

Baylorian

2011

Baylorian 2011

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Faculty Advisor

Dr. Brady Peterson

Cover Artwork by:
Amber Crimmings

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Erica Ratke

Writer's Block

Dark clouds behind closed eyes
obscure clarity.
Inspiration, like a fickle flirt,
impishly flits between fibrous gray strands,
forever out of reach.
Lightning flashes,
ushering a release
from this sightless prison.
In the darkness I stand,
arms outstretched...
waiting for the rain.

Chelesea Carter

Cutting Away

When a black woman removes her relaxed or chemically straightened hair, the procedure is called the “big chop.” The “big chop” is the first step toward embracing her natural hair. On May 2, 2009, I took a risk with my appearance. It was a gamble that could result in being called “nappy headed” or having my coils classified as “bad.” I did not care. All I wanted to know was what I really looked like. I wanted to see the mass of mane I was born with, that God created just for me.

“Just cut it off,” I cried.

“Are you sure?” asked my Aunt Rochelle.

“Yes, I’m tired.”

My “big chop” took place in my Aunt Rochelle’s kitchen one afternoon when it was time to carefully remove my micro braids. My aunt was shocked by my decision to do something so permanent but eagerly grasped the scissors to cut away. I did her “big chop” right in her kitchen the previous year, and now she has dreads that hit below her neckline when she wears them down. I never thought to ask her how she felt, sitting in a chair without a mirror to capture every alternation my inexperienced hands were making across her head.

As I sat in the hard wooden chair, I itched to see what type of texture I had. Would it be curly, coily, rough or soft? I wondered what was underneath that mass of hair I latched onto mine. As the snipping increased and the floor became covered with the hair I hid behind, I began to realize something. When this is all over, I will not be able to escape to the style I had before. I would be exposed before everyone, lacking garments to cover what could turn out to be disastrous.

As we approached the end result, my aunt declared, “Chels, your texture is so pretty.” However, I was a little uneasy because she believed every pattern growing from one’s roots was beautiful. I was not brought up to believe such

things. At age five, my mother decided to chemically straighten my hair. She always said, “Your hair is too nappy,” after I told her I want to go natural. How did she know what my hair looked like anyways? She didn’t give it a chance. In the past, as it came closer for my mother to spread poisonous icing over my roots, I would try to envision my curl pattern. I thought to myself, “Just give it a chance.” Every six weeks, I eroded that chance with guanidine hydroxide disguised in a creamy mixture resembling vanilla bean ice cream.

My aunt completed my “big chop” and sent me over to the sink, where I leaned my head over. While staring down into the silver tub, my heart thumped against the top of the laminated wood counter as I waited for her to wash my inch long strands. My head felt light and sort of naked underneath the towel that seemed to outweigh it. After the wash, I crept into the tiny bathroom fearing the image that would appear in front of me. As I stood in with my head down across from the mirror, I slowly opened my eyes. The reflection unveiled a striking face with bold features. Relief rushed through my veins. It was like the liberation one feels after exposing a deep secret that was previously a permanent fixture in the back of one’s mind. Finally, the uncertainty was gone. It was refreshing learning to love and care for the whole me. Suddenly, I remembered all the people who would have an opinion about my new look.

On the way to meet my boyfriend, I called my mother and told her what I did.

She nonchalantly asked, “Does it look okay?”

I explained, “Yes, and I think it makes me look more feminine.”

After arriving at my boyfriend’s job, he stared at me while the word “wow” stumbled out of him and leapt onto my consciousness. At first, it was odd for him, but now he advocates for my natural hair when I consider masking it.

Washing my hair whenever I want is the greatest thing about my coils. You can’t wash your hair every day when it’s relaxed because it dries it out, and if you wash it every day with braids, they become frizzy. This led me to see how absurd it was to feel embarrassed of my tendrils. On the street, I passed black women with relaxed hair, weaves, and

shaped and meant to stand out. For the first time, I saw how we devalued our hair by attempting to blend in with society’s standards of beauty. As a result, we spend insane amounts of money to keep it up something that was not designed for us. Beauty is so distorted. Even though I was natural, I continued to combat ideas suggesting that beautiful is long, straight, and bouncy.

When I transferred to UMHB, where no one knows what I look like with micro braids, people continued to think I was pretty. Beauty was something I thought I would lose when I shed my extensions. However, when I saw women with long, flowing hair, I found myself feeling less feminine. Instantly, short hair became a man’s fashion in my eyes, and my femininity was lacking in my shrunken coils. Soon after, I began dreaming about cats at least once a week. The felines would hunch up, drawing back their lips to expose a set of tiny teeth. They were alone and striking their paws at what looked like the air—nothing.

My cat dreams ceased late in the spring semester when I decided to get braids again. People did not recognize me, and when they did, they shot me down with praises. Those who knew me did not care either way—I was still Chelesea. Soon after, I was forced to embrace my natural self again. The weekend before finals, my boyfriend helped me remove them after pressuring me to take them out. When the process was over, he smiled, leaned, and cupped his hands around my face and whispered, “I like seeing you.”

During the summer, I left the hair embellishments where they belonged—hanging on the walls of stores selling overpriced sleeklocks. It was only until I found myself sitting at Varsity Ford Dealership ready to buy my first car that my condition changed. My mother kept staring along the side of my face. My teeny weenie fro was gaining length. If I was to straighten it with a chi iron, it would reach my shoulder-tops. Her eyes continued to scan my mass of curls while maintaining a puzzled expression.

She exclaimed, “I don’t like the afro look.”

I explained that it shrinks badly in the heat and I was thinking about texturizing it. My mother agreed to do it.

room while my mother strained to read the directions for the Soft & Beautiful Botanicals Regular Texturizer. A texturizer is designed to enhance the natural wave or curl pattern, making hair easier to comb and softer. However, some argue it is a milder relaxer, but I said whatever. When the texturizer was complete, I removed the towel from my head and discovered my curls had been yanked out of my hairline. My coils were not enhanced but diminished. They did not bounce back into tight circles after wrapping them around my fingers. While getting dressed, I would stare in the mirror as if the image I wanted would appear at any moment. No matter how I tried, I could not embrace my reflection. I wanted to see me before the chemicals and the cuts, but in order to achieve that, I had to cut it off again.

When it came time to trim my hair, my ends laid dead and sliced in half between my mother's fingers. My mother removed about four inches of it, which turned into two more when she tried to shape into a symmetrical cut. After a week, I made an emergency appointment with my old beautician and got micros again. Three weeks have passed, and already I miss my own hair.

However, as hard as it is, I'm realizing that maybe I'm missing the freedom and the idea of wearing my hair in its natural state. I always thought to myself, if white girls can wear their own hair then why can't we? I don't know if going back to my coils is me. "Of course that's you! That's the hair God gave you" is what a person confident in natural hair would say. I am certain that I fell in love my reflection long before I knew what I looked like without a relaxer or braids. But I am mustering up the guts to say, "I'm not comfortable being the one with the fro among all the ones with the Rapunzel locks." Maybe I am like the millions of black women who wear ebony extensions down their back or get rid of their kinks with relaxers. Unlike them, I have given my natural hair a shot.

Garrett Michael

Taken

Love so tender
Intentions unkind
To your deceit I was blind
This beautiful canvas that was painted
Revealed to me a promise so tainted
Through betrayal my thoughts are shaken
Against my will my heart remains taken