
My Hair Is My Culture: College Admission Essay Sample

I *never* forget a bad haircut. In my experience, a bad haircut can only be described as a humiliating, disturbing, and devastating experience that assuredly leaves me with a deep sense of being wronged. While I recognize how melodramatic that is, for me, my hair is a lot more than just dead skin cells and fibrous proteins. It's my preferred method of self-expression, a cultural connector, an art form, a security blanket, an affirmation of my blackness, and so much more. It's an integral piece of my racial identity, an identity that's been particularly difficult yet vital to preserve in the predominantly white community I've grown up in. Unfortunately, I wasn't always aware of the tremendous power of Black hair and what that means to me, and it's taken me a lot of bad haircuts to see it.

Throughout my life, I've had more disastrous trims than I care to admit; an unfortunate fact that I attribute in part to Vermont's lack of barbers who are able to cut hair like my own. With a Black population struggling to exceed one percent, it's not surprising that Vermont's hairstylists tend to be thoroughly confused when it comes to Black hair. However, one of my most recent botched cuts occurred not in Vermont but rather in a foreign country of similar racial homogeneity. While studying abroad in Germany this summer, I received the worst haircut of my life.

Admittedly, I knew the risks of trusting an unfamiliar barber with my hair. But for whatever reason, I did it anyway. I'll never forget how I felt following that first—and last—German haircut. Indignant and ashamed, I hurried home to my host family. I struggled to explain my displeasure in German, feeling even more embarrassed when I couldn't recall the word for "haircut". Disappointingly, but not surprisingly, they told me that I was overreacting, that it was just hair, and that it would grow back. Needless to say, I was distraught.

What my host family didn't understand was the essential role that hair plays in my Black identity and culture. Black hair has long been misunderstood, and yet, it's something that means so much to Black folks everywhere, myself included. Although the German barber meant no harm, he had inadvertently committed an offense that's nearly unforgivable in the world of Black hair. Not long ago, I would have felt silly for being so upset over a bad haircut, but by then, I was fully aware of the role that my hair plays in my black identity and I knew my feelings were justified.

In retrospect, my middle school experience was filled with bad haircuts. However, at the time, I couldn't articulate my feelings about those experiences like I can now. At that point in my life, I was just beginning to understand my racial identity and how my hair fits into it. As I got older, I began to pay more attention to my hair, and more attention to the quality of my haircuts. In my

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struggle to find space for myself and my hair, I shaved my head out of frustration. I figured if I couldn't find a barber that treated my hair with respect, I'd simply cut it myself.

Essentially, haircuts have been my way of gaining control and claiming my hair as my own. They've allowed me to navigate my racial identity independently and authentically. Perhaps that's why bad haircuts tend to be particularly memorable. Due to the connection between my hair and my Blackness, it's easy for me to see a botched haircut as an attack on my racial identity. However, no bad haircut could get me feel something other than pride for the curls and kinks that make me who I am. With each haircut, good or bad, I feel more connected to my truest and most authentic Black self.

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