

Our Crown: A Visual Experience of Black Women

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“Having Black hair is unique in that Black women change up styles a lot. You can walk down one street block in New York City and see 10 different hairstyles that Black women are wearing: straight curls, short cuts, braids - we really run the gamut.” – Queen Latifah

Throughout my life I have had the feeling of wanting to change my hairstyle because I have honestly not always loved my natural hair. Having grown up in Brooklyn, NY, I recall first feeling this way in middle school. I went to a predominately Black and Hispanic school, but all my friends had either straight hair or a weave --- they didn't wear their natural hair. As a result, I often felt like the odd woman out.



Whenever I had the opportunity to do my hair such as picture days, prom, or graduation I would beg my mother to flat iron my hair because I felt as if wearing it naturally didn't look good. My feelings were further torn because all my friends wore their hair straight. At the time, my mother even had her hair relaxed, so I was rarely exposed to a black woman who wore their natural hair. That said, even with natural hair, which had to constantly be detangled each night, typically by my mother, was not only painful because I used to be tender-headed and impatient because it would also take almost an hour to detangle my hair before she would even style it.



It was around middle school when I begged my mother to allow me to relax my hair. According to Beauty Answered, the definition of *Hair Relaxed* is “a chemical used to straight hair, and it’s used by people that want to

straighten their naturally curly hair.” When my mom finally agreed to allowing me to relax my hair, I honestly felt prettier because at the time I equated straight hair as being beautiful. Throughout the 3 years of relaxing my hair it also was much it was less time consuming. It involved none of the detangling however the process of having to maintain my relaxed hair wasn’t that easy, too. When a person relaxes their hair, they need to keep up with



relaxing it and sometimes natural hair doesn’t take to the chemical and it can burn and the hair must be washed immediately. I remember my mother having a bad reaction to getting her hair relaxed in the hair salon. She got it colored and after that process, her hair started falling out. Eventually she had no choice to chop off her hair. She started wearing it natural and she’s been natural ever since.

In the image “*Wash Day at 12pm,*” I decided to title it and specifically include the time my mom started washing her hair along with the time when she blow-dried it, which was 3-4 hours later. The reason it takes more hours for a Black woman to wash her hair is that we must detangle our hair and then wash with a natural shampoo that not only fits our curl pattern, but that works for our hair. After that we have to condition, then deep condition and then wash again, blow and finally, style.

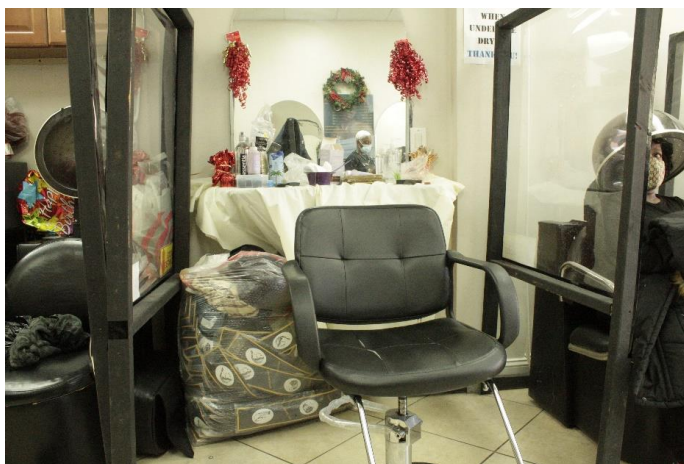
In the photograph ““*Blow Drying at 3pm,*” I chose to include the times to further emphasize the lengths black women go through to have clean hair. Unfortunately, my mother works amongst other



coworkers who can't grasp with how her natural hair grows. Whenever she chooses to switch up her hairstyles whether it be a wig, locs or a weave she is often confronted with inappropriate questions ----

“How does your hair grow wild like that” or “How did your hair grow overnight?”

It's possible these questions are out of genuine concern or curiosity however when my mother, myself and the overall Black community receive these questions it is highly offensive and, at times, dehumanizing. The questions over time became annoying because I did not want, nor should I want to go into details and explain how a Black woman's hair can shift from one style to another.



During the summer before high school, I spent a lot of time debating if I wanted to continue relaxing my hair or if I wanted to go back to wearing my hair natural. I eventually made the decision to keep it natural but that process also wasn't easy. During that summer when I stopped putting relaxer in my hair it started transitioning back to its natural state, but the ends of my hair would still be straight, and my roots were back to its curly state, so my hair were dead. I had to start chopping my hair off and let it grow back.

During that period, I didn't feel my prettiest and I also needed to train back my hair. Training back, one's hair means to wear more protective hairstyles, which means wearing a hairstyle such as box braids, twist outs or wigs and weaves. It was around this time I started going to an African beauty salon with my mom and getting my hair styled into box braids. While I loved how it looked, the process of sitting in the salon chair and not only having them detangle my hair, took up to 8 hours. I remember going during the summer at 10am and leaving around 5pm so it takes up half the day.

When I started high school, my mother would send me videos of natural hairstyles that she wanted to try on my hair. When she started doing them, I grew to love and appreciate my natural hair.

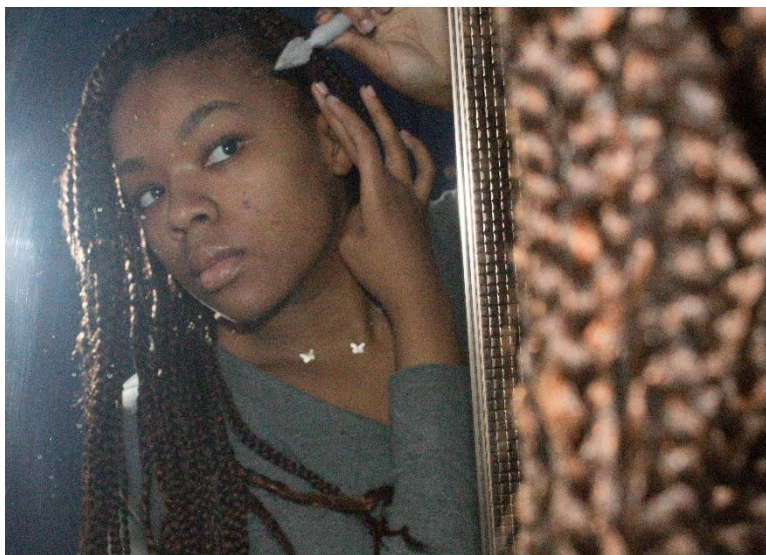
I did, however, run into some issues when I started working in high school. When I used to work at a Brooklyn Public Library, I remember wearing my hair in two puffs and my boss walking past me and she squeezed my puffs and said, “*Cocoa Puffs*”.

Not only did I not find any humor in her offensive words and actions, but I also found it inappropriate as a woman, to not even ask consent to touch it let alone the offensive fact of her racial slur, as a white woman. Even if had she asked, the answer still would have been no. During that time some hairstyles I did were twist outs, braid outs, box braids and locs. While the process of the locs and even just washing my hair is still a long process for me,



the result of hair is worth it. The compliments I also received from it made it more worth it to me.

Fast forward to attending a PWI (Predominately White School). When I started my first year in a way, I experienced culture shock when I started my first year at a predominately white school. In comparison to me being home and having more resources that made washing and taking care of my hair much easier, I was in freshman dorm buildings where the lights cut off in the middle of



your shower since its motion detected. The tubs were small and since I had to share the bathroom

amongst other students, I didn't feel comfortable to take the time I needed and would often go home during the weekends just to be able to wash my hair and give it the amount of care it needed. Even the space to detangle and dry it out, since I was in a converted double room with two other girls the lack of space and privacy became my challenges. From that point moving forward I would continue keeping it in protective styling to manage my time better.

Throughout my experience, I often felt like the outlier since I did not see many Black women on my dorm floor. I did not know if anyone else had the same struggle. It wasn't until I heard about what the Crown Act was, and its statistics was I able to feel heard and not alone.

According to the Crown Act, it was *“Created in 2019 by Dove and the CROWN Coalition, in partnership with then State Senator Holly J. Mitchell of California, to ensure protection against discrimination based on race-based hairstyles by extending statutory protection to hair texture and protective styles such as braids, locs, twists, and knots in the workplace and public schools.”* Crown Act statistics show that, *“100 percent of Black elementary school girls in majority-white schools experience that hair discrimination at the age of 10.”* Studies also show, *“While 90% of black girls feel their hair is beautiful, the microaggression and discrimination she endures has an impact on she sees herself”*. Another study revealed that *“80% of Black Women also felt they had to change their natural hair in order to fit in at work.”*

With experiences and a lot of thought in mind, I decided to create a series of photographs that participates in the process of Black women's hair to provide an informative, educational, intimate, inside-view of the lives of a select group of black women and how they style their hair.

When I first began this project, the Crown Act was only approved in only 15 states with 35 states left waiting for approval. As of spring 2022, the bill is being passed to Senate for approval. While this may seem like a victory, I don't see it necessarily being a step in the right direction. The Black community should not need a bill to pass allowing us to wear our hair in its natural state. Hair discrimination should

not have occurred in the first place. Choosing to wear box braids or locs to protect our heads, and our crown shouldn't be deemed as unprofessional. What also does not make this feel like a win is that some states rejected the Crown Act, meaning they don't agree with the fact that hair discrimination is an issue.

According to CNN Politics, Republican Rep. Jim Jordan of Ohio said –

"Fourteen months of chaos and we're doing a bill on hair."

Jordan also added —

"I hope we can actually focus on the things that matter to the American people."

These insensitive statements show the complete disregard towards Black hair when the issue doesn't affect other people. Jordan and others do not deem it as important and instead believe an entire group of people should assimilate their natural hair just to fit into American society.



Besides my mother, I also photographed my best friend, Alyssa. I have known her since middle school, and she went through a similar phase as I regarding how she wore her hair. She works with children that have special needs, however the family she works with are a white family who ask the same inappropriate question that my mother and I have heard in our own interpersonal and professional experiences. Whenever she chooses to switch up her hair, she often hears –

"Can I touch it?"

"It looks so wild and crazy?"

She often laughs awkwardly but of course she's uncomfortable with it.

My little sister wears her hair slicked down most of the time. If not slicked down she always has it in a protective style because that is how she feels most comfortable. After she and I see our mother comfortable wearing her natural hair in settings that society labels “*unprofessional*,” it made me want to continue wearing my natural hair how I see fit.



My older cousin Amanda has an Instagram about Black women (@heythereblackgirl). On the page she promotes self-love and confidence for Black women. Amanda rocks her natural hair confidently, which has also helped me with my own confidence. She did her own hair for her wedding in a natural hairstyle and chooses to wear her hair naturally in her everyday life and not straightening it.



Not only have I been influenced by each woman that I photographed, but I’ve also been influenced by other Black female photographers whose work either focuses on Black hair, themselves, or their family. One of these photographers is Deanna Lawson whose work usually focuses on the experience of Black women. One specific image that made me want to emulate her work and it is entitled “*The Communion*,” In the photograph, Lawson shows a community of Black women looking out for other Black woman. Lawson deliberately reveals the process of the subject along with the photographs of hair being



braided. Her work represents what my own project is.

In addition to Lawson I also looked at the



works by photographer Nakeya Brown who also made a series based on Black hair. The items she shot such as combs and the picks along with a magazine that reveals hair care products was in synergy with my project. Latoya Ruby Frazier is another big influence. Frazier often focuses on her family along with other Black families. For myself, I too often document my family and friends.

Our Crown: A Visual Experience of Black Women strives to illuminate and inform viewers about what it feels like to step into the shoes of all these Black women. We as a group are often overlooked and this leads to topics concerning us also being overlooked. While I know I can't speak for every Black woman, I feel that most all of us identify with the same problems and our voices need to be heard. This project is our statement, and our calling of attention.



"The De-tangling, 2020"

13x19

Digital Photograph



“Wash Day at 12pm, 2022”

13x19

Digital Photograph



"Blow Drying at 3pm, 2022"

13x19

Digital Photograph



“Working with your Crown, 2021”

8.5x 11

Digital Photograph



"Irritated Scalp, 2022"

8.5x11

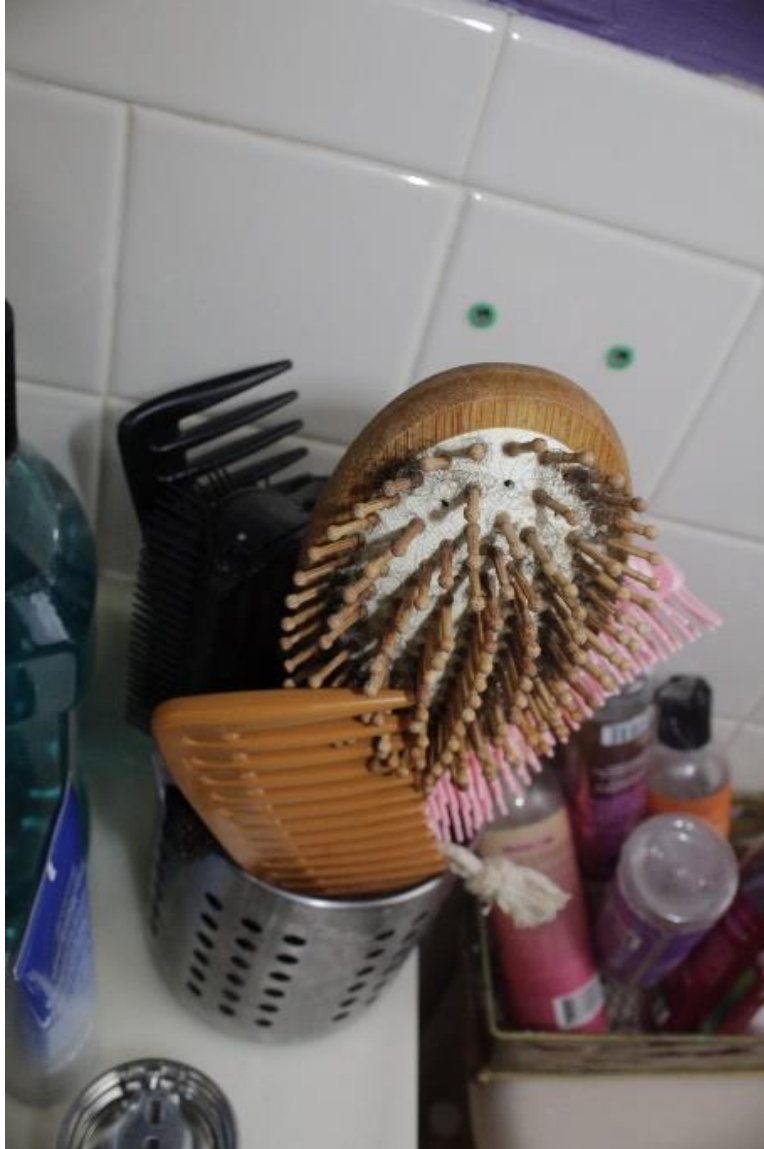
Digital Photograph



"Kayla's Baby Hairs, 2022"

24x 33

Digital Photograph



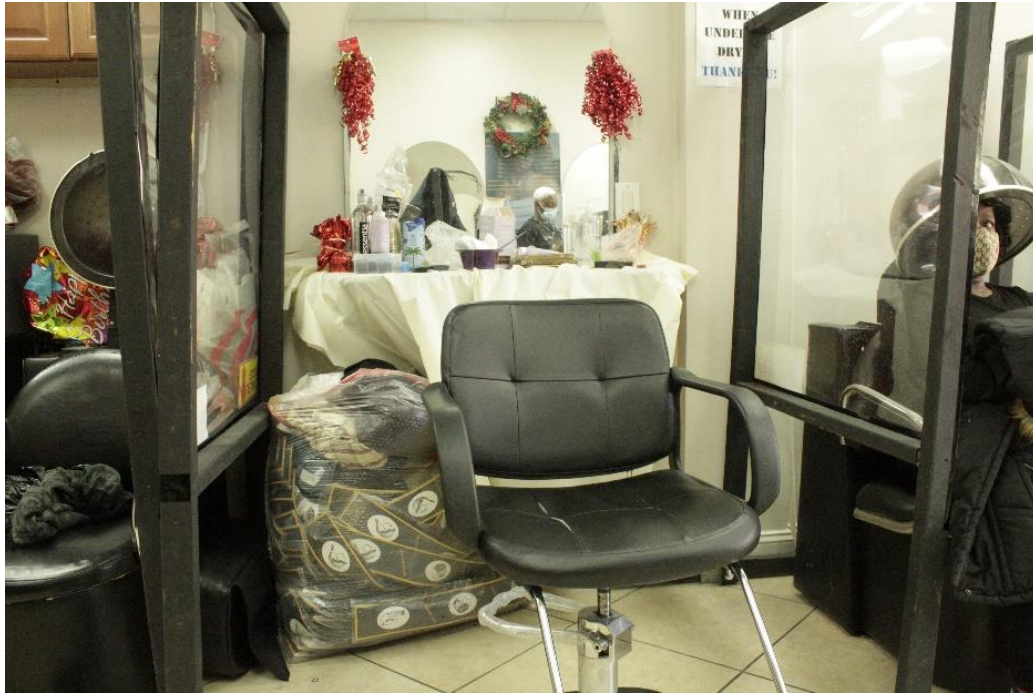
“Brushes and Combs,2021”

13x19

Digital Photograph



"Re-twisting, 2022"
8.5x 11
Digital Photograph



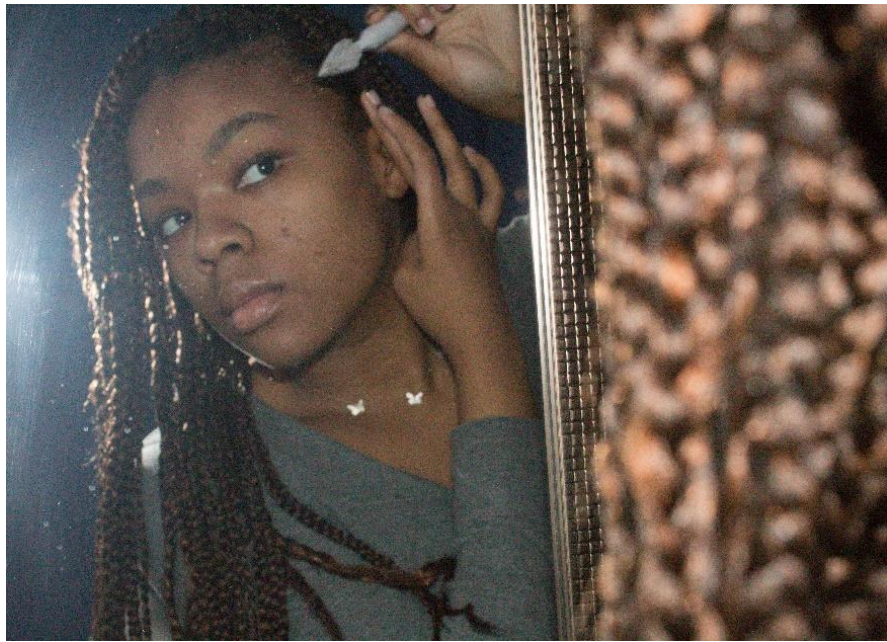
"Beauty Chair, 2022"

13x19

Digital Photograph



“Curling Cream, 2021”
8.5x 11
Digital Photograph



"Doing my Edges, 2022"

8.5x 11

Digital Photograph



"Bestie, 2021"
8.5x 11
Digital Photograph



“Amaya retwisting her hair, 2022”

13x19

Digital Photograph



Amanda at her Wedding, 2021

8.5x 11

Digital Photograph

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