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How one Kwame Brathwaite photo captures the '60s 'Black Is Beautiful' movement

By MAKEDA EASTER MAY 09, 2019 | 6:30 AM



Kwame Brathwaite's photograph of Grandassa model Nomsa Brath, center, promoting the natural hairstyle as part of the Wigs Parisian protest in Harlem, 1963. (Kwame Brathwaite)

It was the summer of 1963 when photographer Kwame Brathwaite captured a protest over Wigs Parisian, a white-owned wig shop that opened on Harlem's 125th Street near the Apollo Theater.

One moody black-and-white photo provided a glimpse into tensions over the ways black women wore their hair in the 1960s and the explosion of the "Black Is Beautiful" movement, which guided Brathwaite throughout his 60-year career.

Brathwaite was 25 when he snapped the photo with a medium-format Hasselblad camera. A self-described artist-activist, he was just beginning to master his craft, photographing black artists and Harlem's vibrant black culture.

The image shows model Nomsa Brath sporting a cropped Afro and wearing heels, walking among other protesters outside Wigs Parisian, her A-frame sign reading: "Natural — Yes! Wigs — No!" Behind her, another woman's sign says, "Don't Be a Jackass Be Natural."

This early career photo is one of about 40 from the late 1950s and the 1960s on view in the Skirball Cultural Center exhibition "Black Is Beautiful: The Photography of Kwame Brathwaite," which runs through Sept. 1. Aperture Books released Brathwaite's photos last week in "Kwame Brathwaite: Black Is Beautiful."

Growing up in the Bronx, Brathwaite and his older brother Elombe Brath gravitated toward jazz, the music of black freedom and resistance. They were also deeply influenced by the teachings of Marcus Garvey, the Pan-Africanism leader who inspired the "Buy Black" movement promoting black economic independence.

As teenagers, Brathwaite and Brath established the social club African Jazz-Art Society & Studios in 1956 with fellow black creatives. It booked rising jazz musicians including John Coltrane and Philly Joe Jones to uptown venues in the late 1950s and '60s.

In 1962 the group formed Grandassa Models, a troupe promoting black nationalist beauty principles through models with natural hair, curvy figures, various skin tones and African-inspired fashion.

When Brathwaite documented the Wigs Parisian protest in August 1963, the “Black Is Beautiful” wave was gaining momentum in Harlem.

The African Nationalist Pioneer Movement, an activist group to which Brathwaite and Brath belonged, launched the protest after hearing that “two white men were trying to open a shop to sell black women a dream of European beauty — through the artifice of straight-haired wigs,” Tanisha C. Ford writes in an essay in the Aperture book.

It was a time when black women had to wear wigs or straighten their hair to be considered beautiful, said the photographer’s son and director of his archive, Kwame S. Brathwaite. For AJASS, the protest was a way of encouraging black women to embrace who they were naturally.

But some black women didn’t agree with the demonstration and participated in a counter-protest, arguing that they had the right to wear their hair however they wanted.

Another Brathwaite photo shows the counter-protesters with A-frame signs that read, “Beauty Is Personal — Decide for Yourself” and “If it looks good wear it! try a wig and see.” The counter-protest was short-lived and eventually the owners closed the shop.

Through Brathwaite’s photos and with coverage in local black newspapers, the protest gave AJASS a larger platform to espouse ideas about black beauty. “That’s when we started promoting ‘Black Is Beautiful’ more,” the photographer, now 81, recalls in his book.

The photos are part of Brathwaite’s legacy as the “keeper of images,” as AJASS called him. The photographer “was always the person who was looking to document not just what AJASS and the Grandassa Models were doing, but the life of the African American almost on a day-to-day basis,” his son said.

Showing black women “in their natural glory with big ’fros and just looking fabulous — he was doing that and a lot of people weren’t,” said feature film stills and music photographer Bruce Talamon.

Brathwaite’s photography also presented a rare insider’s view of black life. It’s “extremely valuable to have because for so long we haven’t,” Talamon said. “We’ve had people who have

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come into our community to document and to do photographs of us, and then celebrated for that. Now we can celebrate Kwame.”