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“Natural State”: Navigating the Experiences of Black Women’s Natural Hair Identities

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THE ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS

"Natural State": Navigating the Experiences of Black Women's Natural Hair Identities

A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
BACHELOR OF SCIENCE DEGREE
IN MUSEUM STUDIES

DEPARTMENTS OF PERFORMING ARTS AND VISUAL CULTURE AND HISTORY

BY
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Abstract

In 2009, The “Natural hair movement” developed and was widely discussed in online discourse. The goal of this contemporary movement was to encourage Black women to wear their natural hair to work in an effort to combat internalized negative images Black women might have surrounding natural hair. This transformative movement resulted in many books and articles being written on the shared experiences and adversities many Black women face about choosing to wear their natural hair today in the workplace. These inspiring books and articles prompted this project which will track my journey and the results of conducting a Black hair questionnaire focused on the topic of natural hair. I ask: have societal pressures affected Black women in the workplace in their lifetime? Have they benefited from the resurgence of the natural hair movement? These surveys explore each woman’s individual experience with their hair journey. The survey results gave insight to what Black women experienced surrounding their hair and encouraged further discourse about this topic within the RIT community.

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The story of Black people's hair begins where everything began- in Africa. Not surprisingly, the birthplace of both astronomy and alchemy also gave rise to a people in perfect harmony with their environment. Indeed, the dense, spiraling curls of African hair demonstrate evolutionary genius. Like natural air conditioning, this frizzy, kinky hair insulates the head from the brutal intensity of the sun's rays. Of course, there is not one single type of African hair, just as there is not one single type of African. The variety of hair textures from western Africa alone ranges from the deep ebony, kinky curls of the Mandingos to the loosely curled, flowing locks of the Ashanti. The one constant Africans share when it comes to hair is the social and cultural significance intrinsic to each beautiful strand.¹

Introduction

The impact of Black hair has long been a topic in American society and particularly how Black women view themselves within society. Whether it is a political statement or a challenge to pressures to conform to European beauty standards, Black women throughout time have used their hair as a form of both radicalized and gendered expression. In 2019, contemporary discourse has encouraged Black women to reflect internally and with others about what our hair means to us and how we present ourselves to people we may encounter in our day-to-day lives. Hearing personal narratives from women of different cultures and backgrounds can help to shape a broader vision on how Black hair is integral in Black culture. These stories have been shared through social media blogs, online videos, and oral history interviews. Black hair has also become a topic discussed in institutions which have voiced negative opinions on natural Black hair and even set laws to regulate Black hair in the workplace and schools.

Although it has not been heavily researched by scholars, many academic papers from Black writers and online discussions and forums have called for a resurgence of the topic of Black hair, specifically natural Black hair. Due to structural racism, many Black women have felt the need to manipulate and treat their hair in its natural state with hot combs, relaxers and blow outs. These were all in an effort to have straight hair and be accepted into a Eurocentric

¹ Ayanda D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharps. *Hair Story Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America*. St. Martins Griffin, 2014. 3

society. By the late 1860's almost all Black women had their hair manipulated to seem straight. This high demand for products contributed to the mass production of hair relaxers and hot combs. With the thought that there was a specific quality of hair texture that was socially unacceptable, many Black women were taught that the natural hair of Africans was less than acceptable, and they sought out any possible way to loosen their curl pattern. These forms of alteration can cause lasting effects to the hair, scalp and skin surrounding the hair, including heat damage, alopecia and hair loss, but they were still targeted to Black women who wanted to conform. Black consumers wanted an easier way to duplicate hairstyles every day. Men joined on the bandwagon to reinvent their hair, styling it using a texturizer created by George E. Johnson. It was called *Ultra Wave*.² Following soon after was a similar product for women to create the perfect wave hairstyle or sleek lightly curled styles.³

The reclaiming of natural hair came during the 1960's and 1970's with the Black power movement. Activists like Angela Davis wore her natural hair unapologetically in an attempt to shift the culture from relaxer to self-acceptance. Moving forward, women who wore their hair naturally were deemed as making a political statement of being against conformity and embracing their natural beauty. For years afterward the Afro and other natural hair styles were viewed by society as inherently resistant to the status quo and therefore needing to be regulated.

In 2009, a movement referred to as the "natural hair movement" developed and was widely discussed on online forums. The goal of the movement was to encourage Black women to wear their natural hair to work in an effort to continue to combat internalized negative images that Black women have surrounding natural hair. Many of these natural hair blogs shared

² See Appendix A: Figure 1.3

³ Ajia Eberhart. "The Evolution of Black Hair in America." NaturallyCurly.com, November 9, 2015. <https://www.naturallycurly.com/curlreading/kinky-hair-type-4a/the-evolution-of-Black-hair-in-america>.

tutorials on hairstyles for natural looks, hair products best suited for natural curls and advice on the best way to make the transition from processed hair to natural. Many of these blogs and movements had forums for Black women to discuss and share their experiences of what it is like to have natural hair in the workplace, adversities they had faced as professional women with their hair, and the pressures they still felt to conform.

As a young Black woman, I am concerned about the role my hair plays in how I identify in society and how I am identified by society. From a very young age, my mother tried to instill within me a sense of self love and appreciation for my natural hair. She did not let me relax my hair or use chemicals to alter its state and make it straight. She let me wear braids and taught me not to see straight hair as the standard of beauty; she stated: “Your curly hair is beautiful and if you want length, braids can give that to you!” Nevertheless, as I entered middle school and high school, I felt social pressure to keep my hair straight to be desirable, taken seriously, and to feel as pretty as my white classmates. I used flat irons daily to conceal my curls until my hair was completely damaged. My freshman year of college, I decided to cut my hair off completely to have a fresh start on my natural hair journey. This is where many women start their journey, and it is often referred to as “the big chop.” I felt free, I felt beautiful for the first time in a long time. When my hair grew out, it was curly and it was the first time I realized that my curls were considered a more “acceptable” kind of curl.

Curly Black hair comes in all kinds of textures, ranging from grades of hair that are in categories from “loose curls” to “kinky/coily.” My hair texture is loose and lightly curled, and because of this, I noticed that my hair was less seen as a political statement, didn’t make people uncomfortable and was usually accepted in the workplace. This stimulated my curiosity to explore how other Black women felt about their natural hair and how hair texture played a part in

their overall acceptance as well. My mission in this thesis is to explore the many complex nuances amongst Black women's hair and experiences they've had in the workplace. The purpose of this project is to give insight to what Black women experience surrounding their hair and encourage further discourse or projects about this topic within the RIT community. I will ask questions focused on how societal pressures affect Black women in the workplace, particularly in the academic setting. I will ask if women benefited from the resurgence of the natural hair movement, and also ask more in-depth, open-ended questions to further explore personal experiences. The answers will give me insight into how each woman's professional hair journey has proceeded up into the present day and explore how societal pressures to conform to Eurocentric beauty standards have, or have not, applied to them at the workplace.

Literature Review

Historical Scope of Societal Pressures on Black Hair in America

In order to create the appropriate questions for my project and better understand the diverse narratives surrounding natural Black hair, I needed to first find sources that gave a scope of the state of field surrounding Black women's natural hair and how it has been perceived within white American society throughout time. I wanted the sources I provided to cover the impacts of conformity pressures and how they have since led Black women to internalize natural hair as something negative. I wanted the sources to explain how and why Black women choose to wear their hair. Is the resistance to natural hair a form of expression or a consequence of societal pressures? The books and articles written on the history of Black natural hair were very informative to use as a foundation for my research. The books and articles written about the historical scope of Black hair were written by men, but I wanted the contemporary sources I

chose to be written by Black women, as I found that these books and articles gave more of an authentic insight into the experience of a Black woman.

The first source, Kobena Mercer's article "Black Hair/ Black Politics," written in 1987⁴ and chronicles Black hair throughout time with insight on Black celebrities and their struggles to conform to white beauty standards as they gained fame. He goes into how natural Black hair was seen in society as a political statement and a challenge to European beauty standards of straight hair "With its organizing principles of biological determinism, racism first 'politicized' our hair by burdening it with a range of negative social and psychological 'meanings'." He separates Black hairstyles into social and political economies for evaluation.

Dominant ideologies such as white bias do not just dominate by 'universalizing' the values of hegemonic social/ethnic groups so that they become everywhere accepted as the 'norm.' Their hegemony and historical persistence are underwritten at a subjective level by the way ideologies construct positions from which individuals 'recognize' such values as a constituent element of their personal identity⁵

This piece is very informative and delves into a lot of the issues surrounding Black hair, but it does not focus on Black women. Black hair is an issue for all Black identities but holds a more intense pressure for people who identify as Black women.

The book "Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America" by Ayanna Bird and Lori Tharps⁶ covers Black hair throughout from time from the 1800's to present day. The book shares historic context and insight on the most popular hairstyles, how they've developed over time, and their importance culturally to Black women today. The topic of Black hair in its natural state being used as a political statement and a sense of rebellion the idea of assimilating into white society was discussed connecting directly to the topic discussed in my thesis. They

⁴ Kobena Mercer. "Black Hair/Style Politics." *Black British Culture and Society*

⁵ Kobena Mercer. "Black Hair/Style Politics." *Black British Culture and Society*, 11

⁶ Ayanda D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharps. *Hair Story Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America*. St. Martins Griffin, 2014.

write a guide to how Black hairstyles fit into a social and political category and make a powerful statement about how white societal bias and pressures to conform have trickled down into Black communities and helped shape how Black women view themselves.

“A new way of defining beauty may seem an unlikely tenet for a revolutionary movement. But for Blacks in America, a new way of looking at themselves was as revolutionary as most anything could be. They had been more than three hundred years in a land that had collectively stripped them of pride in their Blackness- including pride in the color of their skin and all distinctly African physical attributes.”⁷

This analysis helps inform the past to present pertaining to how Black women feel about their natural hair and the shift it being deemed negative to something to be proud of which is also discussed in my thesis.

The article “Black Women, Beauty, and Hair as a Matter of *Being*” by Cheryl Thompson⁸ explores how Eurocentric beauty standards of straight, long hair has a sociocultural effect on Black and biracial women's ideas of physical attractiveness, self-esteem, and identity.⁹ The article explores the Social Comparison Theory which is the theory of people comparing themselves to others when they are unsure about themselves. It connects to how Black women feel like they should alter their hair and looks to conform to the dominant beauty standards to succeed at work and in their personal lives.

Cheryl Thompson also wrote another article “Black Women and Identity: What’s Hair Got to do with It?”¹⁰ In this article, she touches on the topics discussed in the previous articles and gives a scope of the different ways Black women used their hairstyles to conform but, in that act, they found their own sense of identity. The article addressed how hair and identity are intertwined for many Black women and included narratives from Black women on topics like

⁷ Ayanda D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharps. *Hair Story Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America*. 10

⁸ Cheryl Thompson. “Black Women, Beauty, and Hair as a Matter Of Being.” *Women's Studies* 38, no. 8 (2009)

⁹ Cheryl Thompson. “Black Women, Beauty, and Hair as a Matter Of Being.” 36-46

¹⁰ Cheryl Thompson “Black Women and Identity: What's Hair Got to Do With It.” *Michigan Feminist Studies*, February 2009, 78–90

weave, straighten hair and going natural to support the claims from the article. Thompson's methodology included narratives from Black women using their own words. This method inspired me to create a similar methodology for the women here at RIT.

Black Woman in the Workplace

I wanted sources that provided information on how the choice to go natural can affect how Black women are seen in society. The most challenging environment Black women must navigate is in the professional workplace. I chose articles that analyzed the ways in which many establishments provide strict guidelines pertaining to how Black women must wear their hair. Places that have tried to regulate Black women's hair have been schools, Army regulations, and administrative workplaces. The most recent example of discrimination at the workplace was when first grader Tiana Parker was sent home from school for wearing her hair in dreadlocks.

Tiana Parker was banned from wearing her hair in dreadlocks at her Oklahoma charter school. According to local news outlet KOKI-TV, Parker's father (who is himself a barber) was told by school officials from the Deborah Brown Community School in Tulsa that his daughter's hairstyle wasn't "presentable," and felt her hair could "distract from the respectful and serious atmosphere [the school] strives for"¹¹

Most of these regulations code Black natural hairstyles as unkempt, matted, messy, and distracting. These negative ideas about natural hair have often been imposed on Black women resulting in internalized racism and low self-esteem, which is addressed in my project.

In the journal article "Black Hair and Textures of Defensiveness and Black Hair/Style Politics," Amber Jamilia Musse shares her analysis of Black hair through her comparison of how she views herself in the workplace as opposed to her everyday life. She claims that there is a shift from how she presents in her personal life versus her professional life. She feels more comfortable with her natural hair at home in its free and natural state while she feels the need to conceal her natural hair when at work, using hairstyles that change the state of her natural hair.

¹¹ Eleanor Abraham. "How Black Hair Is Repressed and Regulated, Legally, in the U.S." *InStyle*, www.instyle.com/hair/black-womens-hair-regulated-us-school-workplace-discrimination.

She talks about how hair textures that are softer and less coiled are deemed more attractive at work. She expands on how the verbiage used to describe Black hair can depend on its texture. Words like “neat, curly, soft” are positive words to describe less coiled hair patterns, while “kinky” and “wild” can have negative undertones pertaining to more coiled hair. The more your hair resembles an Afro, the less accepted it is in the workplace. She writes about her experience pertaining to conforming, The sense of feeling the need to be performative for society is something that Black women feel often and something I want to explore in my oral histories. Conforming can feel like something that is necessary to successfully navigate the workplace and to get ahead in society. This article is an example of a firsthand narrative on how societal views of a Black woman's hair and how its texture can shape identity, and lead black women to make social sacrifices to make nonblack people in the workplace feel comfortable around them.

The article “Black Women Can’t Have Blonde Hair in the Workplace” by D. Wendy Greene¹² in 2011 introduced hair stories pertaining to the regulation of Black women’s blonde hair in the workplace. The article goes into the laws and regulations that illustrate restrictive demands that employers and others in positions of power can impose upon Black women and their hair. Greene explores the contradictions of the regulations which stop Black women from looking either “visibly Black or visibly white.” “Employers are allowed to force Black women to wear their hair in a straightened style and thus conform to an “invisible” norm of white womanhood and beauty to maintain and acquire employment. Yet, employers are able to lawfully deny Black women employment opportunities if they venture into territory that is deemed “visibly white” by wearing blonde hair.”¹³ Employers can also deny employment to Black women who wear braids and natural hair styles that are “visibly Black.” Most of the

¹² D. Wendy Greene. “Black Women Can't Have Blonde Hair . . . in the Workplace.” *SSRN*, June 9, 2011. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1859662.

¹³ D. Wendy Greene. “Black Women Can't Have Blonde Hair . . . in the Workplace.” 18-32

regulations call for employees to look neat and professional and in most cases employers do not view natural hairstyles to fall into those categories. These regulations are unethical and create conflict within Black women in terms of whether they should conform to European beauty standards for the sake of employment.

The article “Hair Matters: Toward Understanding Natural Black Hair Bias in the Workplace,” by Gail Dawson¹⁴ published in 2019 explores a study the author conducted about natural hair in the workplace. The results provided an analysis of 274 comments posted to online discussion boards and revealed that some Black women are embracing natural hairstyles, but many feel pressured to conform to Eurocentric hairstyles; some have experienced negative consequences stemming from their natural hairstyle choices. There was an exploration of three major themes (hair bias, identity, and conformity) that were created for questioning, the promotion of further research and stories of hair bias.

In The book “Blue Veins and Kinky Hair: Naming and Color Consciousness in African American,” Obiagele Lake discusses the connection between Black law guidelines from the Reconstruction era enforced on newly freed African Americans and the mandated appearance guidelines in the present-day workplace. She discusses how these guidelines were specifically targeted to get Black people to conform and “fit in” with the majority society and make white people comfortable. These are prevalent in the appearance guidelines in this era as well and are mainly targeted on controlling how Black women wear their hair. She makes the case that because of these generational pressures, it has resulted in preconceived internalized racism among many Black women and their self-image.

¹⁴ Gail A. Dawson, Katherine A. Karl, and Joy V. Peluchette. “*Hair Matters: Toward Understanding Natural Black Hair Bias in the Workplace.*”

Contemporary Analysis of Natural Hair on Black Women

The present discourse surrounding Black hair has a very concentrated focus on natural hair as opposed to relaxed hair. This shift started around 2005 when many Black women went on different social media platforms to discuss natural hair, reclaim the word “nappy,”¹⁵ and promote other Black women to go natural. This shift has later been identified as the “natural hair movement.” This is the focus of my thesis and I chose sources that explored the aftereffects of this movement. Now that many Black women are natural, what other struggles surrounding this choice do they face?

Amani Morrison’s article “Black Hair Haptics”¹⁵ was published in 2018 and delves into the complexity of natural hair on Black women and claims that the state of Black natural hair has been “overdetermined and underexplored as a site of intellectual inquiry.” She conveys that Black hair is always discussed but rarely in a critical or politically correct way. The article offers a critical look at natural Black hair as a source of interpersonal conversation/negotiation for Black women in the United States.¹⁶ Morrison states that Black hair is its own unique extension of the struggles Black women have over how their bodies are perceived by the public. She connects how discourse surrounding natural hair can lead to transgressions of socially appropriate conversations and interactions.

“Hey Girl, Am I More than My Hair?” by Tracey Owens Patton proposes a discourse about Black hair in juxtaposition to European beauty standards and the struggles Black women have about beauty, body image and their hair. She has an Afrocentric standpoint when theorizing Black liberation and self-love surrounding Black hair. She discusses an example of self-love and liberation initiated by Black students on college campuses empowering Black hair and the focus

¹⁵ Amani Morrison. “Black Hair Haptics.” *Meridians* 17, no. 1 (January 2018): 82–96.

¹⁶ Morrison, “Black Hair Haptics” 86-94

on educating Black women about natural hair care. She argues that there is much need for inner empowerment in the Black community but that it might not be enough. Beauty, body image and hair have been engulfed in the effects of institutionalized racism and new movements challenge the hegemonic White standard of beauty through Black beauty liberation.¹⁷

The topics of the beauty and body image of Black women in the context of white standards and spaces are also discussed in “#Teamnatural: Black Hair and the Politics of Community in Digital Media” By Tiffany M. Gill¹⁸ which was published in 2015. It explores Black women’s natural hair in corporal spaces. The author examines ways that online natural-hair communities provide an almost archive-like safe space for women who want to share stories about the concerns of Black women being constantly pressured to conform to the general society in these corporate spaces. Specifically, this essay discusses the ways in which these online communities define the beauty of natural hair in the new world of digital beauty. Gill shares a perspective as both a historian of Black beauty culture and a participant in these online communities.¹⁹ Both pieces explore topics of beauty images in predominantly white spaces.

Narratives of Black Women’s Natural Hair

Narratives by Black women about their hair are very important to include as sources for this thesis because they offer insight into the interpersonal struggles many Black women go through and show the shared experiences and struggles pertaining to their natural hair; these are vital to helping me form questions for my oral histories. I also wanted to include sources that had surveys or research involving many women to share their experience for a larger and more in-depth scope of the claims being made.

¹⁷ Tracey Owens Patton. “Hey Girl, Am I More than My Hair? African American Women and Their Struggles with Beauty, Body Image, and Hair.” *NWSA Journal*. Johns Hopkins University Press, June 26, 2006.

¹⁸ Tiffany M Gill. “#TeamNatural: Black Hair and the Politics of Community in Digital Media.” *Nka Journal of Contemporary African Art* 2015, no. 37 (2015): 70–79.

¹⁹ Gill. “#TeamNatural: Black Hair and the Politics of Community in Digital Media.” 72-75

In the article “30 Women Share Their Most Personal Natural Hair Stories” by Maya Allen, Black women share their narratives surrounding natural hair and their experiences with people not in the natural hair community expressing thoughts on natural hair. These women share how natural hair has affected their everyday life, one-woman states "I feel like I've had so many encounters with discrimination or pure ignorance from strangers toward my natural hair that it's hard to keep track. A lot of the feedback I get is mostly positive, so it always outweighs the negative, but I will get random strangers reaching to touch my hair without permission, assuming that it's fake or a wig, or asking if it's all my hair."²⁰

In 2000, Ingrid Banks wrote a book “Hair Matters” based around a survey interviewing over fifty women from teens to seniors on how they see hair. “The politics of Black hair is to be based on substantive, ethnographically informed research. This research will focus on the everyday discussions that Black women have among themselves and about themselves.”²¹ Banks uses this survey to analyze how talking about hair reveals Black women's ideas about “race, gender, sexuality, beauty, and power.” This piece is like my project because Banks not only interviews the women but within her survey, but the women are able to interview each for shared experience.

The article “Hair it is: Examining the Experiences of Black Women with Natural Hair” by Tabora A. Johnson makes the claim that identity is inextricably linked to Black women's relationship with the presentation of their hair. An Internet based survey was conducted where 529 Black woman participants were asked to share their experiences when wearing their hair in its natural state without any form of alteration to it. The conclusion of the study was that the way

²⁰ Maya Allen. “30 Women of Color Share Their Most Personal Natural Hair Stories.” *Byrdie*. September 29, 2019.

²¹ Ingrid Banks. *Hair Matters: Beauty, Power, and Black Women's Consciousness*. New York: New York University Press, 2000.

Black women perceived their natural hair correlated with how if they were perceived positively or negatively when they wore their natural hair.

Oral History and Shared Authority:

Exploring the ways in which I could incorporate shared authority into my oral histories is important to this project as I believe that oral histories should accommodate both the creator and participant in a fair way. Having Black women share their experiences in their own voice and in the capacity they see fit, is a key component of my project. The sources I've chosen give insight to the history of oral histories and the new way that oral histories are being conducted. These concepts in the sources are useful to my thesis as I am exploring the ethical ways to facilitate oral interviews using shared authority.

The book *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* by Michael Frisch²² shares essays exploring the theory of shared authority. These essays make the argument that “because an interview is intrinsically dialogic, that is, constituted by a back-and-forth exchange between two individuals with different frames of reference—different domains of knowledge or expertise—authority by definition is “shared.”²³ The claim that shared authority is ingrained within oral history through shared expertise is questioned in an online article “Disrupting Authority: The Radical Roots and Branches of Oral History.” by Linda Shopes and Amy Starecheski.²⁴ The article gives a brief historical context of oral history’s previous tradition of being facilitated by historians. During the 1970’s, a shift to “non elites” occurred, which left the field split into two ideas of what oral history should look like. Some

²² Michael H Frisch. *A Shared Authority Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*. New York: State Univ. of New York Pr., 1990.

²³ Frisch. *A Shared Authority Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*. 23-46

²⁴ Linda Shopes, and Amy Starecheski. “Disrupting Authority: The Radical Roots and Branches of Oral History.” *National Council on Public History*, March 3, 2017.

believed it was an additional source for archives, while others used oral histories to highlight the first-person voice without the input of historians.

Visual Projects that Represent the Beauty of Black Hair

In 2018, artist Lorna Simpson compiled a book, “Lorna Simpson Collages” of over 160 collages she created that depict Black women and their hair. Using multimedia, including newspaper clippings with racially controversial titles involving Black women and their hair, Black women’s heads of hair become galaxies unto themselves, solar systems, moonscapes, volcanic interiors.”²⁵

Elizabeth Alexander is a poet that wrote the introduction to the book and begins to speak about Black women’s hair being magical and wonderful which is juxtaposed with the art pieces. Although the collages are beautiful, the words attached to some of the photos are offensive. It seems to make a point about how society views Black women's hair although it is beautiful. The pieces are drawn from vintage issues of *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines that provide reference to different vintage hairstyles and the clippings give context to the issues surrounding Black women during earlier times. Simpson’s art seems to challenge conventional views on many topics about gender and politics. These collages are a great reference for my thesis in terms of having a visual representation of the politics of Black hair.

Methodology

In a journal article titled, “Black Hair and Textures of Defensiveness and Black Hair/Style Politics’, Amber Jamilia Musser discusses her own conflict with identity pertaining to hair and its importance in society, stating:

²⁵ Lorna Simpson, Valle-Inclán Ramón María del. *Lorna Simpson Collages*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2018.

I'm on my way to work. It's always a performance. I perform for them and I make them perform for me. Today I'm going to let them touch me. I know they want to. They told me. They told me at work. I'm on my way to work and I'm going to perform for them. I'm gonna let them touch me. I know they'll like it. I'm on my way to work.²⁶

It is this feeling that many Black women have within their inner thoughts. The need to mentally prepare to go into a work environment and possibly is made a spectacle or target of entertainment all because of how their hair naturally grows out of their heads. Musser goes on to explore the complexity of Black hairstyles and the politics that are intertwined within hair textures in relationship to the workplace. Musser also speaks about the longing for Black women to share their cultural differences with society. I would see if other women feel a similar way when going into work every day.

Inspiration for Surveys

In February 2020, *Huffpost* released an article titled “We Belong Here: Black Hair Defined” for Black History Month. The article touches on micro aggressions and the reclamation of Black hair in the main media. In an effort to use the internet to teach about Black hair, a project was created.

Black Hair Defined is a multimedia experience designed to celebrate those stories of self-invention. Dozens of creators have lent their hands to these photos, videos and articles that explore the variety in Black hairstyles, the traditions that surround them, and the products we use to create them. Through this work, we invite you to feel the essence of Black hair without having to touch it.²⁷

This experience incorporates eighteen photographs of Black men, women, and children showcasing their natural hair. A transcription of the interview questions and a video of them talking about their hair experiences are attached. The goal seemed to be for people to be able to

²⁶Amber Jamilla Musser; “Black Hair and Textures of Defensiveness.” *Palimpsest: A Journal on Women, Gender, and the Black International*5, no. 1 2016: 1–19.

²⁷ “Black Hair Defined.” HuffPost. HuffPost. Accessed February 20, 2020. <https://www.huffpost.com/feature/Black-hair-defined>.

visualize the people behind their hair, learning about hair styles, hair products, and wearing their hair with intention. Ja’han Jones from *Huffpost* writes

Black hair is an artistic form of expression, sometimes conveying what Black people wish to share about ourselves — neatness, messiness, nakedness, cultural pride, personal independence and all sorts of other feelings. And the time we spend treating our hair and heads — combing, coiffing and massaging them to our liking — is an expression of the care and sensitivity we feel we deserve.

This project is a *wonderful* example of what I want my surveys to reflect. The best way for someone to understand someone’s experience is to be able to visualize that, and in a survey I pull direct quotes from to help personalize this topic for people that may be unfamiliar with.

Shared Authority

Before I could start my interviews, I experienced a setback due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Beginning on March 20th, The Governor of New York, Andrew Cuomo, issued an order closing non-essential businesses and places with large populations, and urged people to stay indoors. This meant RIT’s campus was closed and I could no longer conduct in-person focus groups. My goal to hear Black women’s voices had to be altered, but not completely changed. I first needed to define what shared authority was and how I would incorporate it into my project. In “A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History,” Michael Frisch describes interviews as “intrinsically dialogic” and argues that with the exchange of ideas and dialogue, shared authority can form organically. With this thought I decided to conduct questionnaire surveys to send out to the women on campus to complete online using Google Forms. Although the interviews weren’t going to be in person, when conducting an oral history that will be used for research and for many to review, a form of consent is still necessary. The following questions were informed by the literature I read and working together with my advisors to develop questions that would get the women thinking on a personal level. I wanted to

continue to give these women agency and to feel comfortable speaking on their own terms, so an option was included allowing them to request that their initials be used in confidentiality. Additionally, some of the questions were open-ended and required more writing, as opposed to multiple choice questions to give the women the opportunity to speak in their own words about their more personal experiences.

Study Population

As I want my project to share experiences from a broad group of women, I chose to interview faculty and staff at RIT for a more diverse grouping. RIT's faculty is below the national average (71.52%) for gender diversity with a score 33%, but above the national average for racial diversity (45.95%) with a score of 60%.²⁸ About 6.8% of the faculty is Black or African American.²⁹ From personal observation, many of the RIT faculty and staff women are older and have been established scholars and educators for years, while a few are younger and provide a different perspective on the academic field. Some of the women still have their hair relaxed or straight, while some have their natural hair, braids, or other natural hairstyles. This diversity gives the opportunity for different experiences and opinions to be shared.

One section of my survey asked for demographic information from my subjects:

1. Age
2. Range
3. Where were you born? (Country/State/City)
4. How do you identify? (Racially/Ethnically/Nationally)

²⁸ "Overall Diversity at Rochester Institute of Technology." College Factual, February 7, 2020. <https://www.collegefactual.com/colleges/rochester-institute-of-technology/student-life/diversity/chart-overall-diversity.html>.

²⁹ See Appendix B: Figure 2

5. What college or department do you work in?

Based on these answers, I would have a sense of how the women identified and their relationship and knowledge about the natural hair movement. Coming from diverse backgrounds ethnically can also shift how the conversation is approached, as “Black” is a blanket term for a multitude of cultures spreading through Diasporas. Someone raised in an Afro-Latin background might have a different relationship to natural hair than an African woman or a woman who identifies as an African American. Using the Google Forms survey as my online template, I kept track of the demographics in an organized way using pie charts and percentages of what and how the women answered questions.

Participant Recruitment

Working with my advisors, I constructed a list of about thirty women to send an email inquiry about participating in my survey. The women were selected because they were diverse in age and ethnic backgrounds as well as institutional departments. I started the email by telling the woman about myself and the thesis project. Narrowing the field of Black women to be interviewed by sending the questionnaire to women in academia gives a more specific perspective and one that has not been heavily explored within the research of natural hair. Considering that the women being interviewed are in the world of academia, will that play a role in how they view themselves amongst Black women who are not in terms of how they can wear their hair? Will faculty feel more comfortable with how they choose to wear their hair more than staff? Do these women feel that they have to wear their hair differently at work? Does that affect how these women choose to do their hair daily?

Once I had a survey, consent form, and list of women, I needed to then reach out to them. I compiled a list of women working as faculty and staff throughout different departments and with suggestions from my advising team, I felt confident in sending it out. I anticipated that the demographics would range in age, how they wear their hair and where they come from. I worked with my secondary advisor Dr. Katrina Overby very closely on deciding the questions that should be asked but provide context for the subjects to be able to expand on. I worked with my primary advisor Dr. Tamar Carroll on how to best ask questions and explore ways to incorporate shared authority.

In Ingrid Banks' "Hair Matters," she uses her surveys of Black women to make a greater statement about how hair shapes Black women differently depending on their social conditions and social status. Banks reports on what a diverse group of women stated in the interviews:

African American women might not have an option of having it [their hair] natural' and doing things to their hair 'to have men attracted to us'. Other women indicated that certain hairstyles (like braids and dreadlocks) might be fine for graduate students, but not for women who want to 'look professional for a job interview'. Physicians said that they had more freedom to choose their hairstyles than lawyers working in the corporate sector. One of the older women spoke about straightening as a way 'to improve my looks', not an attempt to look like a white person. Stacy, on the other hand, looked critically at this passion for 'improvement' and saw it as a manifestation of the way women generally walk around with that feeling of lack'. Some of the younger women hoped that the fathers of their children would have the 'right' sort of hair so that their children would have 'good' rather than tightly coiled hair. Other women passionately rejected the 'good' and 'bad' hair distinction.³⁰

Having women stating such disparate opinions on the topic of natural hair, and the complexities on when and where certain hairstyles are acceptable, shows that Black women and their hair aren't homogenous and vary from person to person. This survey was taken in 2000; I wonder whether opinions have shifted since then on questions regarding braids vs straight hair in juxtaposition to natural hair? Does texture matter when speaking on what kind of Afro is

³⁰ Ingrid Banks. *Hair Matters: Beauty, Power, and Black Women's Consciousness*. 38-9, 128, 66

acceptable in the workplace?³¹ These are the subjects that can be touched on with my survey subjects.

Results

In total, I received nine responses to my questionnaire and the answers were all very diverse. However, many common themes included the need to feel accepted for their hair and the significance of hair in respects to culture. Additionally, some women expressed experiencing their white coworkers having a lack of understanding about their hair. These instances led to these women feeling like spectacles at the workplace. As this is a small pool of women participating, these surveys do not serve to make generalized statements or speak for Black women from a homogenous standpoint. Some of the findings left me to believe that the diverse demographics played a role in how the women answered. 44.4% of participants were between the ages of 40-60 while the lowest percentage was from the ages of 20-24 with 11.1%.³² There were also diverse answers based on how women identified ethnically, women in the 40-60+ range identified as African American while younger participants identified as Black. This can be a result of many of the younger women being from places like Nigeria and Jamaica.³³ 66.7% of women voted that they did not experience societal pressures to conform to European beauty standards while the other 33.3% voted that they did. There was a shared experience amongst women of lighter skin and loosely curled hair textures saying that they did not experience the pressures to conform as discussed previously.

³¹ See Appendix B: Figure 2

³² See Appendix B: Figure 2

³³ See Appendix B: Figure 2

There were mixed reviews on women being aware of the natural hair movement. Women from older generations expressed how the movement seemed to be something younger generations could take more advantage of. Women ranging from 20-30 years of age were all aware of the movement and expressed its importance within society.

How do you feel about the evolution of the Natural Hair Movement?

L.C.: It is nice to see today's generation embracing the various styles and understanding the texture of their hair. There is a lot more content that is available unlike when I was growing up.

Dr. Crawford: Awesome. It has been a long time coming.

D.C.: I think it's amazing that Black women are embracing their natural hair and that there are products in stores to encourage others to go natural.

Ms. Beck: Don't know what is, but happy to see more black women embracing more natural hair styles

M.G.: An influential and important aspect of the modern era. The movement demonstrates the importance of representation in black society.

Y.A.: The natural hair movement is stronger; workplaces are beginning to understand that black hair can be presented in different ways. Although there is still discrimination in some places, black people feel more comfortable to take their natural hair to work.

Have the experiences you've had with your hair ever played a major role in your academic workplace environment?

Dr. Crawford: No. Probably because I am light skinned with semi straight hair.

Although there were inquiries, she was able to maintain the job.

Dr: Crawford: *My hair is more European than naturally kinky. I got a job at an upscale restaurant in Atlanta in the 70's as a waitress. I wore my hair pulled back for the job interview. However, the first day on the job, I wore my hair in an Afro. Some of the other waitresses told me that the manager indicated that she would not have hired me if she had known that I wore my hair this way. She was white. Nevertheless, some of the customers who were white indicated that they liked my hair style.*

Some of the women expressed different experiences in which they feel they are made a spectacle of or feel insecure about expressing themselves through hairstyles. These are also the women who said they felt pressured to conform to European Beauty Standards.

“Is there a story you can share related to a workplace experience that involved your hair?”

D.C.: *I have so many! Anytime I change my hairstyle, my white coworkers are amazed and give me compliments which is nice but I hate when some try to touch my hair. I am not a pet, this is not a project and I don't know where your hands have been! I always get asked how a style is done and how long did it take, etc. I always feel conflicted because I feel like some of my coworkers are really curious and probably aren't around a lot of Black people but I also feel like I should not have to explain my hair. I also think that sometimes they are jealous that Black hair is so versatile and it can change.*

When I decided to go natural, I had a white coworker try to give me advice on my hair and I had to tell her that I was not interested in her advice. Our curl patterns are completely different and our experiences will be completely different.

D.C.: *Of course, it plays a role in everything I do. I am now just getting comfortable with it, I think. For my 30th birthday, I got a purple curly sew in and I was nervous as heck to wear it work. Believe it or not, I double checked with my white supervisor to see if it was okay. My previous jobs had strict hair color rules and I did want any trouble. She was fine with it but asked me why I was nervous about having purple hair. I told her I wanted to make sure that I would offend anyone with my hair and I*

wanted to be taken seriously in meetings. She never thought about it that way and was surprised to learn that I even had this thought. It made me realize how much other people's opinion affected my career and my hair choices. No worries, I got the purple sew in and had no problems. Maybe the times are changing. Right now, all non-essential staff are working from home which is nice and I'm wearing my natural hair out because I'm not at work and everything is closed. I had a staff meeting with my dept. and I felt comfortable showing my hair on screen because no one can be close to it (like touch it, ask too many questions). I know whenever we go back, I will have it in braids or a protective style because I don't want to deal with the craziness. I have learned though that if I don't make it a big deal then they won't either.

This specific testimony from D.C. proves how integral hair is to Black cultural identity. The current crisis has allowed D.C. to wear her hair in a form that is most comfortable to her because she does not have to worry about the inquiries from coworkers.

All of the women when asked the question: What do you want people to understand about Black women's hair? Provided definitive answers that implied a need for more understanding of Black hair and Black women's agency

L.C.: I want people to know that Black hair is a journey and some are good at styling and taking care of it and some struggle. No matter where you are on the journey we should not judge someone for how they decide to wear their hair. As a child and a Christian I was taught it is our crown and glory and I have always loved knowing that my beautiful thick Black hair was my crown. As I age and due to hormonal changes in life my crown is changing so it is not as long or thick or full and learning to love my hair in this new state can be difficult but I wouldn't change it for the world. My daughter has beautiful hair and I can already tell it is going to be a challenge for her to understand how to deal with her hair but it will hopefully be a journey we can take together with the experience I have learned.

Tomicka: No matter what we choose to do with our hair we are beautiful, it is our choice to make and our responsibility to celebrate each other for those choices.

Dr. Crawford: Black hair is beautiful and because of its texture, we spend more time with our daughters.

Ms. Breedlove: It is OUR HAIR....let us do what we please. I find it so interesting that no one disapproves or speaks negatively about other cultures' hair. I've seen some styles but hey who am I to judge them. Let people be free and do them.

Similarly to the previous statements, the following woman expanded on Black hair with positive descriptors detailing what Black hair meant to them.

D.C.: That it is literally magic. We can do so many styles. It is another form of expression. Black hair is not monolithic, either. Whether you are relaxed or natural, it's your hair. Also, stop asking to touch our hair.

M.G: That Black hair is versatile, dynamic, and beautiful. The way in which Black women wear their hair does not determine their success.

Conclusion

African American women have long been privy to some of the most intimate secrets of white society. Countless numbers of Black women have ridden buses to their white "families," where they not only cooked, cleaned, and executed other domestic duties, but where they also nurtured their "other" children, shrewdly offered guidance to their employers, and frequently, became honorary members of their white "families." These women have seen white elites, both actual and aspiring, from perspectives largely obscured from their Black spouses and from these groups themselves.³⁴

On one level, this "insider" relationship has been satisfying to all involved. The memoirs of affluent whites often mention their love for their Black "mothers," while accounts of Black domestic workers stress the sense of self-affirmation they experienced at seeing white power demystified—of knowing that it was not the intellect, talent, or humanity of their employers that supported their superior status, but largely just the advantages of racism. But on another level, these same Black women knew they could never belong to their white "families." In spite of their involvement, they remained "outsiders." This "outsider within" status has provided a special standpoint on self, family, and society for Afro-American women. A careful review of the emerging Black feminist literature reveals that many Black intellectuals, especially those in touch with their marginality in academic settings, tap this standpoint in producing distinctive analyses of race, class, and gender.³⁵

³⁴ Patricia Hill Collins, "Reflections on the Outsider Within." *Journal of Career Development* 26, no. 1 (1999): 85–88. <https://doi.org/10.1177/089484539902600107>.

³⁵ Patricia Hill Collins, "Reflections on the Outsider Within.", 85–88.

Many of the women in my study have expressed an outsider perspective to society on account of their hair, but in some ways I feel like I fit that mold as well. As a Black woman I share many of these experiences of fear, concern and a need to be not only recognized, but appreciated by society, what I choose to do as a Black woman in terms of my hair and all other aspects of my life. I feel close to these women's stories but I also feel like an outsider because I am not just a Black woman in academia, but a Black woman who is a *student* of academia, which comes with its own set of challenges. Patricia Hill Collins continues to speak about Black women's voices in her article. She highlights three main points on the importance of Black women's "feminist thought" and the need for more women to be seen.

"Black feminist thought consists of ideas produced by Black women that clarify a stand- point of and for Black women. Several assumptions underlie this working definition. First, the definition suggests that it is impossible to separate the structure and thematic content of thought from the historical and material conditions shaping the lives of its producers (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Mannheim 1936). Therefore, while Black feminist thought may be re- corded by others, it is produced by Black women. Second, the definition assumes that Black women possess a unique standpoint on, or perspective of, their experiences and that there will be certain commonalities of perception shared by Black women as a group. Third, while living life as Black women may produce certain commonalities of outlook, the diversity of class, region, age, and sexual orientation shaping individual Black women's lives has resulted in different expressions of these common themes."³⁶

This thesis aligns with Collins' call for more Black feminist thought and Black women to feel like they have the agency to speak up, speak out, and express themselves and their own unique way. We are not homogenous and therefore our hair shouldn't be seen that way or seen the opposite way in which it is 'othered.' I wanted to showcase the diversity within the Black community pertaining to our hair while also educating myself on other women who might have had a different experience and might have even paved a way for me as a Black woman in academia. With this small group of surveys, I feel relieved that 66.7% did not feel pressure to conform, but it is important to keep everyone's voices heard on the topic and keep the

³⁶ Collins, "Reflections on the Outsider Within." *Journal of Career Development* 26, no. 1 15

conversation going and to encourage Black women to believe their voices, hair, and cultures are heard.

Appendix A



Figure 1.1 This chart shows different hair textures through categories ranging from straight(1A), Wavy (1B-2A), Looser Curls (2B-3B), and Tighter Curls (3C-4C)

“Hair Type Chart - What Is Your Natural Hair Type?” Sheamoisture. Established 1912. ®. Accessed April 10, 2020. <https://www.sheamoisture.com/find-your-hair-type.html>.

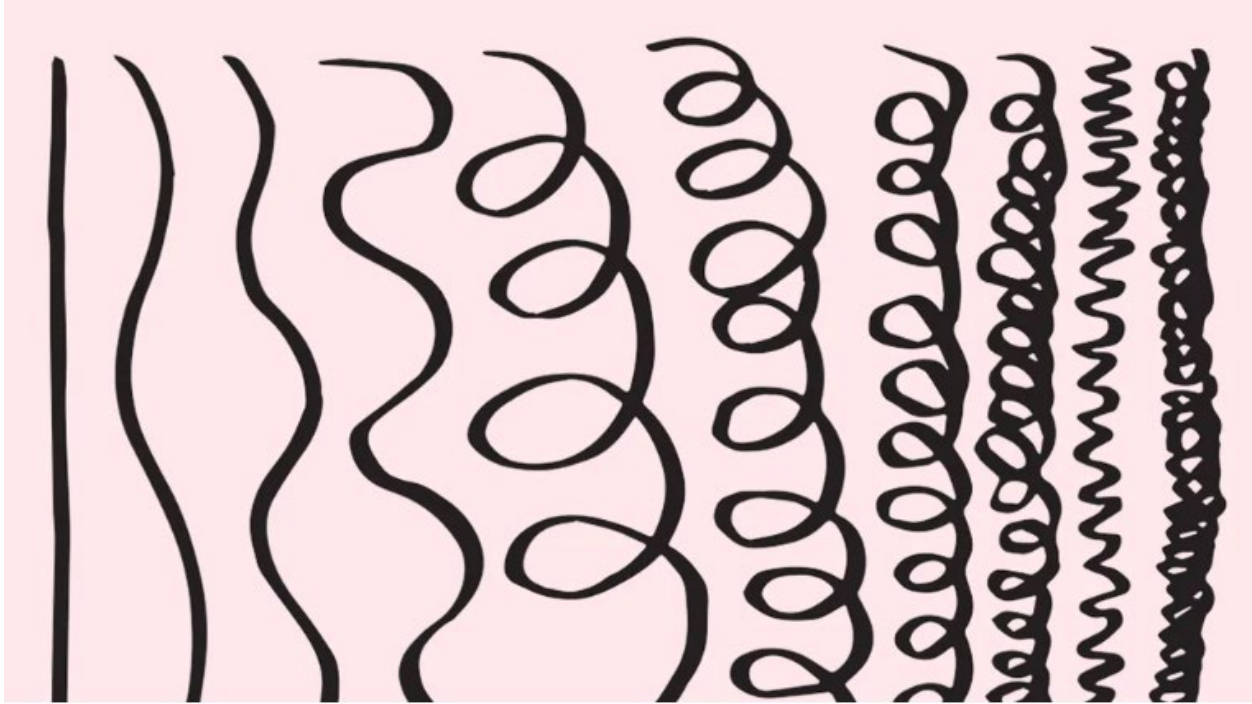


Figure 1.2 A set of strands of hair that range curl pattern for a closer look at hair textures 1A-4C

Nussbaum, Rachel. "How to Figure Out Your Curl Type and Why It Actually Helps." *Glamour*. *Glamour*, January 14, 2019. <https://www.glamour.com/story/curly-hair-curl-type-chart>.

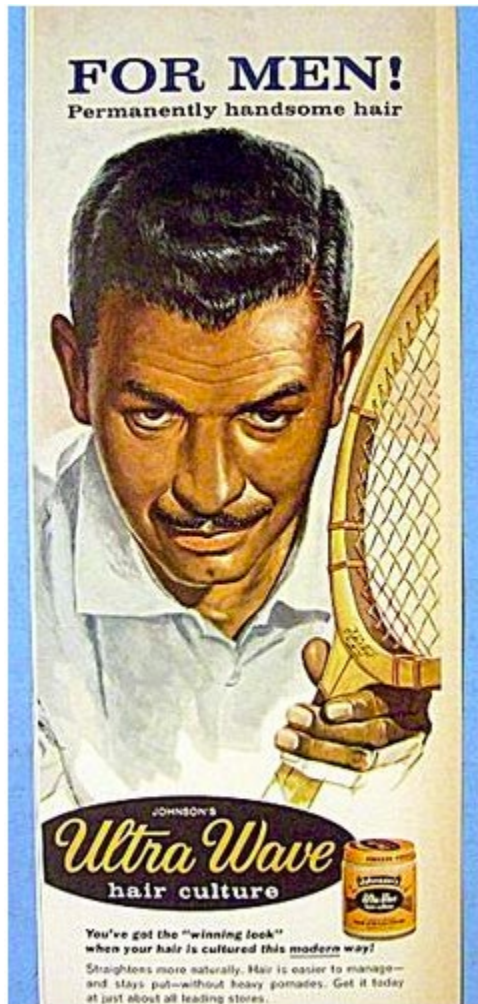


Figure 1.3: George E. Johnson launched the Johnson Products Company with Ultra Wave Hair Culture, a permanent hair straightener for men. A permanent hair straightener for women followed. This allowed Black women and men to straighten their hair without constantly applying heat. They would apply the product and allow it to sit in their hair for many minutes or even hours. The longer it sat, the straighter the hair. This caused a burning sensation;

Burroughs, Todd Steven. "Johnson Publishing Company." *African American Studies Center*, September 2009.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.45770>.

Appendix B

Figure 1- Blank Questionnaire Form



Interview Participation Questionnaire

Greetings,

I am Leah Green, a Museum Studies student in The College of Liberal Arts here at RIT. I am seeking participants to take part in a brief written interview for my senior thesis research. Below you will find more details about the purpose of the study, interview, and potential time commitment.

Purpose of the written interviews: The purpose of this written interview is for Black women in the academy to share their knowledge of the natural hair movement and their experiences in the workplace with their own hair. Further, the researcher seeks to explore whether their experiences have played a major role in their academic workplace environment.

Participants: Black identifying women who are administrators, faculty, and/or staff at RIT.

Time Commitment: This written interview will take approximately 15 minutes to complete.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and will assist me with satisfying the requirements for my Museum Studies senior thesis about Black women's hair in academia.

Thank you very much for your consideration,

Leah Green

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Demographic Questions

Please complete the following information about yourself to the best of your ability.

First and Last Name: *

Your answer _____

Email (For communication purposes only): *

Your answer _____

Age range:

- N/A
- 25-39
- 60+
- 20-24
- 40-60

Where were you born? (Country, State, City, etc.)

Your answer _____

What college or department do you work in?

Your answer

Please select the title that best applies to you: *

- Administration
- Staff
- Faculty

How do you identify? (Racially, Ethnically, Nationally) *

Your answer

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How do you feel about the evolution of the Natural Hair Movement? *

Your answer _____

Do you consider your hair to be natural? *

Yes

No

Other: _____

How do you mostly wear your hair in the workplace? (Braids, Wigs, Afro, etc.) *

Your answer _____

Have you ever felt pressured to conform your hair to Eurocentric beauty standards (perm or straightening your hair or refraining from wearing a certain hairstyle) while working for a university? *

Yes

No

Is there a story you can share related to a workplace experience that involved your hair?

Your answer

Have the experiences you've had with your hair ever played a major role in your academic workplace environment?

Your answer

If you watched the docuseries about Madam CJ Walker, titled "Self Made" on Netflix, share your thoughts about some of the historical issues in the film around hair and job choices. Also, do you believe any of these still exist within or outside of the university workplace?

Your answer

What do you want people to understand about Black women's hair? *

Your answer

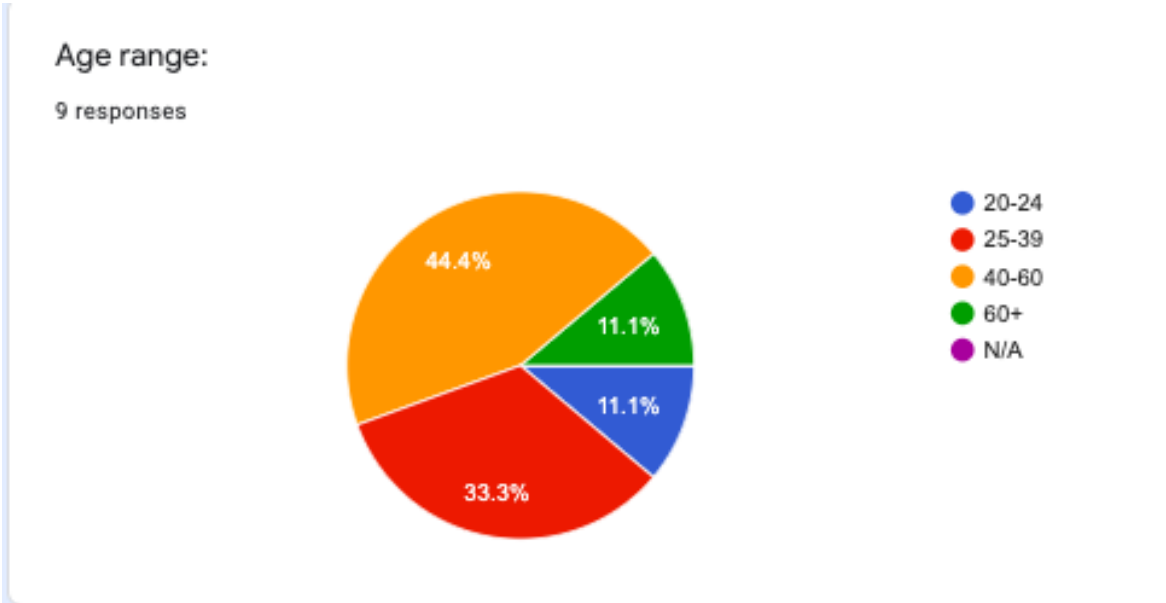
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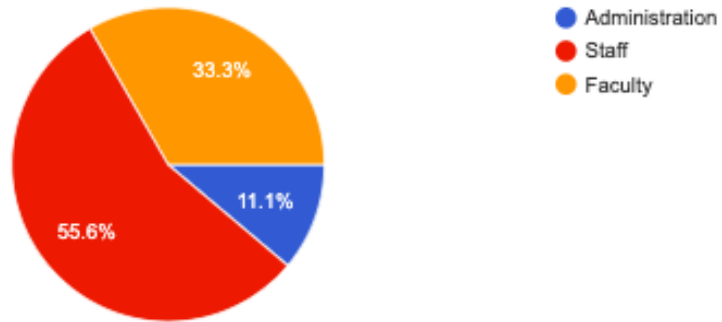
Figure 2: Data from preliminary study with RIT faculty, staff, and administration

Note: identifying information such as names and email addresses are not included in this data in order to protect respondents' anonymity



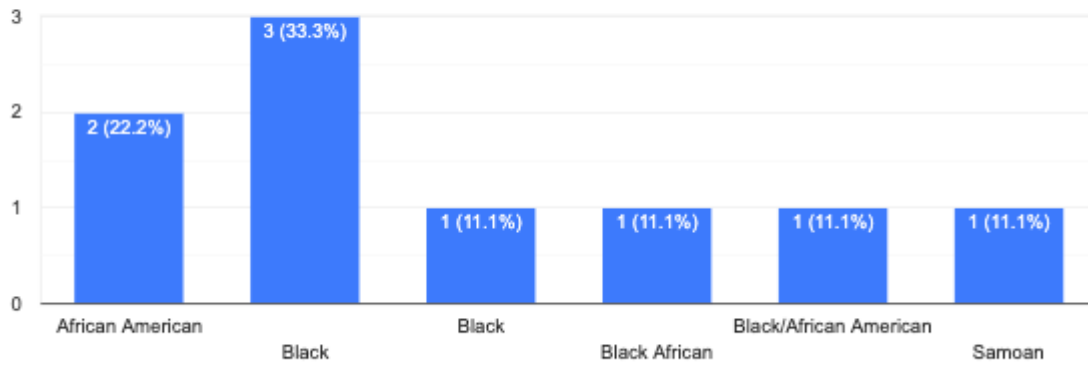
Please select the title that best applies to you:

9 responses



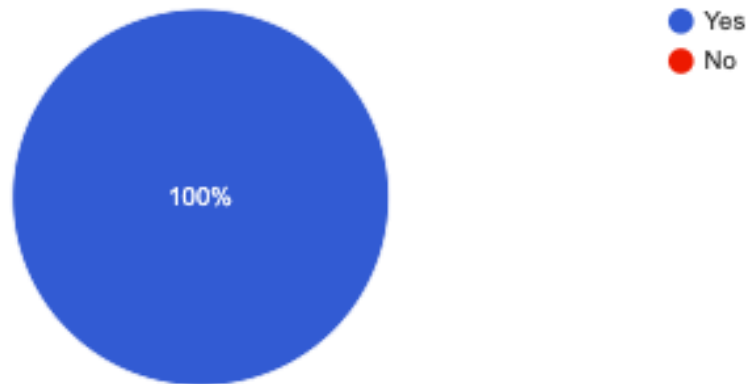
How do you identify? (Racially, Ethnically, Nationally)

9 responses



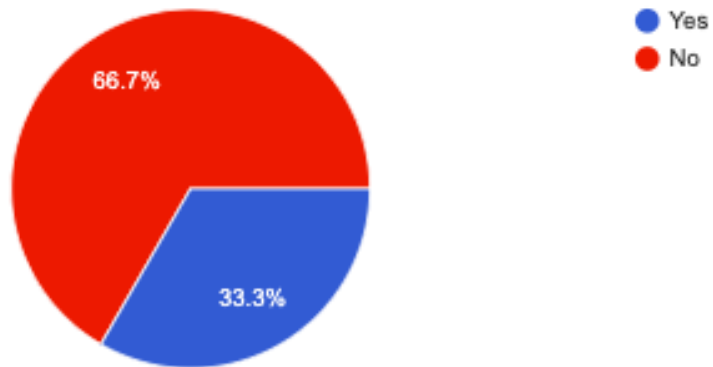
Do you consider your hair to be natural?

9 responses



Have you ever felt pressured to conform your hair to Eurocentric beauty standards (perm or straightening your hair or refraining from wearing a certain hairstyle) while working for a university?

9 responses



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