

It's been my second summer without them... well.... third – if you count escaping the harsh Wellington Winter to a tropical-warm-winter of Rarotonga (*which I totally do*)! Swimming has been more pleasant without these long tentacles dragging behind me - a part of my own body freaking me out –*eeeeek seaweed..... uggggh.....a slippery salt water eel.....*nope – just my long-ass dreadlocks soaked, soggy and grazing over my skin.

I've never been too good with numbers, dates and memory – but for at least 10 years my mostly black dreads with coloured highlights have let people know that I'm not norm-core, that self-expression and punk rock are important to me. They say that I move a bit against the grain of the mainstream. They've given me a bit of edge – I'm not a pretty girl, I'm a bit rough around the edges. My rainbow coloured fringe probably gave an indication of my queerness (*this queer can only hope*)!

My hair made me stand out and I'd enjoy the frequent compliments of "sweet dreads" along with the occasional ask to buy weed - in hindsight a missed opportunity for a lucrative side-hustle! They helped me to be remembered. Despite a few trims my dreads crept from a few inches below my shoulders to that dangerous kind of long where you have to scoop them up into your arms before you sit down to pee or make sure they don't get caught in the car door when you're closing it.

I loved my dreads and I'd even say my hair helped me a lil' in my mahi – as odd as that might sound - holding various jobs in the arts and also in community sector - I think often they'd play a part in helping me easily connect to other folks I worked alongside – giving me an in with say, Josh* a rough sleeper who was hard to get an in with and who lived life on the fringes. Perhaps I was seen as a little more relatable? When working in the arts scene, I was colourful, quirky - an artist.

Hair – it isn't just "hair". It talks to our personalities, to our history, to our communities. In some societies hair can represent spiritual connections and different styles can be rites of passage.*

Sitting on my porch with a friend one day, she said "*have you heard or read much about dreadlocks being cultural appropriation?*" I hadn't really. My cellphone must have been listening in my pocket because from then on articles would be targeted to me, or I'd see a post on Facebook – algorithms at work. Months later, at a party, an acquaintance would give me a light-hearted jab for being a white girl with dreads. *Ouch. Ooof. Truth.*

So.... What's a millennial to do? I'd google. In my noodling around the internet, I would learn that, in black culture, hair is a big thing! I can't fully understand the complexities – not do I have the wordcount to share my learnings, but in short - so many black women are forced by society's eurocentric beauty standards (where beauty is in the eyes of the coloniser) to put so much energy, money and time into their hair – to have it any way BUT how it naturally falls – as society tells them this is wrong, not socially acceptable, not employable, not "respectable". Systematic racism, white supremacy and capitalism all at play. To be safer moving through the world they often chemically straighten, wear wigs, perm and weave their hair. To be a black woman and wear your natural hair, an afro, dreadlocks – is a bold political statement.

I learnt that for many People of Colour (POC) their dreads are viewed as dirty, unprofessional, militant. That was not assumed of me. *Ahh.....society says it's okay when white people do it.* A person of colour could look at me, dreads and all, and be reminded of the privileges they don't have. We could be doing the same thing, yet getting different results.

I would read articles and sit with some guilt and some defensiveness as I unpacked what I was learning:

- “Yes, but so much of this is from an American perspective, and this is Aotearoa – not America” *It’s a global world. We’re connected. What happens in America can concern and affect me and others. Also, I have many POC friends. I should be a better friend, try to be a better ally.*
- “But I’ve been complimented by so many POC” *What about those that haven’t said anything? one person doesn’t speak for all.*
- “Yeah, but I have Celtic history and there is some evidence the Celts had ‘hair like snakes.’” *Do I? Did my ancestors actually have dreads? Is that really a reason?*
- But I want to keep them – I love them! *Privilege much?*

When it came down to it – I was wearing dreads cos dreadlocks are cool. They were made cool by a culture that isn’t mine. Worse, they were made cool by a culture that struggles under white supremacy.

I love fashion and clothes! Not in the *runway-latest-trends* kind of way – but I view fashion a vehicle for self-expression. I make and modify many of my own clothes. I wear things that reflect the subcultures that I’m involved in, relating to music, art and politics. I intentionally wear things that project who I am. I got a bit of a bent goth/punk hybrid style going on too – never grew out of that ‘phase’!

I don’t want people to look at me and see something I’m not - what is my hair saying about me? I don’t want POC to think I don’t care about their experiences and struggles and that I’m not trying to be a good ally. Is walking around as a white woman with dreads the same as saying “Hey look, I’ve taken this thing that’s natural for you, that you get chastised for having and I’m still considered trustworthy and employable while you’re not. This thing that’s yours won’t hold me back – but it will you - Ha!”

I’m ashamed to say, that it should have been a quicker conclusion – the dreads had to go. I could no longer justify them to myself and I no longer felt pride in them. They went from being an empowering hairstyle to one that disempowered others – and me....They no longer were a part of the representation of who I am – representing a bit of my inner world.... Cutting them off felt like the right thing to do to take some accountability of my role in white supremacy culture and an opportunity to learn and grow.

I now sport a black and green bob. When swimming I now don’t hesitate to dive under the water, and my head now fits in hats! I feel lighter in all the ways that one can. I don’t miss the dreads one bit!

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