



Cover Illustration Alem Derege

My initial interest in the politics around Afro hair came from watching comedian Chris Rock's 2009 documentary 'Good Hair'. Rock's inspiration for the film came from his young daughter enquiring "Daddy, why don't I have good hair?", highlighting how insecurities around physical appearance begin from a young age and are influenced by society's often polarised, eurocentric view of beauty. The concept of "good hair" is one rooted in slavery as those with looser, softer hair (and fairer complexions) were seen as being more white adjacent and thus given indoor tasks. For many of us who live in the west we manipulate our hair in order to appease others, sometimes through the use of relaxers, wigs/weaves or even just slicking back our hair with thick creams and gels as to not 'offend' anyone or to garner attention. This is particularly noticeable in educational environments and in the workplace. Watching Rock's documentary prompted me to examine my own relationship with my hair, which I wore exclusively straightened until the age of 15. Even now, as I am nearing my mid-twenties, I continue to struggle with how to "manage" my hair and feel confident wearing it out in its naturally curly state. That being said, in the last decade or so there appears to have been a shift, with an increasing number of Black women foregoing weaves and relaxers in favour of wearing their hair in an Afro state or opting for protective styles, like box braids and twists. These hairstyles are not new, however, they have been around for centuries and are often indicative of particular tribal/ ethnic groups, for example Fulani braids originating from the Fula people of Western Africa.

To me, there is a unique and beautiful quality to the way that Black men and women may style their hair – particular styles like, for example, cornrows aren't always constrained to 'cornrows'. There are actually a wide array of complex patterns and designs which people incorporate and they have a beautiful architectural quality to them. Slaves did in fact

use braiding patterns as intricate floorplans to indicate escape routes and convey messages to each other. For example, in Colombia and other South American countries people used cornrow designs to gain freedom from plantations.

In my design, also inspired by visuals from Sonya Clark's 'The Hair Craft Project', the male figure on the left-hand side is wearing cornrows, similar to the aforementioned styles, which compile into a mound at the crown of his head – attached to this is a tree-like afro puff. I wanted to create a sense of ambiguity by linking these hairstyles not only to architecture but also nature. The blonde colour choice of the braids was intentional, with it creating contrast from the dark routes and emphasising the intricacy of the braids, as well as showcasing the versatility of protective styles as they enable us to "switch up" our look through the use of coloured extensions instead of chemical dyes which could compromise the health of our natural hair. The figure on the right-hand side has a single braid at the front of her face with locs on the base of her head and zig-zag partitions along her scalp. The orange thread wrapping around the conical structures are reminiscent of African threading – a technique which originates from Sub-Saharan Africa and is used a heatless method for stretching hair. The conical structures mimic vernacular hut typologies, like the Hamar conical huts found in Southern Ethiopia. Overall, this artwork is intended to celebrate and reclaim Afro hair and traditional styling methods in the midsts of threats such as demonisation and appropriation.

Alem Derege is a 24-year-old Sheffield School of Architecture alumnus who completed her BA Architecture degree in 2019. During her time at SSoA Alem became involved with the Black Females in Architecture (BFA) network and was recognised in RIBA's 2018 Black History Month campaign. She was also the recipient of SsoA's annual MSMR travel award scholarship in 2019 which sponsored her trip to the city of Asmara located in Eritrea, East Africa. Since graduating Alem spent time working as a Part I Architecture Assistant at MSMR architects and freelance illustrating. She is currently completing an MA in Migration and Diaspora studies at SOAS, University of London.