

Natural Crown

by Kirsten Lyttle

This work was made during the second lockdown in Melbourne in October 2020. I have been working from home since March. The one-bedroom apartment I share with my partner James and Moko the cat has taught all three of us how to share and be kind to one another. I work on one side of my living room, my partner on the other. I teach University classes, have meetings, talk to friends and family through video conferencing services. Our private spaces are now public spaces, or at least, certain carefully curated corners of our homes are now public; seen through the lens of built-in-computer-cameras. I tried using virtual backgrounds, but the software does not consistently find the edge of my hair.

Normally at home my hair is a bun; wound and tied in a self-contained knot. For me, to wear my hair out is my “public” hair. It is a signifier of indigeneity, a sign of my Māori heritage. It has taken me a long time to come to terms with the texture of my hair. Growing up in the 1970s I wished for the long layered blonde hair of Farrah Fawcett. While the 1980s brought perms, my hair was an undesirable “frizz” rather than the coveted soft wavy curls of Andie MacDowell. By the 1990s, I discovered the wonders of handfuls of conditioner applied wet, in the shower and left in to dry naturally. In this way, my hair could be semi-tamed (depending on humidity levels – the higher the humidity, the higher my hair rises). I rarely brush my hair dry. Few people have seen me with natural, dry and brushed hair; only family, ex-lovers and my fiancé James. I would not leave my house with my hair brushed – it attracts too much attention, too many comments: it has been labelled an “extreme style” and in contemporary Australian society, would not be deemed as “professional”. Discrimination on the grounds of hair continues to happen in Australia. In June this year, a private Christian school in Brisbane was found to have discriminated against a five-year-old Cook Island Māori child for demanding his hair be cut, to be “neat and tidy” - even though he wore it in a bun¹.

Natural crown is a performative act of self-care in a time of lockdown and COVID. The documentation of a grooming practice that embraces natural hairstyles that are inextricably tied to race, colour and ethnicity.

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October 2020

¹ Australian Associated Press, Sat 11 Jul 2020 12.38 AEST, “Brisbane Christian school found to have discriminated against Cook Islands boy by demanding haircut”, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/jul/11/brisbane-christian-school-found-to-have-discriminated-against-cook-islands-boy-by-demanding-haircut>, accessed 8 October 2020.