



## The tangled web black hair weaves

By Nedra Rhone  
The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

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On a hot summer day in 1994, Alyssa Haskins decided she had had enough. She stood in front of her bathroom mirror, lifted a pair of scissors to her head, and just like that, cut off all her hair.

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Johnny Crawford, jrcrawford@ajc.com

Actress Nia Long says, "It is ignorant that we can't actually embrace ourselves in the raw state."

After years of getting hair relaxers, including one at age 14 which caused extensive scalp burns and hair loss, Haskins cut off her chemically straightened hair and resolved to leave the "creamy crack," alone. "It was extremely liberating," said Haskins, 45, of southwest Atlanta whose experience mirrors that of many African-American women today. "I've been natural ever since."

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For African-Americans, choosing to wear their natural hair texture is about much more than appearance. Kinky or tightly coiled hair is often seen as radical and unkempt, while straight hair or "good hair" has long been perceived as more acceptable, not only by the white mainstream, but plenty of African-Americans as well.

"There are almost like two extremes," said Nicole Logan, 39, of East Atlanta. "There are black women who are like 'perm is the way,' and frown on other women who have gone natural, and the other extreme is women who have not only gone natural but are wearing dreadlocks and sisterlocks and are like 'Oh, you're a sellout because you keep getting a perm.'"

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In the movie, "Good Hair" which arrives in theaters Friday, actor/comedian Chris Rock details the lengths to which some black women and men will go for straight hair. His journey takes him from a hair salon where a 6-year-old maintains a stiff upper lip as a chemical relaxer sits on her scalp, to the

temples of India where the hair women sacrifice in a religious ceremony is swept up, sent to factories and exported as weaves to be sewn onto the heads of celebrities and soccer moms throughout the U.S. and Europe.

Black hair care is a \$165 million industry in the U.S. with about \$46 million spent on relaxers, according to Mintel, a market research firm, though future projections show sales of relaxers declining slightly.

A recent study from haircare giant Alberto Culver Company found that while 81 percent of black women said their natural hair makes them feel more in tune with their heritage and culture, only 26 percent said it makes them feel more confident in social situations.

"It is ignorant that we can't actually embrace ourselves in the raw state," said Nia Long, one of several Hollywood actresses who appears in Rock's documentary. "You have to kind of say, 'Okay, am I getting a weave and a perm because it is a style choice or is it that I'm actually denying a part of who I am?'"

Long admits to wearing several tracks of hair weave, a process in which hair from another source is glued or sewn into existing hair. And Rock confesses that while he shot footage related to natural hair it didn't make it into the film. The stuff about relaxers and hair weaves was much more exciting, he said.

But what many black women wonder, is why the stuff on top of their heads is so divisive?

A hair revolution of sorts came in 2005 with the release of India Arie's single "I Am Not My Hair" in which she suggested that black women should wear their hair however they choose.

"That freed a lot of people to do what they wanted with their hair," said Leslie Leland, owner of Hair-Ex which specializes in hair extensions. While the song gave many women courage, there is still a stigma attached to Afro-textured hair, she said. Hair weaves offer black women the option of having straight hair, while retaining their natural texture underneath. "People are really preserving their natural hair," Leland said, "They will braid it up under a weave and then by summer they will wear their own natural texture."

Adrienne Leak, salon director of Lux Salon in Grant Park, agreed hair should be about choice, as long as the choices are healthy. "Hair is like a beautiful piece of jewelry and if you don't take care of it, it starts to get tarnished," said Leak, who offers a range of straightening solutions including heat straightening, relaxers and a new keratin smoother. About 40 percent of her clients are natural, she said, adding that kinky hair isn't just a black thing. "It is more about the texture of your hair than the color of your skin," Leak said.