As a human-centered designer and artist, passion, commitment, and empathy for others guide Beatty's work. Through her experiences as an African American student and artist, Beatty realized that she wanted to help young people, particularly from marginalized groups, utilize their creative talents to explore and expand possibilities for their futures. Now, as an art education master's student at Virginia Commonwealth University, Beatty has presented curricular ideas at Virginia Art Education Association and National Art Education Association conferences centered around cultivating the well-being of Black children and other underinvested groups.



