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From Nappy To Classy

Throughout the essay “In The Kitchen” by Henry Louis Gates Jr Gates goes into the history and views of black hair. The author does this by recalling his mom doing hair in the physical kitchen, and connecting it to the unchangeable part of a black person’s hair “The Kitchen”. The author also touches on the philosophy of how straight or white adjacent hair is looked at “good hair”. With that framework in place, he describes some of the painstaking processes that people go through to obtain that “good hair” status. During the author’s black empowered afro phase he went through product after product trying to get the right wave pattern to his hair. This essay is a love letter to black hair and the culture surrounding it.

In this love letter to black hair Gates has a way with words like no other. I would describe his style of writing as a conversational piece. While reading this essay I found myself time and time again giggling to myself and having little dialogues in my head on what the writer was saying. He brought numerous amounts of good points about our society and countless amount of stories about black hair that are very relatable as a reader. The giggling came from the referential nature of Gates's writing. Wondering what type of hair products Frederick Douglas use is an out-there funny statement that kept me engaged and reading more. A writer needs to have those light-hearted moments in their piece to break from the monotonous and monotone of a serious

essay. If you have too much of one dark tone it can really take away some of the power of the writing. If you give the space for humor the serious points will hit harder and stronger. Don't get me wrong, full serious writings can still be gripping all the way through but the author must give the audience a mental break. There is only so much you can take of the same thing before you start to clock out. This is what Henry Louis Gates does well. He gives us the reality about the history and society view on black hair and how it relates to the black experience, while also hitting you with relatable humor and examples to keep you engaged. He tapped into his target audiences' lives and presented it to them on paper. The essay Gave the audience a mirror to look into and see their experiences played out and explained.

I would put myself in the target audience for this essay. I use hair products to accentuate my curls. One day I might look like a rebel sure the next I might look like a runaway slave. These two sides to my hair give me a good perspective on the idea of "good hair". Good hair should not be a thing. It divides us too much. Now that might sound extreme to you, you might be asking yourself "but it's just hair?". I would think the same but hair is a crucial part of black culture. Some people are more loyal to their barber than their significant other. We always want to look our best so when people try to take us down or degrade us we can still have the confidence and the presentability to fight back. We conform to a lot of safe and socially acceptable styles just to be able to compete in the world. If it's either cutting of dreads or straightening out your hair to look more "professional". These whitewashed images of professionalism and correctness is another big push for wanting "good hair". Having that hair will make you closer to power. Sadly in a world that is being closest to white that you possibly could be. This is not a jab on white people by no stretch of the imagination. It's just a built-up history that we are trying to tear down

now. We have been set in our ways for so long that it's hard to see anything else as right. It might stay this way forever but there won't be a time where you see us stop fighting.

Hair is the cornerstone of the black experience. In our society (at least in the black communities) the definition of "good hair" is loose curly hair with no kinks. Kinks are a natural part of black hair. As babies, we have silky hair but as we grow and evolve so does our hair, but it does show how important silky smooth hair is in society when people try their best to stop the natural evolution of black hair. Trying their hardest to keep the straight silk-like hair. It's because we have a negative connotation in calling it "nappy" or "unkempt". I don't like the superiority that this philosophy brings. Giving what seems like a class system to hair. It might not be extreme as racism or sexism or any of the "isms" but it does divide us even more. The desires for these styles stems from what we're presented within the media. If you look at your television at any given moment, at any given time, in any given decade, you can tell the trends and what the people at the time saw as perfection. You will also notice a large number of white people on screen. We make these T.V, music, and movie stars our idols. We look at them and want to be them. So no wonder why there are so many black kids, teens, and adults that see the people on the screen is better and want to be just like them. Why be me when I can be better. This thought infects everyone no matter race, creed, or sex, but it is more prevalent in minorities since we are not represented in the "perfect" image as often if at all. The idea of having "good hair" has so much weight to it that people will go through a lot just to have anything close to the type of hair that would be considered "good hair". A famous example is Malcolm X back when he was known as Detroit Red. In his autobiography, he goes into great detail and he describes getting his hair relaxed with conk a chemical that literally burns the scalp. Why do we do this? Why go

through pain stacking processes for hair? We go through it for the status and praise it brings. It's no surprise that we all want to be loved. We all want to be looked up at not down on. We see this with jobs, relationships, family dynamics, there is always an unspoken (or loudly heard) class system.

The perception of "good hair" has shaped our culture. This is apparent when famous and high echelon (Black) people rock the relaxed or "good hair" look. In my eyes, this gives a certain level of status to the hairstyle. Henry Louis Gates describes each hair process as a little kid describes his favorite superhero. His words are filled with envy for stars like Nat King Cole who had beautiful processes, and on the flip side filled with disappointment and kind of disgust for bad processes like the one Sammy Davis Jr wears. Nat King Cole seems to be put on a higher pedestal in the eyes of the author based on the luxury nature of his hair. The author thinks so highly of Nat King Cole's hair that when he is reminded of it he has to hold back tears. It is interesting to me how the thought of this type of hair can provoke such emotions.

Henry Louis Gates Jr. He is a black author, filmmaker, teacher, and historian, that has been writing and producing films about the sociology of black people for a long time now. He has been involved in countless PBS documentaries and movies based on the life of black and Latino people. With one of them (The African Americans: Many Rivers To Cross) winning a Peabody award and an NAACP (national association for the advancement of colored people) award. He teaches at Alphonse Fletcher university and is the director of the hutching center at Harvard. He is a highly educated man getting his education from Yale and Cambridge. He is an intellect that presents many interesting and revealing thoughts on the black experience.

