

## **She Won Three Gold Medals... But Why Isn't Her Hair Done?**

*Reina DuFore*

“Wherever there’s a black girl, there’s a hair conversation.”  
-*Michaela Angela Davis*  
(qtd. in Hudson)

After intensely training for the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, the time finally came for Gabby Douglas to make her big debut. The chronological scene was painted as such:

First thirty seconds. A serious expression appeared on the Olympian’s face, contrasted against her vibrant American flag leotard, as she mentally prepared herself for the bars. You could hear a couple of screams in the audience paired with the silence of the announcers patiently awaiting to comment on her performance.



*Gabby Douglas*

Minute one. As she went from one bar to the next, effortlessly, there were monotone buzzwords such as “floating,” “height,” and “light” uttered by the announcers.

Minute two. She let go of the final bar, stuck her landing, and the first commentator asked, “Does she always rise to the occasion?” “She does!”

Minute three. A sigh of relief, and a smile slowly snuck upon the Olympian’s lips. Her heart slowed down only by a pace. The bars were over.

Minute four. Twitter comments about Gabby Douglas started flooding in. Retweets were made. “Likes” were established. Gabby Douglas, three-time gold medal winning Olympic gymnast, fell victim to the social media pack. The main trending question about her Olympic performance: What in the world was going on with her hair?

Immediately after Gabby Douglas dared to expose her curly—some would say “nappy”—edges at the 2016 Olympics, disappointed fans used Twitter to criticize her hairstyle—or her lack of one. Comments about her gymnastic abilities were overshadowed by comments about how she looked. The tweets about Gabby Douglas’s hair became part of the never-ending narrative surrounding the expectations for a Black women’s hair. Surprisingly, the majority of the people continuing the narrative were other Black women.

Within the Black community especially, Cheryl Thompson, professor of Visual Culture and the Politics of Identity at the University of Toronto Mississauga, notes that it is understood that hair “is laden with messages, and it has the power to dictate how others treat you, and in turn, how you feel about yourself” (Thompson 80). On top of merely being



*Gabby Douglas Tweets*

a representation of an individual's style and taste, it can also be a sign of rebellion, strength, professionalism, or a combination of the above.

However, according to Dr. Christian Hope Gillespie, because of popularized Western-beauty ideals, "the prevalent message regarding Black hair is that it is inferior to White hair, unattractive in its natural state, and only considered appropriate or attractive if fundamentally altered to appear long and straight such that it reflects the dominant mainstream beauty norms" (Gillespie 21). Because of this, the pressure for Black women to alter their natural hair texture dominates Black hair culture.

Fan's disapproval of Gabby Douglas's hair is not only because they believe her hair wasn't "done," but also because she didn't adhere to the expectations of mainstream beauty norms. As an Olympian, Gabby Douglas is held to high standards. As a twenty-year old *Black female* Olympian, these standards are even higher.

The quickness to attack her for not having her hair "done" emphasizes the expected image that successful women, especially Black women, must have. "It doesn't matter that Gabby tumbles across the mat with such fierce determination, or that she flies through the air fearlessly," explains Renee Martin, a renowned writer for the magazine, *The Establishment*. "What matters is her refusal to conform to the socially-imposed behavior and appearance standards for Black women" (Martin).

The disconnect between her inappropriate and "unkempt" hair and her achieved success created discomfort and confusion within those who criticized her. It left her Black fans wondering: How can we view you as successful if you can't even do your hair? In other words, her image didn't seem to match up to her caliber of success.

For example, when we look at television, we see images of seriousness, success, and power commonly attributed to women who possess straight, flawless, hair. The most known powerful, Black female characters dominating television right now are Shonda Rhime's Annalise Keating in *How to Get Away with Murder* and Olivia Pope in *Scandal*. The overlooked attribute that both characters share besides amazing wardrobes and deep-rooted emotional issues: straight, flawless hair. This similarity implies that straight hair and success are linked. To be a fierce lawyer, such as Annalise Keating, or a White House trailblazer, such as Olivia Pope, you must have immaculate hair.

The fact that both characters have straight hair is not coincidental. Elayne Saltzberg, a Ph.D. Clinical Psychologist fellow at Yale, and Joan C. Chrisler, a professor of Psychology at Connecticut College, claim that "Black women who actually go through the measures of altering their appearance to meet hegemonic beauty standards would likely be perceived as possessing greater intelligence, personal, and moral character than Black women who resist such standards" (Gillespie 21). Because of these alterations, viewers readily glorify these two characters as strong, intelligent, Black women. Their sleek, straight strands indicate success.

The result of that: the misconception that perfectly straight, well-groomed hair means that you are completely competent in whatever task you chose to pursue.

"Wherever there's a black girl, there's a hair conversation," explains Michaela Angela Davis, renowned writer on African-American style, race, gender, and hip-hop culture. "To a conservative Black audience, this is the point where respectability politics kicks in. It triggers something in them that says if you're not really pulled together, or if you

are a little Black girl with messy hair, that means you aren't loved or something just isn't right" (qtd. in Hudson). The belief that two seconds of imperfect hair means something is wrong puts immense pressure upon Black girls to avoid criticism by always looking perfect.

Even Viola Davis recognizes the societal pressures relating to Black girl's hair. She notes how people criticize her ability to be a good mother if her daughter's hair isn't "done." Similarly, in her own experience she makes a powerful point when she explains, "Sometimes [actresses] feel like if we don't have perfect hair, then we're not doing anything. We have to understand that hair doesn't negate our beauty. You'll see a Caucasian lady walking into the scene with messed up hair, or after the shower with no makeup and it's not a big deal," says Davis. "It's just her portraying that moment in time. But we don't allow ourselves to do that" (Campbell).

However, some women who embrace their natural hair texture are not meeting resistance. Alicia Keys, for example, has started an all-natural campaign and received comments on how gorgeous she looks with her natural hair and no makeup. Viola Davis showed up to the Oscars with her natural hair and people labeled it "powerful." Lupita Nyong'o never straightens her hair or wears a weave and people comment on her beauty. Tracee Ellis Ross refuses to straighten her hair for any role she plays, and she is seen as strong for having that resistance. So then why were there so many attacks on Gabby Douglas's hair instead of it being met with applause?

The difference between Gabby Douglas and Alicia Keys, Tracee Ellis Ross, and the rest of women starting to wear their hair natural is that Gabby Douglas wasn't coming to the Olympics to make a statement about hair. She was coming to win a gold medal.

Because of this, the criticism of her hair came from the fact that her choice to not maintain perfectly straightened edges was not publicized as a rebellious act. Viewers weren't able to defend her actions from a "rebellious" or an intentional "screw Western beauty standards" standpoint. This led them to believe that she truly doesn't care about her image; which has been determined unacceptable.

However, by simply being Gabby Douglas, an African-American female, three-time gold medal winning Olympic gymnast, and not worrying about her hair, she *was* being rebellious. And amidst this unplanned rebelliousness, she sends a larger message: I'm still successful even if my hair isn't "done" so why does it matter?

Gabby Douglas is trying to challenge the belief that success is tied to whatever is deemed a perfect image. After facing criticism in the 2012 Olympics about her hair, but still not concerning herself with laying her edges, she is breaking the connection between worth and whether or not your hair is done.

"The pressure for women to look good while they excel—whether they're athletes or running for president—is evidence of a double standard that needs to go away" said A. Khan. "That goes double for black women, who are scrutinized even more" (Khan).

To get rid of this double standard, Gabby Douglas sends the message: I can still be a gold-medal Olympic gymnast, be one of the most successful athletes, and I do not have to have a perfect image while doing it. So what does that mean?

She is asking the Black community, and everyone, to question how important hair really is. Gabby Douglas's hair points out the flaw of tying image to worth, but it also represents Gabby Douglas's attempt to change

this narrative. She is challenging people to focus more at what she can do instead of how she looks while doing it.

She is showing that even successful women don't need to be perfect—and that's perfectly okay.

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