

# **Blackberries and Redbones**

**Critical Articulations of Black Hair/Body Politics  
in Africana Communities**

————— Edited by —————

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## Chapter 4

# Social Constructions of Black Women's Hair

## Critical Reflections of a Graying Sistah

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This chapter explores social constructions of black women's hair, based in part on the author's experiences with gray hair. The essay begins with a brief overview of the theoretical framework (social constructionism) of the analysis. Next, it discusses four basic tenets of social constructionism, which assert that scholars should challenge taken for granted knowledge; consider the role of cultural and historical contexts in construction processes; understand that social processes sustain knowledge; and, recognize that social actions and knowledge are interconnected. The final section of the chapter provides a narrative of the author's personal hairstory as she struggled with whether or not to dye her gray hair, and the aftermath of her decision. The chapter illuminates some of the complexities of social construction processes, including hegemonic practices of compliance and resistance. The chapter also highlights the significance of intersections of identity (e.g., race, gender, sexuality, and age) to social construction processes.

Most women would rather dye than live with gray hair. Gray hair connotes aging, which women in the United States are socialized to ward off at almost any cost. Women learn this attitude toward aging from societal discourses that venerate youthfulness and vilify old age. Examples of this attitude include incessant advertisements for products to make you look and feel young. These messages characterize aging as a process of physiological and mental degeneration (Allen, 2004). *Ebony* columnist Laura Randolph (1999) explains:

As any woman over 30 can tell you, we live in a society so obsessed with youth that it tells women every day in thousands of ways, both large and small, that if they are not young (read: 22), they are not beautiful, not sexy, not desirable. And there is nothing like your first gray hair to remind you that you are no longer 22. (p. 28)

Given this prevailing, powerful sentiment, no wonder I started coloring my hair in my late thirties. I don't remember considering whether or not I should dye. I just did it. However, I now realize that my unconscious decision to camouflage my gray was not based solely on anti-aging discourses aimed at women. An additional factor was my identity as a *black* woman.

Like most black women, I have always known that hair matters to black folks.

All of my life, black people have commented on my hair. When I was a little colored girl, people in my community showered me with compliments: "You got good hair," "Your hair is so long," "You have Indian hair." In contrast, I heard disparaging comments about girls and women with short, nappy hair. A common criticism of women with short hair was: "Her hair was [snap fingers] THAT long." One time, a boy "cracked" [made disparaging remarks] on a girl by saying that her hair was so short, she rolled it up with rice. Naturally straight or wavy hair was called, "good," which implied that kinky hair was "bad." These remarks and other intraracial talk, along with related, dominant ideas about hair/beauty standards, were significant to my self-esteem. In essence, part of my self worth stemmed from receiving affirming messages about my hair. Consequently, in my thirties, I dyed my hair to maintain my longstanding reputation as a *sistah* (black woman) whose hair always (well, usually!) looks good. Because I didn't equate gray hair with attractive hair, I dyed, colored, or tinted my hair for several years.

My experiences illuminate how hair matters to social constructions of black womanhood. As Black Studies scholar Ingrid Banks (2000) observes, a need exists to place hair "within debates about social constructions of the body" (p. 26). She notes further,

the body is a text in which a host of meanings are extracted. Hair is another important medium by which people define others, and themselves as well . . . hair emerges as a body within the social body and can reflect notions about perceptions, identity, and self-esteem. (p. 26)

In addition to these issues, my experiences imply some of the complexities of social construction processes, including power dynamics and intersections of identity (e.g., race, gender, sexuality, age, and social class).

With these matters in mind, this chapter explores social constructions of black women's hair, based in part on my experiences with (un)colored hair. I begin with a brief overview of the theoretical framework (social constructionism) for my analysis, after which I elaborate on basic tenets of that framework. Throughout the essay, I weave narratives from my personal hairstory.

### Social Constructionism

Social constructionism is a theoretical perspective on sociocultural processes that affect humans' basic understandings of the world. This perspective contends that anything meaningful in our lives originates within matrices of significant relationships (Gergen & Gergen, 2000). In other words, what we know about the world and ourselves does not reflect an objective reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Rather, we create and perpetuate knowledge through a variety of discourses, including interpersonal interactions and media messages. Thus, social constructionism stresses the significance of language, because humans use language to construct and make sense of the world (Allen, 2005).

Humans also use language to construct their identities. Therefore, all identity is relational: "our identity arises out of interactions with other people and is based on language" (Burr, 1995, p. 51). As a result, although many individuals think their identity manifests

their personal essence, a significant portion of their identity emerges from social interactions (Sanoff, 1991).

During social interactions, power dynamics infuse identity construction processes: "the discourses that form our identity are intimately tied to the structures and practices that are lived out in society from day to day, and it is in the interest of relatively powerful groups that some discourses and not others receive the stamp of 'truth'" (Burr, 1995, p. 55). Dominant belief systems, or ideologies, influence how we develop and disseminate "truth" about social identity categories (e.g., race and gender), and their meanings. For example, throughout my life, my race has been known as "Negro," "colored," "black," "Afro-American," and "African American." Some of these labels represent dominant conceptions of race, whereas others symbolize self-empowerment of in-group members who countered dominant forces by naming themselves. As a result, meanings of these labels vary for members and non-members. As I discuss below, ideas and ideals about black women's hair have also varied across time for black people and others (also see Allen, 2003).

This brief overview of social constructionism begins to substantiate its utility for studying hair matters and black womanhood. This important perspective on how humans (re)create social reality presents a useful framework for investigating relationships between identity construction, discourse, and power dynamics. Next, I discuss these matters by outlining four primary tenets of social constructionism (Burr, 1995) and offering examples of how they relate to black women's hair.

#### **Tenet #1: A Critical Stance Should Be Assumed Towards Taken-For-Granted Knowledge**

Social constructionism encourages us to interrogate how we understand the world and ourselves, rather than simply accept "common" knowledge. This idea implies that we should analyze meanings of hair to challenge its "mere physical or biological existence" (Banks, 2000, p. 26).

Some scholars have studied symbolisms of black women's hair. Woven into most of their writings is the idea that "racism and constructions of race are embedded in mainstream notions of beauty" (Banks, 2000, p. 180). For example, "long hair has become a standard that defines femininity" (Banks, p. 34). In addition, a dominant strand of these studies equates hairstyle preferences with pride in racial identity, contending that black women who straighten their hair are ashamed of their racial heritage, whereas those who wear "natural" styles are proud of being black (Banks, 2000).

These issues were significant for me when I was in college in the late 1960s. My hair was relatively straight and long, and I wanted to look more "black" to express my race pride. So, I started wearing an afro. However, I had to take great pains to make my 'fro look "natural." I braided and rolled it up while it was wet to try to get a nappy look. After it dried, I picked it out and used a chiffon scarf to sculpt it. I was pleased because many people said I looked like Angela Davis.

To make my hair more manageable, I decided to get it trimmed. Because the barber was not familiar with this new style, he ended up shearing my hair to about two inches long. I was devastated because long hair was such an important part of my identity. Some of the older women in my family were dismayed because they bought into traditional notions of beauty among black folks. However, some of my younger friends said that my hair was "sharp." After a couple of days, I embraced my new look because it corresponded with the style that many women with black pride were sporting.

Other writers provide alternative readings of black hair practices and attitudes. Kobena Mercer (1990) characterizes oppositions between natural and straight hair as simplistic and

reductionist. He argues that hair, along with skin color, is a racial signifier. He notes further that hairstyling practices represent cultural artifacts or adornment rituals.

Noliwe Rook (2000) provides a provocative discussion of black hairstyles and their consequences to illustrate that hairstyling choices are “inextricably linked with how others perceive us to be wearing and performing our racial identity” (p. 282). Rook offers insight into tensions between sociopolitical meanings of black bodies and individual expressions of hair adornment. She examines how power dynamics infuse this tension when black hairstyling practices and meanings conflict with “individual understandings held by members of an outside group invested with the power and authority to bring those bodies and styles in line with what they believe to be acceptable” (p. 284). To illustrate these issues, she narrates stories of authority figures’ sanctions against black women’s hairstyling practices in public spaces of work and school.

As this nonexhaustive overview of literature on black hair implies, many scholars are executing the first tenet of social constructionism in analyses of black hair. Their work substantiates the need to question what we take for granted about hair and other aspects of identity. Furthermore, their work incorporates numerous implications and ideas for additional studies.

### **Tenet #2: Knowledge is Historically and Culturally Specific**

Social constructionism contends that all knowledge hinges on the historical and cultural context from which it emerges: knowledge is a product of its time. Thus, information and attitudes about black women’s hair depend on social, political, and historical factors, as humans rely on current ideologies to create meanings about womanhood, blackness, and beauty.

According to this tenet, to understand constructions of black women’s hair and their meanings, one should investigate a variety of interrelated contextual factors. For instance, time period matters. In the 19th century, black women had few options for styling their hair, whereas contemporary sistahs have an overabundance of beauty aids from which to choose.

Another important contextual factor is geographic location, which comprises sociocultural variables such as regional differences in hairstyling norms among blacks. I believe that social class also matters; however, I base this claim strictly on personal experience. It seems to me that middle-class black women tend to have different hairstyling preferences than those in working and poor classes. In addition, national and local political climates can make a difference, as well as other power dynamics. Some black women who face disciplinary actions at work or school may comply with authority rather than wear their hair as they would prefer (see, for example, Spellers, 2000). Or, some may choose to challenge policies about hairstyle choices, as seen in legal cases filed against employees for discrimination (see, for example, Allen, 2004; Banks, 2000).

An ethnographic study of black women helps substantiate the second tenet. Black Studies scholar Ingrid Banks (2000) asked black women to help her understand “how hair shapes black women’s ideas about race, gender, class, sexuality, images of beauty, and power” (p. 3). Banks interviewed 61 black girls and women, including 43 individual interviews and 5 focus-group sessions. Her research revealed that black women hold complex and often contradictory ideas about how and why hair matters. These ideas often implicate contexts.

A major contextual factor was age. Two women in their seventies were born when the pressing comb was a relatively new hair care tool. They continue to use this tool, even though other means to straighten hair exist. In contrast, women born in the 1940s and 1950s reported

wearing a variety of styles and employing a variety of methods throughout their lives, from straightening combs, to relaxers, to naturals, to texturizers, to wearing wigs.

Similar to these women, I've worn my hair in numerous styles. As I noted above, while I was in college in the late 1960s, I began to wear a huge afro, due in large part to media images of Angela Davis. As a wannabe black nationalist on a predominantly white campus, I made a statement about blackness by changing my hairstyle. But, I also thought I looked pretty cool. And, I got many compliments from my black peers. My elders weren't too pleased, though. They thought my hair looked unruly, which equated, I guess, to "bad" hair. By then, however, "bad" meant "good" to some young blacks.

Along with my experiences, those of co-researchers in Banks' study indicate that age is a significant social construction in our society (Allen, 2004). Within the 20th century, a crucial construction of age is the creation of birth cohorts. A birth cohort comprises people born during a specific span of years. For instance, I am a Baby Boomer (born between 1946–1960). Members of a birth cohort tend to share experiences and circumstances that affect their attitudes and behaviors; they "encounter historically grounded opportunities and obstacles to fulfill social roles as they move through the life course" (Markson & Hollis-Sawyer, 2000, p. xxix). Their shared history can shape how they age and affect their behaviors related to aging. Thus, we can anticipate that black women of similar birth cohorts might have similar experiences with hair. As Banks observes, "one's generation or age, in part, shapes one's understanding of why hair matters" (p. 33). One's cohort can also affect decisions about hairstyles. One reason I'm comfortable with my short, gray hair is that several prominent sistahs (including Johnetta Cole, Nikki Giovanni, and Camille Cosby) wear theirs that way.

In addition to age, Banks' co-researchers offered additional insight on contextual matters. For instance, some women talked about contemporary readings of black women's styles, such as close-cropped hair being associated with "being unfeminine, unattractive, masculine, and lesbian" (2000, p. 95), and long hair representing femininity (and implied heterosexuality). I have often encountered this attitude. When I began wearing an afro in the late 1960s, people would sometimes be confused about my gender, especially when I wore androgynous clothing such as jeans and tie-dyed tops that were popular then. Later in my life, when I was wearing an extremely short natural style and preferred to wear pants instead of skirts and dresses, rumors spread that I was a lesbian.

In a book entitled *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America*, authors Ayana D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharps (2001) provide a chronological history from 15th-century Africa to the beginning of the 21st century. This volume offers compelling evidence of the role of sociohistorical context in constructions of black hair. I can trace some of these developments across my own "hairstory." As a little girl, I often wore "Shirley Temple" curls. When I was a teenager, I wanted my mother to use a hot comb to straighten my hair because most of my black friends had theirs done that way. I also dyed my hair "brunette." One time, I used peroxide to make a blonde streak. These preferences corresponded with white ideals of femininity and beauty. As a young adult, I opted for a natural look because it represented black solidarity. In my late twenties through my thirties, I wore a wide variety of styles, often using chemicals to make my hair ultra straight.

In the current context of the United States black women can choose from innumerable styling options. I can't remember another time during 50-plus years of living when black women wore their hair so many different ways. This situation may ensue from a "social climate that has nurtured black cultural expression in reaction to racism" (Banks, 2000, p. 141). However, the women in Banks' project shared narratives and concerns that imply that persistent

ideologies about beauty continue to constrain many black women's hairstyling practices, which leads us to the third tenet.

### **Tenet #3: Social Processes Sustain Knowledge**

Social constructionism contends that humans create, disseminate, and perpetuate knowledge through social interaction. Most black women begin to learn about hair when they are quite young, from a variety of sources. For instance, interpersonal interactions and media depictions play a pivotal part in socializing black women about hair. These discursive activities uphold dominant meanings of beauty. As Banks (2000) observes, "hair becomes a marker of difference that black women recognize at an early age, particularly given media representations for what constitutes beauty" (p. 23). Media depictions in mainstream and black communication outlets historically have propagated white standards of beauty.

In addition to the media, informal discourse among blacks often preserves dominant ideologies. For instance, a pervasive message that many black women receive is the notorious "good hair, bad hair" dichotomy. This indelible construct permeates black culture, with insidious impact. A running joke from my childhood illustrates this notion: "A man asked a woman, 'Did you use Madame Walker on your hair?' 'Why yes,' she replied. 'Well, Madame need to Walker around those nappy edges,' he crowed" (Allen, 2003, p. 73).<sup>1</sup>

One of Banks' co-researchers observes: "When you have good hair, of course you're happy about it and you feel special and more privileged than those who don't have good hair" (Banks, 2000, p. 28). Banks explains: "'Good hair' becomes a marker of privilege in the eyes of those who have it as well as those who don't" (p. 28). Of course, the meaning black people assign to "good hair" and "bad hair" varies according to context, as the second tenet of social constructionism implies. In some times and places, black folks with so-called good hair may suffer disdain from other blacks who view them as "too white," or accuse them of feeling superior to blacks who don't have straight hair. A young woman I know wishes her "good" hair was nappier because so many black girls taunted her about her hair. She feels more penalized than privileged. Similarly, I used to want my hair to be more like my black friends' so that I would have similar hair care experiences; as I noted earlier, I envied them for getting their hair pressed. Therefore, the bad hair/good hair polarity generates complex consequences even as it exemplifies the tenet that social processes sustain knowledge.

### **Tenet #4: Knowledge and Social Action Are Interconnected**

A recursive relationship exists between what we (think we) know and what we do. That is, constructions elicit behaviors, which elicit constructions, and so on. Consequently, if a black woman "knows" she has "bad" hair, she may straighten it with chemicals or other hair aids to make her hair look "good." And, if her hair is also short, she may elect to extend it with a hair weave, or wear a wig, especially if she is heterosexual and "knows" that men prefer women with long hair. In contrast, a woman with kinky hair may consciously resist dominant ideologies by deciding to wear her in its natural state.

However, some women may choose hairstyles without knowing why. They may not consciously resist or comply with dominant ideologies. Or, their choices may stem from practical

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<sup>1</sup>This quip refers to Madame C. J. Walker, a black entrepreneur who invented beauty products for black women in the early 1900s. Madame Walker has been cited as the first self-made American woman millionaire.

concerns, such as an athlete who wears her hair in braids because she thinks they're easier to maintain than relaxed or pressed hair. Nowadays, I am more conscious of my choices based on practical issues. Because I live in a dry climate, I can wear my hair natural, or I can hot curl it and not worry about it "going back" (to its natural state). I'm glad I don't have to use relaxers to straighten it because the upkeep is time-consuming and costly. However, when I travel to more humid locations, I will usually wear a natural look, or take my electric curlers with me to style it every day.

These examples of connections between knowledge and social action display complexities of social constructions of black women's hair. Black women may vary in their awareness of why they wear particular hairstyles, and a number of factors may shape their behaviors. Therefore, this discussion underscores a need for deeper analysis of social constructions of black women's hair.

To summarize, the four tenets of social constructionism map an approach for conducting research about black women's hair. These tenets direct scholars to challenge taken-for-granted knowledge; to consider historical and cultural contexts; to study routine social practices (especially uses of language and discourse); and to identify relationships between social practices and dominant ideologies/discourses.

The four tenets also imply a need to cast a critical lens on social constructions of black women's hair. A critical approach requires that we study hegemony, which occurs when members of nondominant groups comply with dominant ideologies (Allen, 2004). A critical approach also necessitates discerning acts of resistance, when members of nondominant groups challenge dominant ideologies (as exemplified in some black women's decisions *not* to straighten their hair).

Next, I provide a brief example of a critical social constructionist approach by sharing some of my experiences with graying hair. My narrative illustrates the four tenets of social constructionism as well as examples of power dynamics and hegemony (including compliance and resistance).

### Exposing and Exploring My Roots

As I wrote this chapter, I exercised the first tenet of social constructionism. I questioned my behaviors and attitudes about my hair and about other black women's hair. While combing through my hairstory, I encountered several knotty issues that demonstrate the value of social constructionism. These issues embody a tangled web of social constructions of race, gender, beauty, aging, and sexuality (see also Allen, 2003).

As I noted earlier, I didn't consciously decide to dye my hair. In retrospect, I believe I was following an invisible script for performing social roles. This script emerged from dominant discourses about aging that led me to alter my appearance in order to play the part of a "youthful" middle-aged woman.

Many sources had etched this profile into my mind. I remember a television ad for hair dye in which a woman sang, "I'm going to wash that gray right out of my hair," as if gray hair was a blight. I also had heard black people's negative comments: "If you pluck one gray hair, two will grow in its place; so don't pluck it," and "Gray hair means you're worried."

So, I started dyeing my hair. Unfortunately, maintaining the role as a nongraying middle-aged woman was more demanding than I expected. I needed to color often because my hair grows quickly. Fearful that my telltale roots would announce that I was trying to hide my age, I often found myself back at the beauty supply store, purchasing more products. Concerned



that frequent dyeing could be harmful to my health, I tried natural products, such as henna, but they didn't cover the gray very well. After every dyeing session, I often had brown stains on fingertips and brown splotches on my neck and face. I suffered these nuisances for over ten years, until I chose to stop dyeing and live with my gray.

In October of 1997, I was preparing to travel from Denver to Washington, D.C., to attend the funeral of my friend Frances Abney. Although I usually did (styled) my own hair, I went to a stylist I occasionally visited. I wanted my hair to be "laid" (impeccable) because I was going to be with my people (blacks). You see, I pay more attention to my appearance overall and to my hair specifically when I know I'm going to be around black folks.

As the stylist prepared to color my hair, I griped about having to dye it so often. "Well," he said, "you could just let it show. "I could cut it down to the gray." I had let my gray grow out longer than usual, which meant I would have enough hair for a short style. I'd worn short styles previously, and I liked them. So, I agreed. After all, if I didn't like the gray, he could still color it.

When he finished, I was pleasantly surprised. I loved the way I looked. My gray was silvery and it complemented my caramel skin tone. Robert was quite pleased, and patrons in the shop said it looked really nice.

Despite those initial reactions, I was not ready for the onslaught of comments about my new look. My boyfriend (who was several years younger than I am) exclaimed, "You look great; that took off ten years." As I boarded the plane for D.C., the black female flight attendant smiled and said, "You are a beautiful woman; I love your hair." While I was in D.C., several friends and strangers complimented me. One of my other mothers, who always preferred me to wear my hair long and straightened, gazed at me for a minute, and pronounced, "your hair looks good, Lou." Now, that really surprised me because she has old-fashioned ideas about black women's hair (i.e., it should be straightened and long).

When I returned to Colorado, I continued to receive compliments. Even black men, who seem to prefer long hair (or at least, that's what I've always been told!), would tell me my hair looked great. One said, "I don't like short hair, and I don't like gray hair, but you're working that!" Another brother nodded approvingly at me as he pointed at his own silver dome.

However, some responses to my hair were not so flattering. More people started calling me "Ma'am." Also, salespersons began to ask me if I was a senior citizen; some assumed I was and just gave me a discount. Initially, these reactions dismayed me. I didn't want people to think I was old. However, after reflecting on my feelings, I decided to release them. For one thing, most people did not/do not interact with me as if I'm old. They probably rely on cues other than my gray hair. I tend to dress in contemporary styles, and, as the saying goes, "black don't crack." In other words, I have few facial wrinkles that often signify aging.

Thus, I decided to stay gray. The new style was low maintenance: not only did I forgo the dyeing process, but I also abandoned other demands, such as blow drying, hot curling, and using hair rollers. Because I was wearing my hair natural, I just washed it, groomed it, and tied it down with a satin scarf at night. I didn't have to think about it at all during the day, regardless of the weather. I felt a sense of freedom from hair care bondage comparable to when I'd worn an afro in college.

Another reason I decided to stay gray was because it fits my role as college professor. After all, gray hair is sometimes associated with wisdom and being distinguished. This positive attribute may counter some of the negative ones that can arise in academic contexts. Because black women belong to two traditionally disenfranchised groups (women and blacks), their intellectual capabilities are often undermined or challenged, especially in predominantly white settings (see, for example, Allen, 1996, 1998; Brown, 2002; Onyekwuluje, 2002). I also was

motivated to stay gray because more and more women are not coloring their hair. Gray hair—or should I say “silver” because silver connotes more value and vitality than gray, which seems dull and dreary—is becoming a fashion statement of sorts. Moreover, a generational trend may be occurring: “Graying is not the traumatic event that it used to be: aging baby boomers are still insistent on being themselves, and wearing their *gray* proudly is part of that” (Hagloch, 2004, p. 154).

Related to this, I've witnessed an increase in positive media depictions of women with gray hair. Even more important for me, as I noted earlier, I have seen prominent black women who have short, gray hair. These superb sistahs motivate me to stay gray, just as Angela Davis inspired me to wear an afro when I was younger.

Despite all of the preceding reasons, my main motivator for not dyeing my hair is that black people approve. If few black people had affirmed my gray hair, I am not sure I would have kept it. Thus, my critical reflections about my gray hair unearthed a deep connection to my black roots. These roots tether me to a value system that says that hair matters to self-esteem and self worth. Just as I felt affirmed by compliments from black people when I was a little girl, I still desire and appreciate their validation as a middle-aged woman. This revelation was not what I expected when I began this writing project.

As I conceptualized this essay, I intended to assert that my uncolored, natural hair reflects an act of resistance against mainstream values about hair, beauty, and aging. I planned to refer to Patricia Hill Collins' (2000) four aspects of black women's consciousness: self definition, self valuation and respect, self reliance and independence, and the centrality of a changed self to personal empowerment (pp. 112–119). However, my critical social constructionist analysis helps me realize I haven't totally escaped the snares of dominant ideologies about race, femininity, beauty, sexuality, age, and their interactions. Yes, I wear my hair natural, but it's easy to maintain, and it looks “good.” Yes, I wear my hair short, but I'm careful to adorn myself with markers of femininity and heterosexuality such as lipstick and large earrings to detract others from thinking I'm a man or a lesbian. Yes, I wear my hair silver, but I'm acutely conscious of other aspects of my appearance, careful to signal in other ways that I am not *that* old. I realize that as a woman, my valuation of self-worth depends heavily on physical attractiveness (Collins, 2000). I choose trendy accessories (such as eyeglasses and jewelry), and I wear fashionable clothes to compliment my statuesque body. I also stand up tall like my mother taught me.

However, I don't limit myself to physical cues. I nurture my youthful spirit, my sense of humor, and my sexuality. As the saying goes, “there may be snow on the rooftop, but there's still fire in the furnace!” Basically, my salt-and-pepper hair helps to accentuate my spicy personality. Given all of these positive factors, I love my silver hair, and I intend to keep it.

In conclusion, this essay underscores a need to delve more deeply into social constructions of black women's hair. Similar to other scholars, I have shown that hair is an important building block in constructing black women's identities. This preliminary analysis also substantiates the utility of social constructionism for investigating how humans make, maintain, and modify social identities (Allen, 2005). In addition, my musings illustrate the value of narrative for eliciting insight about aspects of our lives we rarely interrogate. If we share our stories and feelings with one another, perhaps we can develop strategies to deconstruct dominant ideologies about hair, and by extension, other aspects of black women's identities, such as age, sexuality, social class, skin color, and intellectual ability.

Finally, issues raised in this essay apply to other nondominant groups, such as other women, men of color, homosexuals, members of the working class, elderly people, and persons with disabilities (see Allen, 2004). Because social constructionism teaches us that social identi-

ties are fluid and susceptible to change, this perspective on how humans create reality authorizes us to change beliefs and behaviors that hinder anyone from living an empowered life.

### Discussion Questions

1. How does the author's narrative, "Exploring and Exposing My Roots," exemplify the four tenets of social constructionism? How does hegemony seem to operate in her hairstory?
2. Do you agree or disagree with the statement, "all identity is relational"? Explain.
3. To which of the birth cohorts listed below do you belong? Labels for cohorts (or generations) include:
  - Traditionalists (1900–1945) or Veterans (1922–1943)
  - Baby Boomers (1943–1960)
  - Generation X 1960–1980 (also known as Twentysomethings, Post-Boomers, Baby Busters, Slackers, and the Thirteenth Generation)
  - Nexters (1980–2000) also known as Millennials, Echo Boom, Baby Busters, and Generation Next
 (Raines, C. (1997). *Beyond generation X: A practical guide for managers*. Menlo Park, CA: Crisp).
  - a. What are distinguishing characteristics, events, and interests of your birth cohort?
  - b. Do you believe that being a member of this cohort influences your identity? Explain.
  - c. Do any other aspects of your identity (e.g., gender, race, sexual orientation) distinguish you from other members of your cohort? Explain.
  - d. How, if at all, does hair matter for your cohort?

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