

# **BLACK PEOPLE'S HAIR:**

**A SYMPOSIUM ON THE POLITICAL CULTURE  
OF EVERYDAY LIFE**

**UNIVERSITY OF TOLEDO**

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**OPENING REMARKS BY**

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One of the most "stubborn facts" about being Black in America is that there are objective physical differences that make Black people distinct. Our subject in this symposium is hair—Whites have it, Blacks have it, whether old or young, male or female, every

member of our species deals with their hair. Every culture has values, behavior, even rituals that guide people into the proper modes of conduct.

Most Black people are aware of a hair problem, a hair crisis. The most basic problem is the "Good Hair-Bad Hair" syndrome. The idea is that one's biological make up is value laden as if there is a "natural" hierarchy. "Good Hair" is a code for being hair linked to the genetic type of European people's hair while "Bad Hair" is the African type. This is racism pure and simple. The essence of racism is the dialectic of racial inferiority versus racial superiority—hence, good hair versus bad hair.

We are trapped in a language that prevents a neutral discussion of African hair. Black people have been forced to internalize this kind of racism and it is updated continually through the mass media. This is a critical aspect of America's mental health—you can't change your basic biology—so the only universally healthy response is to accept what you get and celebrate the wonder of it all.

In fact, the role of culture is precisely to celebrate who we are. Our focus on this symposium is on hair styles, what you do with what you got. African hair is an eminently stylish feature of our bodies. It can be manipulated through braiding into head sculptures of in-

tricate complexity or straightened by using chemicals, heat or thread wrapping.

Black people have used hair styles to declare new politics. The African locks of the Rastafarians in Jamaica look like the Mau Mau Warriors in Kenya—the bold statement of a strong Black identity in revolt. The Afro of the 1960's spread to African peoples everywhere. Black people have mastered every other hair style of the world and created new ones.

Our interpretation has to sort through several ways of understanding Black hair styling:

- A. To what extent have Black people maintained or reinvented African Tradition in their hair styling;
- B. To what extent have Black people been manipulated and controlled by the racist imperative to mimic white peoples hair styles;
- C. To what extent have Black people been free to create new styles that reflect their identity and changes in their political culture;
- D. To what extent are Black people simply like all other Americans?

We raise these questions as a way to introduce this symposium on the political

culture of everyday life. This is the first year of our Africana Studies Program and we plan for this to be the first in a series that focuses on everyday life. So often we have allowed a chasm to separate the focus of scholarship from the everyday concerns of our community. We want to put cultural theory and analysis to the test of the accumulated experience and knowledge of the people who live in and recreate the culture. What we do should meet the approval of the campus and the community.

We want to celebrate ourselves as well. *Black is Beautiful*. We want to say this as many times as necessary to believe it and make it so. Over the course of this symposium we will see each other in a new light, all of us as vehicles of cultural excellence. *Black is Beautiful*. "Say it Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud!"

With the full diversity of Africa's gift of hair, let us explore Black people's hair culture for understanding, healing, and the joy of celebration. What's on our heads should be connected to what's in our heads. And for that we have our symposium.

*Sponsored by three groups at the University of Toledo: the Africana Studies program, the Women's Studies program, and the Office of Multicultural Development. For more information call (419) 530-7252.*