

March 6, 2020

Re: Support for House Bill 1444

Everyday across this country, Black people have to navigate institutions that meet their presence with policies that police their hair (Greene, 2011; Greene 2017). Recent trending examples of customary, discriminatory practices target Black people at school and work through their hair and demonstrate how policies manifest as active forms of oppression, surveillance, “othering”, and marginalization. Clearly, Black hair styles, textures, and lengths are sites of political struggle, positioning psycho-emotional demands on Black people to anticipate, diagnose, critique, and hopefully dismiss attacks on their aesthetics (see Perez Huber & Solórzano, 2015).

To explain scientifically, Black people in America have a range of hair textures, from silky straight to tightly-coiled (Jablonski & Chaplin, 2014). Highly textured hair, emerging from elliptical shaped hair shafts, may have evolved as thermoregulatory adaptation to help keep the scalp and brain cool under conditions of high environmental heat (Jablonski & Chaplin, 2014). The curliness of the hair shaft is caused by retrocurvature of the hair bulb, which gives rise to an asymmetrical alphabet shaped hair follicles (Jablonski & Chaplin, 2014). Highly coiled hair is susceptible to shrinkage, dryness, and breakage due to the make-up and the abundance of curves in each hair strand (Walton & Carter, 2013). Shrinkage occurs when natural hair is washed; in reality, hair could be shoulder length, but after a wash, the shrinkage may draw up the coils short enough to remain at the ears with a “cottony” appearance (Davis-Sivasothy, 2011). This hair needs be cared for gently, with minimal manipulation and includes styles like braids and locs that can last from months to years.

Black hair care techniques are intricate and psychologically meaningful due to the culture and history of hair (Mbilishaka, 2018). In traditional African societies, hair represented a complex language system to communicate pride, health, wealth, and rites of passage (Byrd & Tharps, 2014). However, through acts of dehumanization to enslaved Africans, European slave masters desecrated the crowns of our African ancestors by labeling their hair as “fur” (Byrd & Tharps, 2014). Several laws emerged in the United States about how people were permitted to wear their hair. From the Tignon Laws of 18th century Louisiana that forced Black women to cover their hair in public spaces to the military regulations of 2015 that stated that braids and locs were out of dress code, the government has been outlawing natural hair (Mbilishaka, 2018b).

Hair discrimination creates emotional consequences. Psychological studies suggest that Black people with natural hair face prejudices within the family unit, romantic relationships, in the media, education, and employment (Lewis, 1999; Lewis, 2014; Lewis, 2015; Lewis, 2016; Mbilishaka, 2018c; Smith, Mbilishaka & Kennedy, 2017; Neil & Mbilishaka, 2019; Davis, Mbilishaka & Templeton, 2019; Opie & Phillips, 2015). These aesthetic traumas fueled by memories of rejection and encoded with sadness and shame (Wilson, Mbilishaka & Lewis, 2018; Mbilishaka, Mitchell, & Conyers, 2019; Mbilishaka, Rall, Hall & Wilson, 2019), are reinforced by daily reminders of how wearing natural hair is non-conforming to White ideals of beauty perpetuated by systems of oppression (Mbilishaka, 2018c). This results in hair stress (Winfield-Thomas & Whaley, 2019, p. 162), the “harmful physical and psychological effects of hair styling methods used to transform the hair from its natural state to achieve and maintain an unnatural texture and appearance.” Chemically or thermally straightening Black hair can result in self-induced hair loss, hair damage,

lowered self-esteem, social anxiety, and depression (Winfield-Thomas & Whaley, 2019). We need a cultural redefinition of natural hair that is fortified by law.

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