



Don't Touch My Hair

Hilary Hanslin (she/her), S8, explains the inappropriate nature of touching black women's hair.



In 2010, Chastity Jones, a black woman from Alabama, eagerly accepted a job offer from Catastrophe Management Solutions. The offer, however, came with a catch— she had to cut off her locks. Chastity refused, and the company cancelled its offer. Since then, Jones has been in a legal disagreement with the company over its decision.

This was not the first time this had happened - someone losing a job opportunity because of their natural black hair or receiving a negative reaction because of it. Many members of the natural Black hair community experience some sort of microaggression almost every day, whether they are wearing box braids, which is part of most African cultures or having their hair in an Afro.

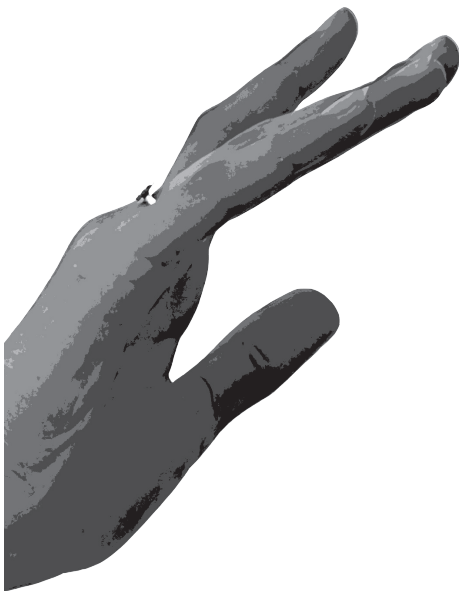
My classmates started to realise that I was Black at around six years old. They would ask me questions like, "How is your skin so dark?" or "Why are you black?" The one I received

almost daily was, "Hilary, are you made of chocolate?"

I was only young, so I found the comments and questions amusing and I actually liked the attention my classmates gave me. Although year after year, as I learnt more about racism, the little comments started to bother me.

As I grew, so did my hair. I loved wearing my hair in beautiful box braids, each one plaited with skill. When I wasn't wearing my braids, it would be big afros and puffy hairdos - my favourite! While I saw that as a chance to show off my gorgeous afro, others saw it as their chance to use me as a petting zoo. I would have random students who I did not know come up to me and start stroking and squeezing my hair as if it were a sponge. They would continuously ask me what I did to get it like this.

In 1810, a woman



named Saartji Baartman was taken from South Africa to the U.K. As a black woman, she had distinct features, so they put her on display at Piccadilly Circus. Thousands of people would come every year to point, stare and touch. They were mesmerised, fascinated, curious.

She survived five years in the United Kingdom but when she died, scientists were so intrigued by her body that they preserved her organs in museums until the 1970s. Finally, in 2002, Nelson Mandela sent for her to come home where she received a respectful burial.

In 1889, human zoos were first found by a white man named Carl Hagenbeck who took African tribes and presented them in Europe and America. Those dreadful zoos existed until the 1960s.

If I had been born just a few decades earlier, it could have been me that people would pay to see locked in a zoo and be treated in a way that no human should be treated. I wasn't, yet my nine-year-old self still felt like I was out for display, for anyone to point, stare and touch. I still felt like Saartji: everyone just did as they pleased.

The unexpected tugs of my hair became so regular that I started being embarrassed about my natural afro. I felt that braids were my only other choice. Even when I asked for the stroking to stop, it never did.

One day, I walked into school feeling confident about my new cornrow hair that took so long to do. No wild afro, no more hair tugging, but now I just met with more commentary. I was in playground when my "friend" came up to me and said to my face, "Your hair looks like snakes. You look like medusa."

That one remark stuck with me

through the entire day. The entire month. The entire year. Even now it hurts.

Even though it was hurtful and thoughtless, I am strangely grateful for that person's carelessness. It made me realise that whatever I chose, no one would be fully satisfied. I realised that I would always get questions and remarks like "Is that afro fake?" or "Do you take your braids out when you sleep?" but I was not going to tell them the lies they wanted to hear. Yes, my afro is made completely of plastic. Yes, I take them out just to put them all in again in the morning.

We live in a world that is systematically unequal. We have designed it to favour one group over another.

Angela Davis, the prominent American political activist and academic, once said, "I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change, but I am changing the things I cannot accept".

As part of the natural black hair community, it is important for me to spread the word on how we can put an end to the constant invasion of personal space and microaggressions.

The first way, the Touchers just need to stop touching. They deserve to go outside without a stranger touching their hair without their permission just as much as we do.

Two: Schools need to educate students to raise awareness. Educate yourself about it as well. Use Google, read books and share. We need to learn more about the history. Not just in October.

Number three: We as a community need to call it out more. We all do, whether you are in the natural black hair community or not. It takes two words; don't touch.



Society, Stereotypes, Identity

Anusha Keating (they/he/she), S9, explains non-binary identities and the value they hold in our community.

In our society, we are told that there are two genders, male and female.

We are told that women are nurses and men are firefighters. That women are too 'weak' for rugby and men doing gymnastics is 'not masculine.' But what about those people who identify as neither male nor female, where do they place

in our heavily divided world?

A non-binary person is someone who 'does not identify exclusively as a man or a woman. Instead, a nonbinary person may define their gender identity and experience outside of these binary terms.' This may mean that on many people who fit into this description will go by they/them pronouns, this does not mean all will, it very much depends on the individual.

People who are non-binary receive a considerable amount of hate whenever they express their identity.

They are told that they should just 'pick a gender' or that 'whatever is between your legs is what you are.'

It is often seen that only people who are trans, intersexual etc can be non-binary, and it is commonly thought that there is a certain 'look' to being non-binary. None of this is true: anyone can be non-binary no matter what.

In many ways, our society has begun to adapt to allow non-binary and trans people to express themselves fully. From trivial things like apps such as Instagram and TikTok giving the user the option to inform others of their pronouns, to creating more unisex bathrooms in public places, change is happening.

Despite the ever-expanding changes to our society, there is an extreme limit to the changes when it comes to schools. From our first day of school, for most things we do we are split into boys and girls: seating plans, sports, you name it.

In situations like this, someone who is non-binary may feel uncomfortable as they do not identify as either of these groups.

To solve this issue, teachers should start dividing classes up by numbers other than gender, and for things like sports, children should be allowed to choose what sports they do other than a school deciding what they can and cannot do based on their gender.

Another way school can be an ally to people of the non-binary community would be by making more things unisex. Most things in schools are split into gender, changing rooms, bathrooms