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May 15, 2009

Hair Apparent?

Posted: 06:43 PM ET



President Barack Obama bends over so the son of a White House staff member can pat his head during a visit to the Oval Office May 8, 2009. Official White House Photo//Pete Souza

From CNN's Alden Mahler:

This picture, by itself, might look bizarre, or even ridiculous. What is President Obama doing, bowing to a little kid? But it's the coolest picture I've seen of President Obama to date, and that includes the ones where he holds staff meetings out by the swingset.

I should first say that I am white and have straight hair. As a result, of course, I've always wanted curly hair - but I've learned enough, from friends and in more academic settings, to appreciate that I'm lucky, in a way. I can pretty much let my hair be and not have anybody comment on it one way or the other.

But our standards of beauty are indisputably racially-charged. It's not just that hair differs between races, although it does. The problem is that people whose hair isn't straight and silky are often made to feel less-than, and to feel compelled to work to change their hair. In nearly every major relationship I've had in my life with a person of any non-white ethnicity, hair has been an issue. My friends have complained about a variety of problems: their fear, sometimes, of water, which can undo styling; their fear of appearing unprofessional if they choose a "natural" hairstyle; the unfairness of being told their natural selves are unbeautiful; the difficulty, sometimes, of finding stylists who know what they're doing.

It's a huge issue on the internet, too. Google it. For starters, try the search term "good hair." I'll wait.

It doesn't matter how rich and famous you are either. Salon.com ran an article shortly after President Obama's inauguration critiquing Mrs. Obama's hair and its relevance to race relations in the United States. I'm not kidding!

That's why my friend Scott thought this picture was so amazing, why he posted it to a blog we both read, and why I have since forwarded it to everybody I know.

It's the caption that makes the picture. "The youngster wanted to see if the President's haircut felt like his own." This is the child of a White House staffer, and what he means is, "Is your hair like my hair?"

For the first time, ever, the President of the United States can say "Why yes, it is. And you can be President someday too."

Danielle Gallagher - Editorial Assistant

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Yalonda

May 15th, 2009 9:44 pm ET

I really like this. Hair is very important to me. I am an African American woman and advocate for natural hair. I tend to cringe when race and hair are discussed by the public at large, in mainstream (read: white) and large arenas, but I must say that I stopped bracing myself halfway through your post. The treatment and views of hair and its political ramifications can be rather (in)delicate, so I appreciate the care you've given the issue(s) here.

And even felt the beginning of tear at the caption. No, I'm not joking. Thank you for this.

Akin Manchester, NH

May 16th, 2009 7:42 am ET

Obama is such an assuming guy, look at that!
Flesh of our flesh, bone of our bones, right in the Oval Office!

Lillie

May 16th, 2009 10:37 am ET

I AM NOT MY HAIR by Indie Arie has renewed awareness. As a African American, Black, Negro, or Colored (please select one), I feel our intellegence, has again been masked by not only our nose, full lips and hips, but now our hair.

Purple Spider

May 16th, 2009 2:27 pm ET

Cute picture – we need to see a little relaxation from time to time and get off the prejudice opinions of others. We are all supposed to be Americans!

CWWD

May 24th, 2009 10:39 pm ET

It tugs at the spirit. It's been a long time coming.

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