



Intergenerational identities among black  
and mixed-race women: understanding  
the role of hair in navigating racial  
politics

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# Dissertation aims

- How is the identity of mixed-race women is affected by wider structuring forces? - reflected in hair
- Focus on hair rather than skin colour which is more common in the literature.
- How does hair impacts choices of identification available for mixed-race women?
- 4 research questions:
  - 1. What is the role of hairstyling for identity?
  - 2. What is the role of hair modification practices for mixed-race women?
  - 3. How do mixed family phenotypes impact a sense of belonging and racial identity?
  - 4. How does colourism shape contemporary hair practices?

# Context of the study

- One family of mixed race women - two generations, USA and UK
- Range of phenotypic markers among the women which affected the identities they claimed - mixed race to caucasian
- Originated from Guyana- impact of colonialism and colourism
- Narrative approach - semi-structured, in-depth interviews
- Thematic analysis



# Findings - individual practices of identity

## a) The importance of role models

“...more like here I am sitting within a spectrum as supposed to an edge of it in my life”. - Rosanna, 59, mixed-race, UK.



## b) identity in flux/passing

“Certainly, when living in London, I was kind of living in London that people stopped seeing me as non-white, or they might not be able to quite put their finger on and that’s I sort of come from...” - Rosanna, 59, mixed-race, UK

Institutional passing - “...[I] just like to blend in, like, I don’t want to stand out”.- Victoria, 26, white caucasian, UK.

Wilful passing - “white people don’t like when [she asserts her mixed heritage]” and that “they’re so quick to be like you’re white too and I’m like well you didn’t think I was white five seconds ago.”- Jade, 27, mixed-race, USA

# Findings - colonial histories and identity

## a) Hair as a key marker of race/identity

"I told them what I was, and he told me there's no way you could be 85% black because your hair doesn't reflect it like you know you don't have, you know, coarse hair you have like hair like Indian people."- Amy, 30, mixed-race, USA.



## b) colourism and textured hair

"if your hair was straighter, you were treated differently you know?"- Eva, 57, multiracial, USA

"they would say 'well that's not, that that couldn't be your real hair your sister must have done something to it" - Eva, 57, multiracial, USA.



# Concluding points

- All mixed race women have different experiences according to how they present, the cultural capital in their family, their location and access to role models in the family- facilitates how they are able to be seen in society
- The ambiguity of each participant proved to be a challenge for most people viewing them - practices of essentializing still common
- American participants reported more overt encounters with colourism than UK participants - connected to specific history of slavery

# Image sources

Image 1- Mohamed, B. (2013) 'Thousands celebrate Guyana's rich cultural diversity.' *Guyana Times International*, March 1 2013.  
<https://www.guyanatimesinternational.com/thousands-celebrate-guyanas-rich-cultural-diversity/>

Image 2 - Rosen, M and Gupta, S. (2021) 'Photos that capture 80's London in all it's charm.' *i-D*, December 10 2021. [https://i-d.vice.com/en\\_uk/article/v7dqyd/female-erotic-photography](https://i-d.vice.com/en_uk/article/v7dqyd/female-erotic-photography)

Image 3- No name (2018) 'Hair types and porosity.' *Kinks and Coils*, June 22 2018.  
<https://kinksancoils.wordpress.com/2018/06/22/hair-types-and-porosity/>

Image 4- Kendi, I. (2017) 'Colorism as Racism: Garvey, Du Bois and the Other Color Line.' *Black Perspectives*, May 24 2017.  
<https://www.aaihs.org/colorism-as-racism-garvey-du-bois-and-the-other-color-line/>