

Detangling Knots of Trauma:  
Intergenerational Transmission of Racial Trauma Through Hair Care Processes Between  
Mothers and Daughters in African American Families

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Gabriela de Souza Ramos

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Dr. Catherine Solheim, Advisor

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## Abstract

Black Hair has emerged as a significant topic in contemporary Critical Race discussions, fostering positive societal changes aimed at combating racism and supporting Black women in their struggles. This has led to the implementation of laws and programs, such as the Crown Act (Lee & Nambudiri, 2021), designed to address hair discrimination. However, there remains a need to address various assumptions regarding the symbolism of Black hair in society. Hair discrimination and racist dynamics based on uninterrogated assumptions have resulted in racial trauma, which has profoundly affected Black women and their relationships with their mothers and with their Black Hair. This study explored the intergenerational transmission of racial trauma within African American families, focusing on mother-daughter hair care practices. Studies have shown that internalized racism can exacerbate racial trauma through intergenerational transmission within African American families (Watson, 2023); many Black women recall their first encounters with hair-related questioning within their families during their initial experiences with hair relaxers (Norwood, 2018). Grounded in a phenomenological approach, I conducted 10 interviews with African American women born and raised in the United States to understand their lived experiences about their hair, asking them to consider how racism, discrimination, and stigma affected their feelings about their hair and hair care, and how messages from their mothers during hair-caring interactions affected their feelings and experiences with their Black hair. Narrative analysis revealed that racial trauma was perpetuated through hair care interactions in families, specifically from mothers to daughters. Older women felt pressure to heed their mothers' advice and conform to society's white standard of beauty. Younger women were caught in the middle. Discrimination and racial trauma were real for them, yet they were empowered by recent societal changes to push back against white Supremacy norms to join the natural Black hair movement. The voices in the narratives of the Black women are reflected in this study. They are presented here to celebrate Black hair and advocate for anti-racist parenting as a contribution toward healing and breaking the cycle of intergenerational pain within Black communities.

*Key words: Black Hair, intergenerational transmission of racial trauma, mother - daughter relationships, discrimination, anti-racism, phenomenology.*

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

This study aims to celebrate Black women and promote healing through embracing Black Hair, thereby contributing to the disruption of cycles of pain within Black communities. I intentionally capitalized the term *Black Hair* to signify that it is a racialized phenomenon and to elevate its significance and meaning in Black diasporic communities globally.

First, I want to share my own experience as an Afro-Brazilian woman, when I experienced my natural hair journey. As an undergraduate student, I conducted research focused on the natural hair journey of Afro-Brazilian women for my anthropology class. This research also served as a form of self-ethnography. Throughout this study, I observed that a significant number of participants shared a common experience: their mothers or caregivers were the first individuals to encourage them to straighten their hair. This phenomenon resonated with my own experiences.

As I progressed with my education, I recognized similarities among Black women in the diaspora. Watching YouTube videos detailing natural hair journeys, witnessing the transformative "big chops," and observing the creative DIY hairstyles combined with the testimonies of Black women from various corners of the globe, I came to a profound realization. These other women were also describing family as a place that negatively affected their perceptions of their hair and beauty. The experiences that I and my peers had been navigating were not isolated incidents but rather part of a collective narrative shared among Black women in the diaspora. These conclusions served as the inspiration for the work presented here.

I came to understand that Black Hair may be a phenomenon connecting Black women in the diaspora through a complex interplay of pain and love. Moreover, I grasped that internalized racism extends beyond individual experiences; it permeates relationship dynamics, compelling individuals to conform to the dictates of a racist society. As my study progressed, I further realized

the profound intensity of racism, ingrained to the point that I observed it as trauma, profoundly impacting individuals' self-perceptions and sense of identity.

To unravel these intricacies, I decided to pursue a study on Black Hair care practices and trauma. Specifically, I wanted to understand how mothers' perceptions of beauty and the symbolism of their own Black Hair, both influenced by a racist society, was passed intergenerationally through caring for their daughters' Black Hair. Additionally, given the striking similarities I observed, I sought to investigate whether hair can be understood as a phenomenon. To grapple with this multi-faceted, multi-layered phenomenon, I knew that I needed multiple theoretical lenses to consider complex influences of societal and racial concepts of beauty, gender and racial socialization, intergenerational relationships and transmission of trauma, and systems of oppression and racism.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides a helpful framework when examining racism, racial trauma, and their societal effects. It's impossible to grasp racial trauma without delving into structural racism, its origins, and objectives (Comas-Díaz et al., 2019). CRT also helps when creating strategies to dismantle oppressive structures that harm minoritized people (hooks, 1993). Specially to understand when the stigma towards Black Hair started and gained structured that has been operating until now days. And how systemic racism has been taking advantage of that, demanding more from some individuals than others to navigate in society.

An Intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 1989) compels us to consider how multiple dimensions of identity simultaneously contribute to vulnerabilities in society. This is important when examining the intersection of race and gender, specifically the experiences of Black mothers and daughters with Black Haircare. Gender pressures and aesthetics are closely linked to oppression stemming from patriarchal structures (hooks,2019), which in turn, affect social relations,

specifically the mother-daughter relationship in this study. Family dynamics is also impacted by gender oppressions, where often times the narratives of women are not being considered, especially Black women that has been used for science as an instrument (Few, A. L. 2007). Which is important to consider forms of methodologies that can listen the voices of women respecting their boundaries and considering them as knowledge contributors.

Finally, two theories provide important lenses for examining relationships within families and between family members and external environments. Durkheim's Socialization Theory (1885) is useful for understanding how family relationships perpetuate and/or are affected by racial trauma related to Black Hair caring. Socialization Theory shines a light on the interdependence of influences on Black Hair caring from the primary level (family) to the secondary level (social institutions), to the tertiary level (society). Symbolic Interactionism theory (Mead, 1934) posits that symbolism, an important aspect of identity and feeling of belonging in society (Emami Sigaroodi et al., 2012), helps us comprehend the meaning of and implications for Black Hair as a symbol of Black women's individual identity, its significance as a cultural and political symbol for Black women within communities, and its significance as a symbol of culture and solidarity across the Black diaspora.

This study aimed to explore the significance of Black Hair for Black women, shedding light on racial trauma resulting from persistent Black Hair discrimination by a white Supremacist society. Moreover, it sought to examine how family relationships and rituals create intergenerational cycles that unintentionally transmit racial trauma and internalized racism. This dynamic profoundly affects Black families, hindering their emancipation and impeding the healing of racial trauma. By interrogating the phenomenon of Black Hair caring as a mother-daughter ritual in which racial trauma and internalize racism is intergenerationally transmitted, I hope to amplify

the voices of the Black women who participated in my study. Their lived experiences provide important examples that can contribute to a better understanding of the phenomenon. I hope it will encourage other Black women to share their experiences and contribute to a widespread dialogue resulting in Black women's healing and empowerment.



## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Overview

The empirical literature on Black Hair caring as a family relationship phenomenon is in its early stages of discussion. As a result, I examined literature published in other fields of study to inform the current research, namely history, political science, women's studies, and African American studies. It was necessary to examine disparate bodies of literature that addressed topics related to Black Hair caring such as the cultural meaning, identity, and symbolism associated with Black Hair, racial socialization, hair discrimination, and other experiences of racism leading to racial trauma, and the transmission of racial trauma within families. However, a specific examination of how racial trauma was transmitted through Hair care processes was lacking in the extant body of research.

In the following sections, I cover historical and cultural analyses of colonialism and its impact on the cultural symbolism of Black Hair leading to stigma. Additionally, I examine Black Hair experiences of Black women across the diaspora; most articles and books analyze this from an Afro-American woman's perspective (Battle, 2022; Norwood, 2022; Ngandu, 2023). It is important to note that studies about socialization and the transmission of racial trauma in families are in their infancy stage in the fields of psychology and family science. The current research will contribute to this infancy stage in family science, namely how racial trauma affects family dynamics within specific factors, such as Black hair care processes. Family scientists are increasingly acknowledging in their research the effects of colonialism, ongoing racism, and racial trauma on the lives of African Americans and their families, However, there remains an urgent need to accelerate research, practice, and policy efforts to move toward healing.

## **Culture and History**

A wide range of literature explains the impact of racism on society and its effects on individuals' lives. Concerning Black Hair, many authors (Gomes, 2012; hooks, 1993; Kilomba, 2012; Matos, 2017; Randle, 2015; Williams et al, 2022) have discussed how hair became stigmatized over time under the influence of colonialism. Greensword (2022) described a law that happened in Louisiana that stigmatized Black women's hair by making the exposure of their hair a punishable offense. "In the 1780s, Governor Miró issued the 'Edict of Good Government,' a racial profiling law that ultimately required a woman of color to cover her hair with a humble-looking kerchief or else comb it as flat as possible." (p. 4). This occurred even after the abolition of slavery in the Americas; Black women continued to struggle for bodily autonomy. Additionally, during colonial times, slaveowners employed various tactics to humiliate and dehumanize Black bodies, creating a clear division between humans (colonizers) and non-humans (slaves). "The term 'wool,' routinely used to refer to Black hair, rhetorically equated slaves to animals. Some were even forced to use this term and deny the appellation 'hair.'" (Rawick & Rawick, 1972, p. 80, as quoted by Greensword, 2022, p. 4).

This politicization of hair and the perpetuation of divisions between the subaltern and non-subaltern individuals over the centuries have had a significant impact on media, influencing contemporary social perceptions of Black bodies (Spivak, 1988). As bell hooks (1993) observed, Learning to identify with the screen images of good and weather looking at Westerns or Tarzan movies, television was bringing into the homes of black people a message that we were inferior, a race doomed to serve and die so that white people could live well (p. 81).

These political dynamics have led to the stigmatization of Black people, and everything associated with them, shaping societal attitudes and beliefs toward this group. These ideologies have been internalized through the process of socialization and perpetuated in various forms.

Other discussions analyzed in the literature emphasize the fundamental role of the socialization process in perpetuating anti-blackness (Wilson et al., 2018). Despite the progress made by social movements and various efforts to change societal behaviors, challenges persist. Even after the Emancipation Acts of the 19th century, Pan-American Blacks continued to struggle against Eurocentric efforts to indoctrinate them into believing that their Black bodies were inferior, less respectable, and less beautiful than those of their former enslavers (Greensword, 2022). This struggle is particularly pronounced for Black women, who face the demands of a society built on structural racism and patriarchal foundations.

Researchers point out that for centuries, Black women have had to conform to European beauty standards to be accepted in society (Williams et al., 2022). Failure to adhere to these standards results in various forms of punishment, such as difficulty finding employment, relationship problems leading to loneliness, and subjecting themselves to dangerous chemical hair procedures (hooks, 1993). This constant pressure to conform has led Black women to navigate a "double consciousness," where they are forced to reconcile their views of Black culture, norms, and sense of belonging with society's Eurocentric standards (Du Bois, 1903). As a result, Black women often struggle to feel whole, as they judge themselves based on someone else's perception, leading to internalized racism (Chapman, 2007; hooks, 1996; Williams et al., 2022).

## **Society**

According to Durkheim (1885), society tends to organize itself based on the beliefs of its main institutions. Once these beliefs are internalized, individuals in society adhere to these values to maintain cohesion. Deviation from expected individual behavior is met with punishment and isolation, including restrictions on socializing. Because humans are social beings by nature and need to interact with others, being unable to do so is traumatizing. Colonialism fundamentally excluded certain types of individuals from specific social interactions and humanity itself (Kilomba, 2021). Racial socialization develops cohesion in society for the dominant race; other races must find ways to unify and protect themselves from the dominant race. As a result, Black mothers have historically reproduced cohesion through socialization as a form of protection for their daughters (Wilson et al., 2018).

A term used to describe the trauma caused by years of violence inflicted upon a minoritized group by a dominant group is racial trauma or historical trauma. Brave Heart (1998) defined historical trauma as cumulative emotional and psychological wounds across generations, experienced throughout the lifespan. While this trauma may not be immediately noticeable in individuals' relationships, it significantly impacts their psyches, leading to anxiety, body dysmorphia, depression, high levels of stress, and other mental health issues (Goodkind et al., 2012). This makes navigating relationships and society more challenging for affected individuals.

## **Family**

According to hooks (1996), internalized racism is the acceptance and internalization of racist beliefs, stereotypes, and standards by individuals who belong to the group that is oppressed or marginalized by those same beliefs. Individuals often reproduce or absorb internalized racism through family socialization. Studies about young Black women's body image have found that

messages that undermine their natural beauty aesthetic, especially about hair texture and skin complexion, are ingrained in childhood by caregivers in their homes and trusted adults in their social networks (Awad et al., 2015; Norwood, 2018; Wilson et al., 2018).

Families serve as the primary connection individuals have with society (Durkheim, 2023). Through these connections, individuals develop an understanding of themselves and others. Families perpetuating internalized racism contribute to issues affecting children's self-perception, identity construction, and sense of belonging, leading to numerous mental health challenges (Ribas, 2022). These childhood experiences affect Black women's self-perception, leading them to be more likely to conform to dominant white society expectations to fit in, including adhering to white culture standards of beauty (Wilson et al., 2018). A study by Johnson and Bankhead (2014) found that Black women's negative messages about their hair (teasing, taunting, or being ridiculed for wearing their hair in its natural state) were from family members (43%), strangers (28%), and friends (25%) (Norwood, 2018).

## **Conclusion**

Despite progress, challenges persist. Discussions in the literature about Black Hair are rich, but they don't fully explain its nuanced symbolism or the intrusion of racial trauma into Black women's perceptions of their hair. It is necessary to understand the complexity of Black Hair as a phenomenon that connects Black women across the diaspora. It is also important to consider the racial trauma associated with Black haircare processes and how it is transmitted across generations within Black family relationships, specifically from mothers to daughters. As bell hooks (1993) stated, "Many Black women view their hair as a problem, or as one Black woman put it, 'a territory to be conquered.'" (p. 86). We need to change that discourse for healing to occur.

Therefore, the purpose of this thesis is to explore the lived experience of Black haircare interactions between mothers and daughters. I sought to understand whether racial trauma was present, and if yes, how it showed up, and the ways it affected the perception of self among Black women. The narratives of the women in this study provided glimpses into the Black Hair phenomenon that is significantly present in the lives of Black women across the African diaspora. My hope is that by amplifying these women's voices through their narratives, Black women will be encouraged to embrace themselves without fear, and empower each other to heal, thereby breaking the cycle of internalized racism and racial trauma transmitted through Black hair caring.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Research Design**

Due to the importance of understanding the narratives of mothers' and daughters' Black haircare experiences, I integrated a phenomenological approach (van Manen, 2016) with narrative analysis (Barthes & Duisit, 1975) in my study design. This allowed me to establish a genuine connection with the participants in their interviews, so they felt comfortable with my questions about potentially delicate lived experiences while I respected their boundaries. I analyzed their narratives to discern negative experiences of relational conflict, tension, stress, trauma, discrimination, and societal stigma, as well as positive experiences of cultural and racial pride and relational closeness related to Black Hair and Black hair care. It is important to mention that this process of interviews was perceived for me as an exchange process of lived experiences and feelings from a Black Brazilian woman to Black American women. Which the main goal came from the idealization of collective healing goals within diaspora community. By listening to the narratives about their experiences, perspectives, and life stories, I was able to weave together my understanding of the complexity of Black Hair in the lives of these ten African American women and their related experiences of hair care.

### **Institutional Review Board Approval**

This study was approved by the University of Minnesota Institutional Review Board (IRB), Study STUDY00019113. I conducted the study with ethical considerations and following the approved consent process, according to the approved protocol.

### **Qualitative Rigor**

Qualitative researchers must be transparent about the ways they strive to enhance the trustworthiness of their methods to achieve confirmability, dependability, transferability, and credibility (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To establish confirmability and credibility, I triangulated my findings through multiple processes. I sent the transcribed interviews to participants to verify their accuracy. I engaged a second researcher, who has similar experiences with Black Hair and has studied Afro-Brazilian culture, in coding a subset of my 10 transcripts. I discussed my findings with a university professor who identifies as Black American, which supports me in the process to guarantee the safety of my knowledge contributors and analyze how their narratives were being interpreted and respected. I met regularly with my research advisor, a senior faculty member who has conducted and supervised many phenomenological research studies, to discuss how my themes emerged from the narratives and appeared salient across participants. Finally, the study reports thick descriptions of participants' lived experiences, organized by themes, and illuminated by detailed quotes to support transferability. The combination of these processes enhanced the trustworthiness of my study.

### **Positionality**

This research reflects a part of my identity as a Black Brazilian woman. During the interviews, it was important to share my story with participants so that they could feel encouraged to share theirs. Being a Black woman in academia revealed to me that often times my peers are perceived as mere objects of research process. As a methodology to guarantee that my knowledge contributors will not go through this process, I intentionally decided to be vulnerable as a positionality to make sure that they could trust on me and understand that this research was nor



based on academic ego. This reinforced to me the profound connection among Black women through our shared experiences across different cultures and languages.

### **Recruitment Method Rationale**

I employed purposive snowball sampling process to recruit African American women living in a large urban Midwest metropolitan city. Snowball sampling involves accessing the community of interest through individuals in the community (Woodley & Lockard, 2016). The first important step is to find a leader, or some connected to the community who is willing to link you to others. Once you establish the first link, that person links you to others; the researcher continues to link within participants' networks until the sample goal is reached. This recruitment method allows careful and respectful access to communities. In a slow, careful, and intentional manner, I contacted potential participants for this study with referrals from people they trusted.

The purposive snowball sampling technique is especially important in minoritized communities who have been historically exploited by academic institutions that take knowledge through research studies without acknowledging that is owned by the community. Moreover, researchers rarely use the knowledge gained from the research to benefit the community. As a student researcher who acknowledges the historic role of academia and the complexities of the researcher-community interaction, I took steps to ensure a cautious and respectful approach. I intentionally sought to use the outcomes of my research as a potential contribution to the Movement of Black lives. I was intentionally describing my goals with this research and also being honest of the process and the final results of this research process. I also recognized that although I am not an African American, I am an Afro-Latina woman from Brazil who has a similar lived experience with Black Hair in a different geopolitical and historical context. My own racialized

Black Hair experience connects me indirectly with African American women in the Midwest through the global Black African diaspora.

### ***Recruitment Process***

Because recruitment for research on sensitive topics can be challenging and who comprises the sample is important, I would like to describe my recruitment process in detail. I began with one Black woman I knew who knew other Black women who were interested in discussing Black Hair and who had previously participated in debates and projects involving this topic. She also talked about it with her coworkers, who showed interest and shared their emails with me. In this way, I managed to recruit participants aged 36 to 56 years old. What was interesting about this process was that it did not require as much effort as I thought it would; the participants were already sharing experiences and stories about their hair. My own hair created connection with some women; one person was interested in participating because she liked my hair.

As I began to conduct interviews with this first group of participants, I also continued to recruit. I struggled on my own and it became necessary to enlist the help of a university professor who was supporting my research. Additionally, I became aware of the Black Motivated Women (BMW) organization on campus when they hosted an event to celebrate Black Hair called *Care for your Hair*. This event created a space where Black female academics could share their experiences and expertise in an afternoon of care, dance, lectures, food, and affection. This was how I connected with BMW. Subsequently, they helped me contact more participants for my research. At this same event, I recruited some women who agreed to be participants. Another group that was crucial to my recruitment process was the Black Union at the University of Minnesota. I came into contact with them through events they held on-campus. It is worth noting that these

organizations are extremely important in predominantly white university spaces. They create spaces and tools for Black students to care for each other, maintain relationships, and seek social justice on their campus. They also celebrate life and the excellence of blackness in the diaspora, inspiring and paving the way for those who want to pursue higher education.

As a result, purposive snowball sampling was an effective strategy for me to integrate into the African American community in Minnesota. It allowed me to make connections that would not have occurred due to boundaries that are difficult to cross, or I may have crossed some boundaries inappropriately, damaging my ability to connect with participants and limiting the extent of our conversations during the interviews.

All identified participants were contacted via an email that introduced me and that I was a graduate student at the local public university. I explained my research project and my motivations for conducting this research. I also provided my contact information and availability for an interview. When I received a response indicating the person was interested in participating, I sent another email with the following information: thank you for their interest, another explanation about how and where the research would take place, and a schedule of possible dates and times for their interview. I included two attachments with this email: the consent form and the demographic information form. After establishing a time for the interview, I sent a Google Calendar invitation and an email confirmation with a request for the participant to fill out the demographic form before the interview. I explained that I would discuss the consent form with them before the start of the interview, at which time I would ask them to sign it and return it to me.

This sequential communication allowed participants time to think about their participation in this project. Moreover, I tried to be open and honest in my communication, so they did not feel confused, uncomfortable, or suspicious of this research about minoritized people's personal

experiences. Through the consent process, I was explicit in communicating that they could refuse to answer questions or stop the interview at any time, without jeopardizing their relationship with me or with the University.

General characteristics of the women I purposively sought to recruit included the following: 1) they identified as a Black American woman; 2) they were born and raised in the United States. Because I wanted to explore societal influences, cohort differences, and the perspectives of women who had experiences of being a mother as well as a daughter, I sought women in different age cohorts using these additional recruitment criteria: a) women age 18-35 who were raised or cared for by someone who represented a strong maternal presence in their lives (Group 1; and b) women age 36-56 who had raised children; identified with role of mother; and were raised or cared for by someone who represented a strong maternal presence in their lives (Group 2),

The recruitment process took about 4 months to complete. In retrospect, I believe this was primarily due to timing. I began recruiting in summer of 2023 when people are often on vacation. Many people I contacted did not respond. Planned vacations created difficulty in scheduling interviews. A few interviews were scheduled, and the person did not show up. Finally, I successfully recruited and completed 10 participants interviews, 5 that fit the criteria in Group 1 and 5 who fit the criteria in Group 2.

## **Participants**

My final sample was 10 participants, divided into two age groups to allow for cohort comparisons influenced by time and societal changes. Note that I conducted a pilot interview

initially to evaluate my interview protocol for whether participants would be comfortable responding to the questions. I also wanted to practice asking the questions.

In Group 1, five participants were mothers, age 36-56, four of them were also grandmothers. The additional role of grandmother emerged spontaneously during the interview and allowed for additional analysis of multi-generational socialization and intergenerational transmission of trauma.

In Group 2, five participants, age 18 and 32 years, had all completed high school and were currently enrolled in or had completed college degrees. One participant earned a master's degree, and one participant earned a doctoral or professional degree. See table 1 for more details about the participants.

For confidentiality, limited information about participants is disclosed; only age, education level, and whether they have caregiver experience, they have been given a name that is popular for women in Brazil as a humanizing identifier.

Table 1

| Participants ID & Pseudonym | Age | Education Level         | Caregiver |
|-----------------------------|-----|-------------------------|-----------|
| Laura                       | 56  | Some college, no degree | Yes       |
| Patricia                    | 52  | Some college, no degree | Yes       |
| Selma                       | 50  | Associate's degree      | Yes       |
| Jhenefer                    | 40  | Associate's degree      | Yes       |
| Ana                         | 36  | Associate's degree      | Yes       |

|            |    |                 |    |
|------------|----|-----------------|----|
| Camila     | 20 | College student | No |
| Maria      | 18 | College student | No |
| Luzia      | 21 | College student | No |
| Estephanie | 20 | College student | No |
| Amanda     | 32 | Master's degree | No |

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### **Data Collection**

After the consent process following IRB protocol and receiving participant consent, I conducted all interviews using Zoom. Interviews lasted approximately 80-90 minutes each and were audio and video recorded on Zoom; All participants agreed to have their interviews recorded.

All interviews followed a similar structure; following I briefly describe the focus of each section of questions. For a complete list of questions, please see Appendix A. Please note that I tried to be as responsive to participants as possible. That meant that I actively listened to what they were saying, asked gentle, follow-up questions for clarity, and encouraged them to provide additional detail in their responses to provide rich descriptions of their lived experiences. I also checked in with participants regularly to see how they were doing or if they wanted to take a break. My goal was to be as attentive to and respectful of their needs and emotions during the interview as possible.

**Section 1.** First, I introduced myself and expressed gratitude for their participation. Then I briefly shared my experiences with my own hair as an Afro-Latina woman. My goal was to foster

a safe space for the participant to be vulnerable and encourage her to share in a comfortable environment.

**Section 2.** Building upon our shared experiences, I invited participants to discuss their childhood and family relationships, specifically how their mother/caregiver managed their hair. to Participants reflected on their individuality as a Black woman and how it was influenced by socialization and in various ways throughout their lives. They often described childhood memories and family relationships.

**Section 3.** After we concluded our conversation about their growing-up years, I directed their attention toward their mothers/caregivers and grandmothers, probing them to consider whether they had experienced or were experiencing racial trauma, whether it continued to persist, and how it affected their lives. I encouraged them to critically examine the role of racial trauma in their socialization, particularly related to what they were taught and messages they were given about their Black Hair. This section was filled with more examples of life experiences, memories, and insights, leading to reflections on the present, once again accessing ideas from the previous section about self-perception and how it is affected and affects others and relationships.

**Section 4.** In this section, I encouraged participants to reflect and share their thoughts on consequences of racial trauma on individuals and families, and ideas they had for solutions that might lead to healing from racial trauma, Black hair discrimination, racism, and other outcomes of our racist society. I encouraged participants to consider solutions to problems, to explore topics that emerged during the interview, and to consider some ideas expressed about Black Hair and hair caring. This section was crafted so that participants felt that I had listened to and heard what they said, and that their knowledge and ideas were important for the findings of this research.

**Section 5.** I concluded our interview with my expression of gratitude for their participation, a reiteration that their interviews would be kept confidential, and a request for their feedback, namely if I had asked any inappropriate questions or if they experienced discomfort at any time during the interview. I wanted to use the feedback to improve future interviews,

## **Data Analysis**

I used a phenomenological approach integrated with narrative analysis to understand participants' lived experiences of Black Hair, racial trauma, and hair caring practices. A phenomenological approach aims to comprehend social phenomena, enabling the researcher to access perceptions and identify social patterns (van Manen, 2016). Narrative analysis provides a process for actively listening to participants' life experiences with a goal of comprehending social issues. (Barthes & Dusat, 1975). My approach that integrated the two perspectives and processes allowed me to actively listen to participants' life stories, discern patterns across narratives, and shape them into themes that represented meanings associated with the phenomena of interest in this study.

After completing the interviews, I transcribed them verbatim. During this process, I began to note ideas that stood out as significant and made notes for future reference. I also reviewed the notes I took during the interviews themselves. Next, I began the process of systematically analyzing the transcribed narratives. First, I read each transcript and simultaneously listened to and watched the corresponding Zoom recording several times. I noted in each transcript the words and phrases, ideas, and descriptions that seemed especially salient to each participant about various aspects of the phenomenon I was trying to understand more deeply: Black Hair, Africa-American culture, symbolic meaning, discrimination, messages from family and society, hair caring practices



and treatments, self-worth, beauty, racism, racial trauma, etc. I then copied those words, phrases, ideas, and descriptions from each transcript into a table that would allow me to look across transcripts to see patterns.

Next, I noted where I saw patterns and began to refine the data into groups or categories. One unique pattern that emerged could be characterized as verbal confusion and body language; these emerged when participants seemed to navigate along the interviews with indirectness or circumspection, potentially indicating an avoidance of significant remarks made indirectly about certain subjects. Concurrently, patterns were shown within their body language—such as hesitation, pauses, or gestures. Through these cues, I discerned a nuanced layer of communication beyond explicit verbal exchanges, suggesting underlying tensions or sensitivities within the discussion. I also consulted the notes that I took during the interviews; I named these patterns that were unsaid through voice, but presented in their bodies as participants' unspoken experiences, as well as critical insights and topics that emerged but were not planned.

Finally, I reviewed my categories and created salient themes. The themes that emerged from Black women participants' narratives were those that provided the richest understanding of their lived experiences related to Black Hair, hair caring, discrimination, mother-daughter relationships and Black Hair socialization, racial trauma, and cultural pride. These themes are identified and described in the next chapter.

## Chapter 4: Findings

Narratives from ten Black women who generously shared their experiences with me are the basis for the ensuing study findings. Together, the themes reflect the story of racialized trauma within family relationships, specifically in the relationships between mothers and daughters, and moments of hair care and reflections that celebrate Black Hair its symbolism in the life of African American women. They reflect generational family legacies and the influences of external actors and factors.

### The Natural Hair Journey

Black Hair emancipation has been claimed as one of the demands of Black Movements, as a form to combat racism in society, such as the Black Power movement that has spread global messages of empowerment like “Black is Beautiful” (Greensword, 2022). Such messages have inspired generations to develop forms of resistance to racism and pride in being Black. The contemporary Natural Hair movement was also inspired by the Black Power, with the slogan that “Black is beautiful”, movement and played a significant role in the lives’ of the women who shared their Black Hair experiences for this study.

The women in this study noted a positive shift following the Natural Hair Movement, as better products for hair care became more prevalent and accessible. This has allowed contemporary generations to experiment with their hair, something that was not available for women in past generations. *“So I started to give myself affirmations or started to seek out like YouTube videos of people who did have my hair type, and like, Okay, what creative styles do they do with their natural hair?”* (Luzia, 21).

The Natural Hair Movement was organized on social media. These platforms made it possible for discussions about caring for black hair to spread (Matos, 2016) which positively affected both new and past generations to go natural and explore their Black beauty beyond confirmative standards. It is important to state here that going natural is an act of rejection of chemical treatments; women still embrace styling their natural hair in various ways such as dread locks, afro, braids, blow outs, hair extensions, and other forms. Social media spaces opened the door for Black women to discuss and support each other's natural hair journeys through the exchange of knowledge of how to care for Black Hair. Facebook groups were one of these spaces, as Laura described:

*A lot of women have gone natural. I'm actually in the natural hair group on Facebook, but you know, it's more like conversations you have in the salon. So you might get some hair tips in the group, but it's more of a little bit of everything. (Laura, age 56)*

These groups are collective safe spaces of healing for Black women across the world because they empower and support natural hair journeys. It was noticeable during the interviews that all participants were proud of their hair and embrace it just as it is. Which they wear their hair natural in different forms of styling. Despite the complexity of their relationship with their hair, the meanings these women associated with Black Hair are profound and powerful.

*I love my hair. This so it actually is one of the reasons why I haven't locked up as of yet because it's that's such a long-term commitment. And I really like to do different things to my hair. I mean, I'm 50 now, but as a young woman, you know, my friends teased me, you know, because once a week, I had a different hairstyle, you know, you know, it would be you know, up or down*

*pink, green, blue. You know, I just kept them guessing all the time. So my hair has been one of my staples. (Selma, age 50)*

Discussions of Black Hair spanned all the generations creating a positive impact that allowed women to understand Black Hair complexity in society. Given tools, they could decide what was best for them and their relationship with their hair. However, even with the tools and empowerment that these social movements have provided to support Black women, racial trauma remained in these hair care processes and added difficulty and complexity to the natural hair journey. I noticed this in the ways that the two generations of women in my study talked about the natural hair journey. Generally, slightly older women in the mothers' group were still navigating their hair journeys. Younger women in the daughters' group had developed an understanding of their relationship with their hair, although they were still exploring healthy ways to relate to it. Also, the possibilities of wear the hair natural today play an important role in how this generations are navigating in their hair journeys. Because the older generations did not have this “freedom” that present and new generations are experiencing.

## **Colorism**

Colorism, something that can show up in racial trauma, that is one of the forms of manifestation of racism in society, was evident in women’s narratives; it came up when they discussed Black hair acceptance and its effects within families and communities. Participants, especially those with dark skin, perceived that mixed-race women and light skinned Black women hold places of privilege in society, especially when it is about beauty. Selma (age,50) described how light skinned girls have historically been perceived and how this relates to other perceptions:

*“light skinned girls always thought you know, and that's who the guys preferred, you know, and so they'd be always flaunting.” (Selma, age 50)*

The curl and texture pattern influences acceptance of Black Hair in a particular environment. The closer the hair is to white standards, the more acceptance and status that individual receives. The hair care industry tends to offer more products for curly than Afro hair types, which reinforces the perception that curly hair is preferred. Direct and indirect racialized messages can manifest in Black women internalizing these racist perceptions of beauty and judging their own hair by those standards. This leads them to complain about length, type of curl, texture, and maintenance of the hair.

*But um, yeah, I, I do remember growing up, like, I did internalize that for myself. I was like, oh, yeah, my hair isn't good. Or like, I don't like my hair texture, or like, oh, yeah, I wish I had like, looser curls. (Luzia, age 21)*

It's common to hear women talk about “bad hair and good hair”; it may be mentioned that light skinned/mixed girls tend to have the “good hair”. Laura, age 56, commented: *“No, my youngest one... She's probably about my complexion has my hair texture, where my oldest one is really light-skinned, and has what is considered good hair.”*

These implications promote negative influences during the process of the natural hair journey, the care for the Black hair, and give light to structural maintenance of oppression. Which in USA you can see that most of the representative on media are based on light skin individuals, that also influences on the demands of hair products that seems not to be concerned to provide enough quality products to other Black Hair types. Resulting in a hostile environment for dark skin women to go through their natural hair process and navigate in society. Even with the social movements opening paths to break these oppressions and support Black women, we are still

struggling when talk about assist and listen to dark skin women demands. Colorism must be used as a tool to access forms of how we can support our peers that have been struggling more than others to reach our emancipation, to find ways to promote our collective healing.

### *Generational Impact*

To conclude this topic, it is mandatory to bring light on the importance of transformations caused by social movements in society, and how they can have longitudinal affects at different moments in time and across generations. The hair tales that I exchanged with my knowledge contributors for this study, provided me an insightful perception that the new generations is currently breaking trauma cycles. I interpreted differences between the two groups in this study. As previously mentioned, daughters tended to understand of the significance of Black hair in their lives and how it was affected by structural racism, however, they avoided applying a trauma lens. Their narratives revealed a greater awareness of microaggressions related to hair and the importance of embracing their hair as part of their identity. They also spoke of strategies to address hair-related microaggressions as a form of violence.

It was very interesting that younger generation women in this study rejected and were combatting structural racism, specially related to Black Hair. Instead of conforming, they understood that they are important individuals in society and have rights that they can demand be upheld. For example, several talked about holding companies responsible for refusing to hire them based on their natural hair. They felt that the company didn't deserve them and rejected that company as a potential place of employment. This generation has been significantly influenced by social movements like Black Lives Matter and the Natural Hair Journey, and laws like the Crown Act, that have raised awareness of how systemic racism has been working. Amanda explained this

clearly: *“And I was just, like, Listen, if that is what people are basing their hiring off, and my hair looks like this. And that's a problem for them. I don't want to work there. (Amanda, age 32)*

In contrast, narratives from older participants in the study were less empowered to reject job opportunities because they did not want to reject the racist corporation; instead, they gave in. They may not have perceived they could take the risk to confront the racist behaviors. However, this may have resulted in frustration as was heard in Selma’s narrative: *“So you would think that we progressed a lot more in the corporate world, but I have a lot of frustration around being black and having black hair, so to speak, in a white corporate office world”.* (Selma, age 50)

It is important to acknowledge that past generations found forms to resist and combat racism that supported and perhaps led to the new social movements. They were not less important than new generation’s forms of resistance, however they were affected by factors such as racial trauma, that currently with the new generation, is often addressed in the process of resolving these kinds of issues. The new generation has learned from the actions of past generations; new forms of resistance will continue to evolve into the future, until, hopefully, they will no longer be necessary.

### **Care for Black Hair: Mothers and Daughters.**

This theme highlights the complexity of Black Hair care that is simultaneously about an intimate mother/mother-figure and daughter relationship and the U.S. racist society. This racist society has denied Black women’s natural hair, causing them to seek conformity to white supremacist standards of beauty through racist tools ranging from casual disapproval of natural Black Hair to microaggressions that diminish one’s humanity, to blatant discrimination of Black women who embrace their natural Black Hair in schools, workplaces, etc.

Black mothers, who socialize their daughters in specific ways to ensure their safety and acceptance in this racist world, practice hair care practices that have been developed in response to racism, internalized to the extent that many women are unaware of its existence, and transmitted intergenerationally from one generation of Black women to the next generation by their mothers, grandmothers, and aunts, who have chemically treated and used heat to straighten and “tame” their natural Black Hair.

The following sections describe several ‘threads’ that are necessarily pulled out from participants’ narratives to allow for examination but are woven inextricably together in the lives of the ten Black women who shared their experiences. Most of the participants in the current study shared that their hair was styled by family members, commonly done in their family home kitchens. Hairstyles included beaded breads, box braids, ponytails, pigtails, buns, and hot combs. They were first introduced to relaxers and perms during adolescence. Few participants had their hair treated in hair salons with the same range of hairstyles options.

It was interesting that none of the older participants talked about their growing-up hair caring experiences with warm memories of their mothers or mother-figures. They did, however, recall messages they received during these times; often they were about convenience or saving time. “We were being told that getting our hair straightened was just like helping, you know. Was making it easier. And really did, really make it easier, because, I don't know, just make it easy. And she was used to say that.” (Ana, age 36)

The physical pain associated with hair care practices did not lend itself to warm memories either. Selma (age 50) vividly described her experiences as traumatic.

*And it just seemed to be like a traumatic experience. It'd be like, sit still, and you'd be crying and it'd be moved, and they caught you with a comb. You know, and they, you know,*



*you're I used to always flinch every time the hot comb would come by me and then I'd be like, you burn me! they'd be like, Oh, you didn't get burned. That's just the heat. And I'm just and then you have like burn marks and you're like, I don't know, you burnt me, you know, but they'll tell you. You keep your skin keeping on fire. And they'll still tell you that you're not in you didn't get burned. It was just the heat from the comb. (Selma, age 50)*

Many participants in the mothers' group commented about having a relationship with their hair, making it seem somewhat like their hair was person-like, and taking care of or managing it was like what was required in human relationships, often complex, and sometimes even toxic. As Amanda shared:

*Me and my hair we have a toxic relationship. It's probably not that bad. But we... I often will tell people: "My hair just has a bad attitude". I asked it to do this. And it said, "Nope". My hair said: "No, I'm not doing this. Not interested, I'm just gonna stay like this today". I actually think I'm starting to like my hair more. I think I'm in a new phase of kind of like understanding my hair. (Amanda, age 32)*

It's evident that the relationship between the slightly older participants in this study and their hair is still evolving. Their continuing journey has most likely been shaped conflicting emotions surrounding Black Hair and societal norms and expectations. Further, the methods of hair care taught by caregivers to these women may have also shaped their Black Hair perceptions. Perpetuating painful hair caring practices to achieve 'beauty', such as was described by Selma, send messages to young Black women that it is necessary to 'tame' or 'manage' one's natural hair to conform to someone else's, i.e., oppressive white, standards of beauty. Is it any wonder that Black women developed a toxic relationship with their hair, as Amanda described?

The narratives of the younger women in the daughters' group held slightly more agentic, encouraging tones that were at times celebratory. However, they were still very aware of the legacy of oppression that their mothers and grandmothers had faced and that still existed in contemporary dominant white society. When asked about the meaning of hair in their lives, some mentioned its impact on their moods and personal style.

*Um, for me hair is, for me, it's almost like an accessory. Like I style my hair to like go along with my outfits or my moods in the morning. My hair also plays like a role in how I feel.” (Maria, age 18). Often Black Hair when it is natural comes as a form of affirmation and an act of bravery that face society racism. Patricia pointed out “that there is a level of self-esteem when it comes to embracing what your natural hair looks like because a lot of people don't like natural hair is acceptable.”*

Furthermore, the participants reported that learning how to care for their Black Hair was often a self-discovery process or involved imitating methods they were taught by their family. They observed a lack of representation in the media, which perpetuated a dearth of guidance on caring for Black Hair. The lack of care for Black Hair on media was worse for past generations that had to struggle to find ways to care for their hair.

*America is that with women who have natural hair, you know, earlier in the 60s and things like that in the 70s there wasn't a lot of, you know, haircare for black women. And so it was always easier to try to straighten it or wear some type of hair piece like a wig or something like that, because we didn't really understand how to take care of our natural hair. (Patricia, age 52).*

***Mother-Daughter Thread: Managing not Caring for Hair***

The narratives from mothers in this study revealed that discussions with their own mothers about their hair as they were growing up often did not center on Black Hair care. This is illustrated by the comments from one participant who said:

*But we never really talked about hair care, other than when she would do my hair and say: "Make sure you tie it up with this silk scarf at night". So it won't be messed up when you wake up in the morning. (Laura, age 56)*

Instead, their conversations focused on the necessity of managing their hair in the most convenient way possible to make it 'acceptable' and facilitate their navigation in society. They aimed to teach their daughters appropriate styles to avoid experiencing discrimination,

*But the messages that she'll get, like, the initial pass to me was just always have your hair in a way that is acceptable for other people. It doesn't matter if it's for yourself because what matters is other people. And I can clearly see that stemming from her own insecurities with her hair. (Luzia, age 21)*

The management skills taught to Black women across generations conveyed different messages, shaping their social experiences and interactions with the world. This influenced their perceptions of freedom, leading to actions such as avoiding activities that could negatively affect their hair. Girls with relaxed or styled hair were often restricted from activities like swimming or enjoying water-based activities because it would affect their hair and their mother or caregiver would be upset.

*Wanted to, but, but you just know you can't get your hair wet. You know, because now you got to go through this whole rigmarole roll routine to wash it and do all this. And so yeah. And that was you know, when my mom was taking care of my hair too, when I just had a pressing curl. So if I came home, somebody I went to the beach, and my hair is all jacked*

*up or you know, who knows, you can get in trouble. I got no time to strike down there.*  
(Selma, age 50)

Peers also faced similar restrictions based on their hair, so it seemed from the narratives that it was more like a group norm among Black girls that they should avoid water-based activities rather than individual mothers making demands of their daughters. Nevertheless, the outcome was the same. Amanda described it this way:

*Because everybody that I grew up around was black. So we were nobody was going to the water. It wasn't like oh, I've got white friends and they want to have a pool party and I can't go or I have to go make sure my hair has been Even before I go to the pool party, it was just no, there is no pool party because we all don't want our hair wet. Nobody wants that fight in their life.* (Amanda, age 32)

The latter was shared when I asked about any activities that were prohibited due to girls' Black Hair. This was not an easy question for participants to answer. I thought it might help if I shared my own experience as a young Brazilian who was not allowed to go into the ocean at the beach because I had used relaxers to straighten my hair. This opened the door to participants' memories and some shared about not being allowed to swim.

In addition to these ideas, these messages were influenced by the perception that care for Black hair requires more time than it should and that this time and effort might not be worth it. This perspective explains why activities like swimming were discouraged, as natural hair was not considered well-kept enough and required styling to be perceived as such. Paradoxically, the effort to style the hair was seen as a time-saving measure for hair management.

### ***Mother-Daughter Thread: Time Perceptions about Hair Management or Care***

The participants in this study who had the experience of being a mother included in their narratives both their own and their mothers' perceptions that caring for Black hair required significant amounts of time. Consequently, they often turned to hair treatments or specific styles to reduce that investment. Black hair required less maintenance when it was braided, straightened, or treated with relaxers or a hot comb and was therefore “more manageable”. Amanda described how a family member tried to convince her that perming her hair would be best,

*Um, well, she was really just like, well, it's gonna be easier if I do this. If I was very much aware, I was tender-headed, I didn't want my hair combed. But she was like, I won't have to do I will have to comb your hair so much, or so hard. If I just put the perm in it. And we only have to perm, you know, every couple of months. (Amanda, age 32)*

However, younger participants rejected the notion that caring for their hair was too time-consuming, emphasizing that time was not the issue. Investing time to care for their hair was a form of self-care, something they were willing to do. They rejected the racialized messages from their mothers who suggested they shouldn't spend time on their Black Hair; these were messages their mothers had heard from their mothers and were now internalized. They now enact those hair care practices as adults and passed the messages, and the hair care practices to their daughters. However, they also shared experiences indicating that these messages remained and affected their practices of hair care moments. Despite what was shared in the Natural Hair Journey theme about participants' complex relationship with their Black Hair reflected in comments like "bad hair day," "rebel hair," and "toxic relationship," participants continued to engage in a process of redefining their relationship with their hair. The journey for mothers in the current study seemed to involve more and seemed to be moving at a slower pace than did the daughters' journeys.

### ***Mother-Daughter Thread: Mothers' Silence About Discrimination, Racism, and Trauma***

When asked, most participants, especially those in the mothers' group, reported that their families did not talk about hair discrimination, racism, and trauma. *“And so we don't talk about stuff like that, you know, trauma and what they experienced. And I know my mom has internalized and stuff, but she won't talk about it.” (Amanda, age 32)*

Participants agreed that everyone was aware of racism, but no one talked about it. Patricia's description summed it up precisely:

*You know, that there was a, there's a portion of this piece of them that they don't want to talk about. And so it's easier to just a nap, I got this neck, it's easier to just, like sweep it under the rug, and not talk about it. But we know that's what it is, you know, we, we can assume that that's what it is. (Patricia, age 52).*

It was interesting to note that as participants in the mothers' group slowly began to awaken to break this silence when they became mothers themselves, they also began to question the hair care practices they had learned as girls and questioned the silence about hair discrimination and racism from their childhoods.

*But I think as we started to learn more about haircare, there was just more conversations. And it was like, Well, why do I have to sit here and do this? We weren't really allowed to ask questions growing up as kids, you know, you had to stay in your place. You don't ask adults questions you don't, you know, you just kind of do what they say. But as my kids started getting, you know, older, they would ask those questions. And then that led me to say, well, I don't know. I'm just doing it, because that's how I was raised. (Patricia, age 52)*

This thread reinforces another thread that focused on the influence of social movements. As noted earlier, daughters in the current study who represent a more recent generation than the mothers in the study, have been influenced by increased awareness of social issues including racism and, hopefully, social change that results from those social movements. Daughters may have learned how to communicate about issues of race, discrimination, and trauma as well as the consequences that result from these inequities and injustices. They may feel more empowered to share their feelings and express their anger in both public and private spaces. As a result, they may feel better equipped to talk with their mothers about the cultural symbolism of Black Hair and how hair care practices have changed. They may even be able to influence their mothers to make changes in their own hair care practices.

*I think she started doing the twist because I was frequently doing this. And she saw how like, happy I was having my hair and like manipulating my hair as often. So, she tried it out. And she really enjoyed it. And I'm glad and happy for her. (Maria, age 18)*

Even protecting daughters from societal oppressions, they are still facing hair discrimination, even conforming to or negotiating with the system.

### ***Hair Discrimination***

Participants' narratives frequently recounted incidents of hair discrimination, ranging from microaggressions to more overt forms. These experiences occurred in various settings, including home, work environments, and school. Hair discrimination was perpetrated by different individuals, including family members, coworkers, teachers, instructors, classmates, and others. This issue had support of politics, especially in USA that gave tools to spread misinformation and

stigma related to Black Hair affecting the lives of many African American women of this country (Greensword, S. 2022).

What is interesting is that some participants had differing perceptions of what constitutes hair discrimination, as we can observe: *I had braids in my hair weave. And I was at the airport. And this lady was like, Can I touch it? And I told her Yeah, but some people are totally against that. No, don't touch my hair (Laura,56).* However, they all shared a common feeling of discomfort resulting from these experiences.

*I have a lot of frustration around being black and having black hair, so to speak, in a white corporate office world. You know, we're always I mean, it seems like by now, they realize that we're subject to show up with all kinds of hairstyles, but you know, and I mean, one thing to be interesting, you know, interested in is good, but, um, you know, I've had to tell many women not to touch my hair at work. You know, and they ask a lot of questions. And, you know, like I say, it's okay, but sometimes it just gets a little exhausting. Like, I don't want to have this story to tell you, every time I come to work, and I changed my hair, at this point, you should realize that, hey, she gonna come in with something that we think is interesting. And you know, not to explain it. (Selma.50)*

Hair discrimination can be categorized as a macro or micro-aggression rooted in structural racism dynamics. Frequently, Black women experience episodes of such aggression, including but not limited to: unsolicited touching of their hair, ridicule regarding its characteristics, experiencing rejection or missed opportunities due to their hair, being subjected to constant inquiries about their hair hygiene practices, facing assumptions or prejudices about the texture, smell, or curly pattern of their hair, as well as other forms of discrimination that result in a profound sense of discomfort



and invasion of their personal space, ultimately impacting their sense of identity and self-worth (Kilomba,2021).

*Sometimes I'll wear my hair and like an afro. And I don't know what it does wrong people and like, they're just like, It's so fluffy. Like, I want to touch it. Like, ah, God, I'm like, it's an afro like, I don't know, like, they are not used to this or something. But yeah, especially like, when I put it in an afro or like. I'll get the question a lot. Like, like, Did you cut your hair? Like if my hair is straight in and then I wash it? And it gets curly, like, Did you cut your hair? Or, you know, like, No, I just just washed it. It's just curly. (Estephanie,20)*

These actions of hair discrimination are perpetuated by societal constructs, including political agendas. For centuries, United States politics have harbored policies and attitudes that discriminate against Black hair, as highlighted by Selma: “*You know, I mean, it's so silly that there's literally a law, that, you know, against me, wearing the hair that I was born with.*”

Hair discrimination has become so prevalent in the United States that it has been deemed necessary to implement public policies addressing this issue and safeguarding Black individuals from such acts of violence. The CROWN Act is a significant step in this direction, acknowledging the importance of discussing Black hair and combatting the discrimination surrounding it.

## **Family**

It is important to acknowledge that the first environment that most of Black women experience hair discrimination is at home within family (Norwood, 2018). Which was a constant topic during the interviews. Participants shared that they used to hear from their family members or colleague’s comments that were offensive, uncomfortable about their hair.

*I remember being young and like trying to apply for jobs and like some of the older women saying to me, you don't want to show up with braids, you know, braids in your hair, because they're not gonna hire you, if you have braids in your hair. You don't want to show up with dreadlocks, you know, or locks. You don't want to have locks in your hair, they're not going to hire you. Because that's making you be too black, you know, you too cultured or whatever. (Ana, age 36)*

Often words such as 'kinky hair', 'bad hair', 'good hair', and 'nappy hair' were noticed by the participants in their life experiences, especially affecting their self-esteem. In this quote, Luzia shared her experience of how she has been facing these hair discrimination from different groups in her life.

*Oh, your hair type was like it's ghetto. It's a nappy, they would say, or like, oh, it's uncapped. It's not professional, um, even from adults, like in my family, who would say like, Oh, your hair is not done, like, what are you going to do with your hair, and it would just be in like its natural state. (Luzia, age 21).*

Mothers tended to reproduce hair discrimination terms or behaviors without noticing that they were doing so. I noticed a number of times in their narratives that they would use terms like 'bad hair' or 'good hair' to compare their hair to other types of hair. Similarly, they described their daughters' hair as good or bad, as Laura did. "No, my youngest one... She's probably about my complexion has my hair texture, where my oldest one is really light-skinned, and has what is considered good hair." (Laura, 56).

As a result, I realized that some reproduction of hair discrimination occurred within the family and community; it was not only experienced as an act stemming from structural racism but rather as a response to racism that had affected their perceptions of themselves as Black people.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

### Caught in the Middle

This theme of my findings kept my attention more than others. It seems that Black women have been facing collective confusion about Black Hair that is caused by systemic racism. Du Bois (1903) stated that Black women are always facing confusion caused by systemic racism. Being caught in the middle is a consequence of racial trauma experienced by Black women whose bodies bear the impact of the interaction between racist structure and patriarchal demands. For centuries Black women were not perceived as female human beings (Kilomba, 2010), so while white women were fighting for their rights to be perceived equal to men, Black women were fighting to be perceived as humans as well as women.

Contemporary society is still linked to stigmatized perceptions of Black women, in which their historically ‘repulsive signs’ of Blackness were used to justify the subordination of Africans (Kilomba, 2021). As updated forms of controlling and erasing appears, extra demands for these women to fit in society result. As a form of double oppression demand of an oppressive system, where beauty pressure, is more than beauty standards connected to acceptance of society’s individual requirements, per say. The concept of beauty was not delivered for Black bodies, but is expected and reinforced that they perform an idea of beauty that is based on white standards to navigate in society. Kilomba (2021) described this as the “process of having to fabricate signs of whiteness, such as relaxed hair, and to encounter white patterns of beauty in order to avoid public humiliation” (p. 62). At the same time, the requirements for that do not fit the demands of time and social rules; I will illustrate how this works.

During the hair tales exchange, I noticed that participants were constantly expressing anxiety as they described being hypervigilant about their hair care process. They reported needing

hours to get ready. I interpret this fear as an underlying theme of anxiety, hence the concept of fighting with the time – related to their hair care process. They said that it was a long process and took them many hours to have their hair done, which led them to seek more manageable methods. The participants also described that when they appeared with a messy bun in a meeting, they felt they were being judged by their appearance. Additionally, they said that white women did not face this same judgment, even when they happened to be using the same traits.

Black hair does not take too much to be done. It is society that demands one single standard of beauty and does not accept our bodies as they are in their entirety. For centuries we were deprived to be taught how we can take care of our hair. Kilomba (2021) reported that this has been the reality of Black women since enslavement. Once Africans were subjected to European enslavement, skin color was tolerated by white masters, but not hair, which became a symbol of ‘primitivity,’ disorder, inferiority, and un-civilization. African hair was then classified as ‘bad hair.’ At the same time, Black people were pressured to relax ‘bad hair’ with the appropriate chemicals, developed by European industries. (p. 66) This influences Black individual’s perceptions about themselves until now days, which we could notice at the narratives shared. That the relaxing hair process is present in the life journey of these Black women, as a form to guarantee their validation to navigate in society.

The hair product industry was not built or developed to consider black bodies, especially Black Hair (hooks, 2019). This was something that often times were noticed by the participants of the young generations. They mentioned that most of the hair products does not have natural healthy ingredients, causing allergic reactions. Also, that the companies are run by white males, that often times do not comprehend the needs of Black women’s health and care. At the same time TV shows and magazines were trying to teach white women how to take care of their hair, the development

of hair products and other options for Black women were neglected. Simultaneously, the stigmatization of Black bodies was happening in media; “We are daily bombarded in the mass media with images that suggest blackness is not beautiful” (hooks, 1993). It is only recently that Black women have spoken up to demand healthy products for their hair natural and representation in media. As a result, Black Hair has been featured in magazines and in social media, and Black women have been considered as a market for natural hair care products by industry.

The lack of representation has affected generations of Black women and their perceptions of beauty and care, especially the meaning and role that Black Hair plays in Black women’s lives (Gomes, 2002). Unfortunately, the Black women’s movement toward change also spurred greater pressure to conform to white standards of beauty from racist oppressors (hooks, 2019). The perception of hair that is done and hair that is not done does not come naturally; it is molded by this standard. So, now that I am natural, to fit this natural hair, I must look in a certain way with it. So, no frizz, no edges, perfect curls based on European curly hair standards, long and other patterns that look like the European curly hair, and not our Black Hair. The issue of the time is that we are still trying to fit a pattern that is not us, even though we are moving toward natural hair embracement process. Were noticeable that most of the participants that belong to the past generations, are in their natural stage of the hair however, they tend to struggle on the acceptance of how this natural hair should look. Especially when is related to afro hairstyles, that apparently is a challenge hairstyle to wear, once goes in the opposite direction of “a done hair”.

Lidia Matos (2016) explained that after the natural hair movement started in Brazil, different companies started to provide products for Black Hair. Today, Brazil exports these products globally to meet the demand of Black women who are in search of hair care solutions. Transformation is evident in Black women’s ideas about Black Hair and society’s standards of

beauty. These changes in conceptions about Black hair care are leading to changes in other forms of care that consists in process of embracing the natural hair for Black women. For a long time, this was a process of care and embracement that was not allowed for Black women to experience, and they were not taught how to do so, as hooks (1993) often described. In this way, Black women got caught in the middle trying to care for themselves because society says that they could not do that. However, Black women are reflecting on this and making progress.

Self-love and self-care act are revolutions when implemented by Black people. Understanding trauma and its impact on the lives of Black women will contribute to reducing confusion so they are not 'caught in the middle', as was found in the narratives of the participants in the current study. The promise is that by recognizing and healing from the trauma, Black women and mothers will not pass it on to subsequent generations. Rather, they will be empowered to talk with their daughters about the existence of racism, particularly how women's Black Hair and hair care practices have been used as a tool of racism. They will be able to teach their daughters natural hair care practices and support them to resist conformity to white standards of beauty.

### **Mothers, This is Not Your Fault**

An important theme in the narratives of the participants in this study describes how racial trauma related to hair care practices was transmitted intergenerationally through the mother-daughter relationship. For example, the fear of going to swim remains in the conscious of my knowledge contributors even after years of comprehension of where this comes from. Which the idea that the hair always need to be perfect even in the moments of pleasure, it is a form of how this trauma comes up. It was clear that many mothers in the study were not consciously aware of how their behaviors related to hair care were interpreted by their daughters through the

socialization process. Although mothers were acting from a place of care and trying to protect their daughters from experiencing discrimination from the racist society, they did not talk about this with their daughters, like Selma described during the interviews. Thus, they inadvertently passed on their internalized racism to daughters who were living in a world that was beginning to become aware of and push back against white supremacy. Daughters, affected by the Natural Hair Movement, were empowered to move forward to celebrate their Black Hair with peers. Mothers didn't intend to promote trauma in their daughters. They were operating from a mother-mindset based on protection and care. However, this mindset has been affected by past experiences of racial trauma, such as hair discrimination. To survive experiences of race-based violence from society mothers tended to find ways to protect themselves and their daughter, ways that had worked for their own mothers and for generations of mothers before them.

Being a Black mother in this society is a challenge that goes beyond motherhood issues, such as facing systemic oppressions affecting this motherhood experience. There are demands imposed by a racist society that creates levels of stress for Black women that are not often reported. bell hooks (2019) described how mothers face societal pressure in the form of blame due to patriarchy. For Black mothers, this blame is also affected by systemic racism because they must consider all white society demands to protect their children from the racist society. Mothers of Black males often describe how tough it is when their sons goes out without the proper documentation, fearing police brutality (Vianna & Farias, 2011). They fear that their sons will not be able to go back home. These conditions may produce toxic parenting methods as mothers seek ways to protect their children (hooks, 1993). This ongoing stress also has negative effects on the mental health of Black mothers. When we talk about a Black woman who is a mother of other black women, it is a level of complexity that is unmeasurable. This mother sees herself in her

daughter and uses her own experiences as a guide to help her protect her daughter from the same racist society that she experienced.

Some mothers in the study tended to reproduce internalized trauma that came as a form of defense or survival skills to fit into society, on their daughters that resemble themselves in their hair texture, skin-color, body type, etc. hooks (1993) stated that Black women reproduce this pattern of protection rather than create forms of a “critical way to affirm themselves” (p.36). Their behavior, based on the fear of being punished, creates life-long self-vigilance for Black people.

Additionally, with the lack of research, we are far from understanding this form of trauma and developing ways to treat it. It is important to name and understand this trauma, so women don't feel unsupported and isolated, perhaps leading to mental health issues. Without support, Black mothers who have experienced this type of trauma, are left to solve it on their own. The outcome is that they have these traumatizing experiences without analyzing, or processing, or understanding how they affect their mother-daughter relationship.

### **Generational faith**

Generational faith is the belief that each new generation carries the responsibility of improving society (Freire,2013). Present generations pave the way for future ones, acknowledging that progress is built upon previous efforts. Today, we see younger generations breaking cycles of racial trauma and societal issues, propelled by access to education and critical thinking.

However, it is crucial to recognize that not all individuals have the same opportunities for growth. It is important to understand the complexities of systemic racism and how does it work on the individual level. This awareness is essential for understanding how systemic racism impacts individuals and society, affecting mental health.



To achieve this, individuals must acknowledge their status as victims of the system and reflect on how racism influences their perceptions. Relying solely on social movements is not sufficient; personal actions can also drive positive change. For instance, personal choices like embracing natural hair can inspire others and foster connections, while representation in various spaces, like having Black teachers, can empower individuals to pursue their goals.

Representativity plays a significant role in effecting change. By demanding societal restructuring and rejecting discrimination, younger generations are reshaping societal norms. Their refusal to accept discriminatory practices, such as hair-based discrimination in hiring, signals a call for societal alignment with the demands of Black individuals.

This demand for change reflects a revolution in self-awareness, recognizing that individuals possess the power to drive positive societal transformation. Thus, generational faith entails not only paving the way for future generations but also actively participating in the ongoing journey towards a more equitable society. Also, collective healing, based on forms of revolution can come from different forms, specially spiritually rooted on diasporic connections that is focus on self-awareness based on decolonial methods (Bird, S.R,2022). Which is powerful to develop empowerment within community, based on healing and faith.

### **Dear White Folks**

Before we begin this session, I want to address a fundamental discussion about race and ethnicity that differs across the globe, especially from where I originate. In many countries, including mine, whiteness is seen as a racial background. However, in the United States, ethnicity and nationality often play a role as a proxy for race, erasing the diversity of racial identities, historical and cultural backgrounds, ancestry, and other aspects. It is essential to clarify this

because this session is intended for all white individuals, not just those from North America. Additionally, it is crucial for non-white individuals, who may also perpetuate racism towards Black people, to understand this distinction.

Black people have faced racism from various groups throughout history, often being dehumanized and subjected to oppression. To promote change, we must identify who is complicit in perpetuating these systems of oppression.

There is a prevalent curiosity about Black bodies that crosses the minds of both white and non-white individuals. This curiosity often stems from a naive desire to understand the other. However, we must challenge this notion. The concept of "the other" has been historically used by colonizers to dehumanize and oppress (Spivak,1988). There is no innocence in this curiosity, especially when it leads to invasive actions such as touching someone's body without consent or questioning their hygiene habits. This behavior reflects a power dynamic rooted in colonialism, where Black bodies are seen as objects to be controlled by society, reinforcing the idea of white superiority.

Grada Kilomba (2021) discussed the fetishization of white curiosity towards Black bodies, highlighting its connection to colonial power dynamics. This curiosity perpetuates the notion that Black bodies must be regulated by society and reinforces the idea of white people as the norm, while others are seen as different. It is crucial to understand that this curiosity is not innocent, especially in today's age of advanced information and accessibility. Just as Black individuals are affected by colonialism's influence on socialization and self-perception, white individuals are also impacted and contribute to actions that perpetuate racism in society.

Durkheim (1885) reminded us that society is shaped by individuals who are both influenced by and in control of its institutions. In a society molded by structural racism, driven by colonial

dynamics, white individuals maintain power dynamics that create a hostile environment for Black individuals. Instead of acknowledging their role in perpetuating systemic racism, they often deflect blame onto the victims.

It is imperative for white individuals to recognize this process to facilitate healing and emancipation for all. Hair discrimination, for example, is often influenced by white standards of beauty, resulting in hostile environments for Black individuals. White individuals must engage in critical self-reflection and examine their actions to avoid perpetuating harmful dynamics. Asking oneself what motivates them to invade someone's personal space or question their appearance without consent is essential. There is no inherent difference between our bodies as humans; therefore, they should not be subjected to unwarranted scrutiny or invasion. By acknowledging and addressing these issues, we can work towards creating a more equitable and inclusive society for all individuals.

### **Black Hair as a Tool to Promote Collective Healing (Positive Transformation)**

In her works on Black Hair in the context of Brazil, Nilma Lino Gomes (2008) invited us to reflect on how Black Hair serves as an inheritance from our ancestors, playing a significant role in our identities as Black individuals in the world. This topic could be a valuable discussion in school environments, where sharing positive stories about our ancestors could boost children's confidence in their roots. Embracing our natural hair in its afro state disrupts societal norms shaped by colonial influences, challenging perceptions, and promoting uncomfortable yet necessary changes.

While promoting revolution or cycle-breaking is a painful process, I believe there are alternative methods that do not rely on pain. Black people have endured centuries of suffering,

with life often denied to us by societal demands. It's time to embark on a path of collective healing and address these traumas with love and care, as advocated by hooks (1993). This approach allows us to experience life fully, moving beyond mere survival to truly living and existing as our authentic selves.

A significant aspect of my work involved exchanging knowledge through lived experiences with other women. I learned valuable lessons about self-acceptance, self-love, activism, empowerment, and healing. This led me to reflect on my own experiences as an Afro-Latina and Afro-Brazilian woman. In Brazil, natural beauty is more widely embraced, with Black women often wearing their natural hair proudly. However, we are still navigating how to be versatile while embracing our heritage and being proud of it, amidst the backdrop of ongoing racist politics.

The shared experiences of Black hair among African American and Afro-Brazilian women highlight the global nature of this phenomenon. Despite similar traumas such as hair discrimination and family conflicts, cultural influences may shape our differing perceptions of the role hair plays in our lives. This connection among Black women is powerful and could serve as a celebration of blackness across diasporas, affirming our shared experiences and identities.

Black hair and the journey to embrace its natural state are intertwined with the process of healing from internal and racial traumas. This journey of self-discovery and acceptance is not only transforming individual lives but also challenging societal structures and paving the way for future generations. The intergenerational breaking of cycles celebrates the essence and beauty of Blackness, yielding tangible results in reshaping societal norms.

## **Chapter 6: Limitations, Implications and Conclusion**

This study sought to understand the lived experiences of ten Black women through their narratives about their Black Hair. My goal was to consider how family relationships, discrimination, racism, and racial trauma affected Black women's hair care experiences. Results revealed that family relationships and racist society had significant effects on Black women and were also mutually interdependent on each other. Racism affected mothers' relationships with their Black Hair, resulting in using harsh and often painful hair care practices that enabled them to conform to white supremacist norms, avoid discrimination, and "fit" with dominant culture. Their unconscious internalized racism expressed as a preference for these harsh treatments, and as an effort to 'protect' their daughter from the discrimination they would also face, resulted in the transmission of their racial trauma to their daughters. Daughters, growing up in a time of the Natural Hair and Black Lives Matter movements, were more willing to shun harsh treatments and move down the Natural Black Hair path. However, they were conflicted by the demands of their mothers, the continuing racism and discrimination that still existed, and their increasing desire to embrace their natural hair. This conflict created anxiety as they were 'caught in the middle' of competing demands.

### **Limitations, Future Research, and Implications**

The small sample in this study limits the ability to generalize the findings beyond this specific group of women. Moreover, the limited interaction with each participant based on their time and availability prevented deeper exploration of these very complex ideas. However, the themes provide an initial glimpse into the phenomenon of the lived of experience of Black Hair.

Future research with a larger sample and more in-depth interactions, perhaps with women from different backgrounds or even across the global diaspora are warranted.

Results from this study provide initial insights that would benefit family practitioners who work with Black women and girls. They provide a small glimpse into the intergenerational transmission of racial trauma and internalized racism that may be present within families, particularly mother-daughter relationships. Considering strategies for addressing racial trauma that leads to healing is critical, such as discussions on educational environments that exemplify the colonial history on how this has been impacting BIPOC individuals. Supporting parents to initiate healthy conversations about race and racism with their children is important. Family educators may consider addressing a current gap in parenting education by developing programs that are grounded in anti-colonial and anti-racist parenting practices to support Black families.

Also, for the governments and states programs it is mandatory to develop projects based on reparations for this communities, providing free quality health care. Laws that address to identify discrimination and racism, such as the Crown Act. That can be implemented in educational systems, with classes that has the purpose to empower and honor Black culture. Creating inclusive school environments, to create representativity in society, with more Black individuals compounding these spaces providing for them safety spaces. Finally, the academia has to implement discussion about Black history as a mandatory requirement in the curriculum. In Brazil universities has implemented this type of project and has shown significant results (Diallo & Lima, 2022). This can promote critical thinking and the development of research that improve forms of healing, solutions and tools to address to systemic racism issues.

It is my hope that by amplifying the voices of the Black women in my study, who echo my own experiences with Black Hair, I am contributing to the healing process for Black women across

the diaspora. By sharing their stories and thus contributing to a deeper understanding of the influence of racism and racial trauma, and as families embrace anti-racist parenting, hair care practices, and self-love, we will break the cycle of trauma and pain, and develop new paths toward healing.

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