

IS YOUR HAIR STILL POLITICAL?

My first trip to Virgin Gorda earlier this year had been an enjoyable, relaxing time. After coping with the devastations of Hurricane Hugo, three friends and I decided to meet somewhere in the Caribbean for a Christmas vacation. From my personal and professional travels, Virgin Gorda seemed the ideal spot. And less than an hour's flight time from my home.

My friend, another Black woman from St. Croix, and I deplaned in Tortola to clear BVI [British Virgin Islands] immigration at the Beef Island Airport. I was happy to be a tourist for a change, looking forward to a wonderful holiday, post-hurricane problems left behind for a few days. The morning was brilliant and sunny, and in our bags was a frozen turkey, along with decorations for the rented house.

The Black woman in a smartly pressed uniform behind the Immigration Control desk was younger than I, with heavily processed hair flawlessly styled. I handed her my completed entry card. She looked up at me, took it with a smile, and said, "Who does your hair?"

My friend and I were the only passengers going on to Virgin Gorda. As a Black woman writer who travels widely, I have recently been asked that question many times. Thinking we were about to embark on one of those conversations about hairstyle Black women so often have in passing, on supermarket lines, buses, in laundromats, I told her I had done it myself. Upon her further questioning, I described how.

I was not at all prepared when, still smiling, she suddenly said, "Well, you can't come in here with your hair like that you know." And reaching over she stamped "no admittance" across my visitor's card.

"Oh, I didn't know," I said, "then I'll cover it," and I pulled out my headkerchief.

“That won’t make any difference,” she said. “The next plane back to St. Croix is 5:00 p.m. this evening.” By this time my friend, who wears her hair in braided extensions, tried to come to my aid. “What’s wrong with her hair,” she asked, “and what about mine?”

“Yours is all right,” she was told. “That’s just a hairstyle.”

“But mine is just a hairstyle too,” I protested, still not believing this was happening to me. I had traveled freely all over the world; now, in a Caribbean country, a Black woman was telling me I could not enter her land because of how I wore my hair?

“There is a law on our books,” she said. “You can’t come in here looking LIKE THAT.”

I touched my natural locks, of which I was so proud. A year ago I had decided to stop cutting my hair and to grow locks as a personal style statement, much the same as I had worn a natural afro for most of my adult life. I remembered an *Essence* magazine cover story in the early 80s that had inspired one of my most popular poems—*Is Your Hair Still Political?*

“You can’t be serious,” I said. “Then why didn’t I know about this before? Where is it written in any of your tourist information that Black women are only allowed to wear our hair in certain styles in your country? And why do we have to?”

Her smile was gone by now.

“It’s been a law for over five years,” she snapped. And I realized she was very serious when I saw our bags being taken off the plane, and it preparing to go on without us.

“But how was I supposed to know that?” I protested, visions of our holiday feast defrosting on the tarmac, our friends from New York wondering where we were, our hostess at the airport waiting in vain to drive us to our rented house by the sea.

“I’ve read I can’t bring drugs into the British Virgin Islands. I’ve read I can’t seek employment in the British Virgin Islands. I’ve read about everything else I can’t do in the British Virgin Islands, but how are Black tourists supposed to know we can’t wear locks if we visit the British Virgin Islands? Or don’t you want Black tourists?”

By now I was outraged. Even with the hot sun outside and the dark face before me, I was confused for a moment as to where I was. Nazi

Germany? Fascist Spain? Racist South Africa? One of those places where for so many decades white people had excluded Black people because of how they LOOKED? But no, it was a Black woman, in the Caribbean, telling me I wasn't acceptable as a tourist in her country—not because of what I do, not even because of who I am, but because of how I wear my hair. I felt chilled to the bone.

By this time the young white pilot had come in to see why the flight was being delayed. "What do you mean, because of her HAIR?" Finally an immigration supervisor came, asking me to fill out another entry card.

"Why can't I go on to Virgin Gorda," I began. "I've been there before. And what's wrong with my hair? It's not unhealthy, it's not unsanitary, it's not immoral, and it certainly is not unnatural!"

The supervisor looked at my well-groomed ear-length locks. "Are you a Rasta?" he asked. And then it finally dawned on me what this was all about.

He didn't ask me if I was a murderer. He didn't ask me if I was a drug dealer, or a racist, or if I was a member of the Ku Klux Klan. Instead, he asked me if I was a follower of the Rastafarian religion.

Some see locks and they see revolution. Because Rastafarians smoke marijuana as a religious rite, some see locks and automatically see drug peddlers. But the people who are pushing drugs throughout the Caribbean do not wear locks; they wear three-piece suits, carry attaché cases and diplomatic pouches, and usually have no trouble at all passing through Immigration.

I stared at this earnest young Black man for a moment. Suddenly my hair became very political. Waves of horror washed over me. How many forms of religious persecution are we now going to visit upon each other as Black people in the name of our public safety? And suppose I was a Rastafarian? What then? Why did that automatically mean I could not vacation in Virgin Gorda? Did it make my tourist dollars unusable?

What if he had asked me if I were a Jew? A Quaker? A Protestant? A Catholic? What have we learned from the bloody pages of history and are we really doomed to repeat these mistakes?

There was an ache in my heart. I wanted to say, "What does it matter if I am a Rasta or not?" But I saw our bags sitting out in the sun, and the

pilot walking slowly back to his plane. Deep in my heart I thought—*it is always the same question: where do we begin to take a stand?* But I turned away.

“No, I’m not a Rastafarian,” I said. And true, I am not. But deep inside of me I felt I was being asked to deny some piece of myself, and I felt a solidarity with my Rastafarian brothers and sisters that I had never been conscious of before.

“Is your hair still political?”

Tell me, when it starts to burn.¹

My immigration card was stamped admit, our bags were put back on the plane, and we continued our journey, twenty minutes overdue. As the plane taxied to the end of the runway, I looked back at the Beef Island Airport.

On this tiny island, I had found another example of Black people being used to testify against other Black people, using our enemies’ weapons against each other, judging each other on the color of our skin, the cut of our clothes, the styling of our hair. How long will Black women allow ourselves to be used as instruments of oppression against each other?

On a Black Caribbean island, one Black woman had looked into another Black woman’s face and found her unacceptable. Not because of what she did, not because of who she was, not even because of what she believed. But because of how she LOOKED. What does it mean, Black people practicing this kind of self-hatred with one another?

The sun was still shining, but somehow the day seemed less bright.

St. Croix, Virgin Islands

January 10, 1990

Note

1. From “A Question of ESSENCE,” in Lorde, *Our Dead Behind Us* (New York: Norton, 1986).

This page intentionally left blank