

Beauty + Justice Podcast
EP10: + Black Beauty Liberation with Dr. Teiahsha Bankhead

LISSAH JOHNSON

You're listening to the Beauty + Justice podcast where we talk with folks from a variety of fields about what it will take to create a more clean and equitable future beauty for everyone. These conversations are led by Dr. Tamarra James-Todd, a trailblazer at Harvard TH Chan School of Public Health and head of the Environmental Reproductive Justice Lab. And I'm your host, Lissah Johnson, a PhD candidate at Harvard Chan.

Hey listeners, thanks for tuning in to episode 10 of the Beauty + Justice Podcast. In many cultures, hair is not just a symbol of beauty, but historically it's been a means of communicating messages that were spiritual, symbolic, or about one's place in the community, including their age or marital status. And for people of the African diaspora, this tradition was brutally taken away, and hair became one of the many ways that oppression, subjugation, and white supremacy were enforced. In today's episode, we're diving deeper into the connection between hair, beauty and identity, and what that means for a person's sense of self, freedom, and liberation.

DR TEIAHSHA BANKHEAD

Black beauty liberation is an act of radical resistance to oppression.

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That was Dr. Teiahsha Bankhead, Professor Emeritus of Social Work at California State University, Sacramento, and the Executive Director of Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth. In this conversation, Dr. Tamarra James-Todd and Dr. Bankhead talked about the illuminating article she coauthored in 2014 called "Hair it is: examining the experiences of Black women with natural hair" and her surprising findings about the attitudes towards beauty, the way these attitudes are perpetuated and maintained, and what that means for the beauty justice movement. Now here's Tamarra to get the conversation started.

DR. TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

I'm delighted today to be joined by our guest Dr. Teiahsha Bankhead. Teiahsha, can you please tell us more about yourself?

DR TEIAHSHA BANKHEAD

Sure so, I am faculty emeritus, so I'm Professor Emeritus, you didn't know that, but I recently retired from teaching after 20 years in social work at California State University, Sacramento. I have a PhD and MSW from UC Berkeley School of Social Welfare and was a research fellow and a fellow of the US Psychiatric Congress, while a student, I also currently am a psychotherapist, a licensed psychotherapist in California, and I serve as the Executive Director of Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth, which does international work and national work as well as local work here.

DR. TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

You're busy—that's what you're telling me, you are busy and you know, I just want to say thank you so much for taking the time out to join us today. This is really a conversation about beauty justice and really being able to understand what systems are at play that can impact how we view ourselves and

how that impacts our health, and I am curious if you can tell me more about your story. How did you get into this area of studying Black hair and just identity-related issues around that?

DR TEIAHSHA BANKHEAD

Yeah, so I guess I should say that co-author Dr. Tabora Johnson and I engaged in a research project some years ago that was international in scope, but primarily based here in the United States where we conducted quantitative, actually, mixed method evaluation research project but with a focus on kind of quantitative analysis of the experiences of Black women and natural hair. So, we're very interested in the relationships that Black women had with their hair, particularly like the experiences of social and emotional and societal experiences that Black women had in the world in relationship to their hair. So, we had thought about it in terms of this idea of if my hair had a story, if my hair could talk, what would it say, what would, what would its experiences have been and we're actually working on a book, right now, that's just about that, like this Black hair stories. If my hair could talk, what would it say?

But the way that we embarked upon this research is we were actually at, we're friends, we're sorority sisters, we're both Black women. We were in Hawaii at a conference, an international conference and we're each presenting different things that we were working on that were academic and we were roommates, and we were also dealing with our hair, you know, we both had natural hair. We both had, I guess fairly, you know long hair and we were like, here we at this conference—how are we going to be? How are we going to show up? How are we going to be you know be bold and bold and Black women in this environment, we started thinking about conceptualizations of beauty and kind of what it meant in our communities, our Black and BIPOC communities, and what it meant in White communities as well. And then these kinds of professional environments that we were in that we were often the only or one of very few Black people. And so it just, that that is how it began, really. We were at a conference in Hawaii we were in, you know, our beds talking about our hair and going to the beach and making presentations and thinking you know we're not, we're in academia and we're you know surrounded by a bunch of progressive thinking people who are very kind of open and receptive to these ideas of embracing our kind of natural selves and embracing our hair as it grows out of our scalp, you know, that that that is appropriate and wonderful to just embrace and that we shouldn't have to change that in any way. We're around people who agree with that and yet we're still having this conversation, we're still, you know, kind of wondering, we have to think about it. Right. And then we thought about how we've been in these environments where even in academia, I remember once I would often straighten my hair. I still do or I will, you know, wear it naturally. But when I wore it naturally after not having worn it naturally for some time, the Associate Dean, who was a Black woman in my college said are you OK? Suggesting that if I didn't put time and energy and work and effort into straightening my hair or presenting myself in a with some version of a certain kind of perfectionism, or some Black beauty ideal, that there was something wrong, you know somehow and that was infuriating, you know, because I had more time, I was even more free, you know. So we started thinking about the whole concept of liberation and how embracing ourselves as we are naturally is an act of Black liberation and so yeah, that that was the beginning and from that we thought let's, you know, when you're on the tenure track, I was already tenured at the time, but my co-author was not. We were thinking ohh, you know, let's make a paper out of it you know, let's do some research, let's talk to people, let's let's design—I taught research methods, I love the quantitative stuff. Let's work with that. And so so yeah, that was the beginning of it. And we got excited about it. And it was what we were passionate about and of course,

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we got a lot of just positive feedback from the community from, at research conferences, folks who just had a relationship with their hair and these mainstream ideas, ideals, and ideas of beauty that they were challenged by or that we're challenging for them or that they just wanted to kind of dig into more deeply. There were people in, you know, who had, who had undergone cancer treatments and were bald women who had alopecia, or women who were suffering from, you know, some kind of consequences of environmental injustice and chemicals that have impacted, you know, their bodies and so just all of that came up as we were talking about and researching and presenting on Black beauty liberation and Black hair.

DR TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

I love this idea, this concept of Black beauty liberation and I think it's incredibly powerful because it really puts the lens and the focus on empowerment. Can you tell us a bit more about kind of what you've learned about in the context of doing this work around the link between kind of Black hair and how we feel about ourselves?

DR TEIAHSHA BANKHEAD

So, we thought that well, we knew that these were complex issues and we knew that Black women loved themselves. We loved ourselves. We knew that. We knew that Black people had high levels of self-esteem. We knew that from other people's research, right? We knew that it was established that even in the face of assault and oppression in society that our brand of beauty is not necessarily embraced by many other you know, people from different racial backgrounds, and yet we find a way to kind of love ourselves. So, we expected to see that and we did see that part and yet we and we also knew that you know from the 60s and I guess the, you know, African-centered kind of Black power movement of the 1960s and 70s that wearing one's hair naturally during that time was a political statement. In some ways, and that it has residuals of but not exclusively. And we found that too, to be the case, meaning that today, you know, maybe during my mother's era, my mother grew up in the 1960s or was an adult in the 60s, I was born in the during that time. You know, it people, others would kind of get down on you, maybe criticize you if you didn't wear your hair, if you didn't have an Afro, if you were straightening your hair, maybe you didn't embrace yourself and your own Black beauty. I think those ideas are shifting and have changed. And so Black women can embrace, you know, a wide range of presentations of themselves. And you know it, it might just be easier for somebody to straighten their hair sometimes or whatever. So, this idea of only present—only displaying beauty in one way, only embracing ourselves through the lens of like the natural hair movement, if you will, that's the only acceptable way. I think that is out the door—I think that's not relevant and I actually think that's another way of being harmful and oppressive, if one was to embrace that. So that was another thing that we found that we expected to find.

We also knew about this narrative, and I'll say in the Black community and in kind of mainstream society, too, they're famous, you know, newspaper and magazine articles about Black women being ostracized and rejected from different work environments and not having the opportunities for promotion because they present themselves with natural hair with braids or locks or afros, or, you know, just curly twist out or whatever that those things, those ways of presenting one's hair are not acceptable in work environments in the corporate world that they undermine one's capacity to earn more and to be more successful in society. And we had heard those stories both in our community and

in our families, maybe not right in our immediate families, but in the larger Black community and the larger Black kind of family network we had heard and we kind of bought into that straightening your hair presenting yourself in ways that were acceptable to mainstream White society would result in more achievement. And so, what we found, though, was the exact opposite of that. Actually, what we found, you know from our study was that the people who had the highest incomes, now here with my quantitative head, like the highest incomes, the most education, you know were the people who actually wore their hair naturally more days per month than those who did not, and so that really kind of flew in the face of that thinking you know that you had to straighten your hair, become more White-like if you would, one of the things we always would talk about is you know, Black straightened hair does not look like White, straight, White hair. It looks like Black straightened hair. You know what, I mean, which is a different, a different thing. But anyway that was one thing that we found and we were really excited about that because I love to share that finding with different people, different, especially older Black women who may really embrace that way of thinking and that way of thinking has, I would say, harmful repercussions for us in terms of, you know, our health, right? So, it exposes us to kind of toxic chemicals and within, you know relaxers, but even the products that are put on top of hair to straighten it with even you know, a flat iron, have plastics in them and you know petroleums and things that are harmful to us and may be cancer-causing or may impact fertility rates and things like that. So, we're happy to hear that you know that a large number of our respondents and were able to demonstrate success while embracing themselves in a natural and in their natural hair. The other thing that I think was really important that we found had to do with and that was surprising, but not really when you think about it, is that we asked the question: well, how are you received when you go out into the world with your natural hair and are you criticize, ridiculed and/or supported, encouraged, you know, loved, seen as someone who's valuable. And what we heard, what we found was that the people who offered the most criticism and teasing were family members. And so that was really, you know, sad to us, but also resonated, maybe these are people who feel the safest feel the closest and so you know, supervisors that was an interesting thing and loved ones, right? So, people the primary love relationship so if you have a partner, a boyfriend or girlfriend who's your primary love relationship and they are embracing this natural beauty that has serious, you know, psychosocial and emotional positive implications.

DR TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

I mean, I just think that is so powerful and I have a couple of follow-up questions to those really key and important findings. I guess one question I have is, do you have a sense of kind of the structural factors that may be at play surround maybe discrimination or racism? Or just economic position that may have been driving those findings from your work?

DR TEIAHSHA BANKHEAD

I think it's all those things I will, I also want to say this, you know, although our study, I can't remember the details, I wanna say it's from like 37 states and three countries of the folks that participated, they were disproportionately from big cities on the coast of the United States, right? So, places like, you know, San Francisco and New York, Atlanta, you know, places where there's a critical mass of Black people and places where they folks are politically progressive. So, I think that those findings may be different if we had a representative sample of the whole United States, or if we oversampled the South

or, you know, different regions. So, I just want to begin with that and then say that, yeah, it's hard to you're asking the question of, what comes first, the chicken or the egg, you know what is it?

It's a good question I think some of this is generational. I think some of this is about social capital, some of it is just practical, like it takes a lot of time and energy and effort, and then when you climb the corporate ladder to have a certain level of success requires effort and energy, and being able to have the discipline to just say no to certain things that don't yield the appropriate return on investment. Right. And so, I think around this issue, some women especially highly successful ones, I think Black women are saying increasingly, I'm not going to spend that kind of time on, I'm gonna do what's easy, what's straightforward, what works for me, and what is healthy because I want to also embrace my own wellness and a part of embracing my wellness is sleeping more, right, or exercise, so I'm not going to stay up and put in a third shift that famous research work on you know, the 1st shift of working outside of the home, the 2nd shift that women do working in the home in the evenings and you know that kind of thing and then the third shift, this focus on beauty and you know doing all the things, nipping and tucking and straightening and conditioning and whatever, you know, botoxifying, and whatever people are doing to make ourselves more beautiful, that is a lot of work and a lot of money and a lot of energy. And so I think folks who are very successful economically also have had a reckoning or are coming to have a reckoning around that that energy, you know, and that investment of resources, so I think it's just practical for some, but yeah, I mean it's a good question about this whole issue of social capital, so I think it has to do with education, income, and social capital and position as well as generation and region.

LISSAH JOHNSON

So, what exactly is social capital? There isn't one agreed upon definition, but in general it refers to the resources and benefits we receive, either as individuals or as groups, through our connections with others. Who has social capital and how much they have is influenced by many factors including age, education level, and race as well as history, culture, and social structure and hierarchies. Having more social capital can allow one to move through the world more freely and easily. As Dr. Bankhead notes, her study included more people in regions of the United States that are politically progressive and have a higher density of Black people. These factors can certainly have a positive effect on a Black woman's social capital and influence how comfortable and how much support we feel have to go against dominant beauty norms and not fear how it will affect our social or professional status, even while functioning within systems where racism very much exists.

DR. TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

No, I think that that's certainly something we see even with the decreasing use of hair relaxers, for example, and at the same time, I think we know and through some work that's ongoing here at Harvard Chan School of Public Health, but then even beyond these, you know, these walls. But we're aware that Black women are more likely to be using or be exposed to chemicals that are harmful in our hair products and what's accessible or available to us tends to be products that contain more harmful chemicals, which are often cheaper. And you know, so I guess, one of my questions is kind of what do you think it might take for, you know, individuals who you know have less access, what do you think it will take for that, those shifts to start happening because I do think and you all mentioned this in the article, this idea of your hair is your crown and glory. I think part of that is really speaking to this, this

idea, this concept of acceptance, which maybe in certain, you know, maybe lower income women or women who have less access to, you know, more natural hairstyles and being able to maintain them. What do you think it will take to allow that shift to happen?

DR TEIAHSHA BANKHEAD

That shift is happening, and I think it depends on where you are, it's very different regionally. So again, I'm in a super progressive community in Oakland, but we have a large population of low-income Black people here and I would say but we have also a highly educated group of people right now at all levels of kind of the income spectrum. And so there what I think it takes is a community conversation, which I think we are having, right? So, a community conversation in, in the Black community. There is even some pressure right now peer pressure around wellness and kind of healthy hair, which hasn't been there, say decades ago, right? So, it it's there and it's not just there among, you know, highly educated, upper-middle-class folks. It's there in very low-income communities as well, there's also a make your own, grow your own, you know, create your own products movement where people are mixing their own kind of healthy ingredients to take care of themselves and their hair. I think another thing that needs to happen is a shift in our values. So, it's always hard to change culture it takes a long time, right? But this culture of what beauty truly is, what is Black beauty? What does it look like and not just only you know Black women talking to each other about Black beauty, but White people and Black men and, you know, children like all of us having that conversation and not just talking about it, but widening our acceptance and our view of what is beautiful. What is beautiful for Black women and what is beautiful for all women, or all people even and I I have two daughters and they're teenagers one tween and they are here in Oakland and they are very progressive around these issues and obstinate. I mean they have a way which I think is the reason I'm using them as an example is I think this is what I hear and see in my larger Black community in Oakland and in among our youth and many at least large cities in the United States. So, they feel like, for example just yesterday, one of my daughters, I was like, you know, we've been here in the pandemic we haven't gone to a hairdresser in years. I'm cutting everyone's hair, do it yourself and I'm cutting everyone's hair in this house, so I wanted to cut one of my daughter's hair so I I cut my own hair, I cut my other one of my older daughter's hair. And then I wanted to cut my younger daughter's hair, I said I wanna blow it out, straighten it basically to cut it. Oh no, you're not going to oppress me by trying to get me to look like a White person. I can, I said, I assure you, you will not look like a White person, you know. But they, I mean, really, she's said I don't want people to see me with my hair blown out, right? So, I won that battle, you know I was able to, and I said, honey, it's not like I'm trying to change you. I just want to know how to cut the ends you know, but and she said, well, you can give me a curly cut.

So that, those kind of conversations that increasingly that we're having are being sparked by our youth are being introduced by our youth, are being held by them and they are challenging us to rethink, you know, old ways. I'll just say it like that old ways of being and of thinking about how we present ourselves. Here's another one, lot of Black women used to always they would wear their hair naturally, but if they had an interview, a formal gala, something really serious where they felt like they had to present and be on, they would straighten their hair for that, and that's changing too. And so it's not just that it changes, but that the community is celebrating, that the community is saying, ohh, you know you look well, and you are working that right, you know, whatever that is and I'm, I'm seeing that happen in my community and I'm seeing it not just from other Black people, which is beautiful and wonderful, but

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also from White people, from Asian people, you know from, probably I probably get as many compliments of non-Black people, from non-Black people as I do from Black people on both, just, you know, wearing my hair naturally when I do, but also on being free to do that.

DR. TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

That's powerful and I was going to say to you, you know, going from a space and place of kind of Black beauty oppression, where we feel like we have to do something to fit in, to feeling free to be who we are that's powerful. And so my last question really is this, you know, what's your hope, how would you define or what do you hope that Black beauty liberation will look like in the years to come, 5-10 years from now, it sounds like it's happening, it's changing, it's growing. But what does that look like?

DR TEIAHSHA BANKHEAD

Yeah, I mean, I want us first as Black people to celebrate ourselves in our natural states, our hair, particularly in our natural states and our the ways in which we display exemplify and embody beauty. So how our noses grow, the color of our skin, whatever it is, you know, our sizes, the diversity of our body sizes and the diversity with which our hair kind of grows out of our heads that doesn't mean that we, you know, I have a young child so sometimes I think but it doesn't mean that you don't take care of your hair it doesn't mean that you don't, you know groom yourself, right. So, but to challenge the traditional ways and the restrictive and oppressive way of interpreting how we care for ourselves and how we groom ourselves and how we present ourselves and embrace ourselves as beautiful. So, I want us to, I think I think we're moving in this direction, I think that increasingly Black women are doing this. The future of this, in my view, is creating liberatory spaces where we can continue to have those conversations and we can continue to support each other and that we can actually welcome in other people from other backgrounds into those conversations. So not only Black women doing that with each other, but all sorts of folks to be a part of this conversation to kind of understand these ideas about Black beauty liberation will help us all to kind of get closer to our understanding of, for example, the political and racialized divide that we're having in this country right now as it relates to power, you know, economic power and political power and different priorities of different groups. So I think you know it, this engaging in this conversation can help White people, it can help White men, for example, think about their own attractions to maybe blonde White women, so where does that come from? Like, that's not divorced from an understanding of Black beauty, actually. And so I think when we all get more critical about our attractions and what we conceptualize, what we see as beautiful, it helps us to evolve as individuals and as a nation. So it really does have a have a place in the future of all of us here.

DR. TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

Is there anything else that you wanted to, you know, share or highlight that you might not have gotten to say?

DR TEIAHSHA BANKHEAD

Black beauty liberation is an act of radical resistance to oppression—that's really something that needs to be known. So, embracing ourselves, kind of loving ourselves, and doing so publicly is counterculture its visionary, you know, and it's a lifelong process for I would say, for any Black woman who's on that path, but also for the people who love her, you know what I mean? For all the people in her life and all

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the people around her. So, it's something it offers so much for our whole society and our whole community, so that I think is really critical for us to keep upfront that it's not this frivolous, I don't know when I first started doing this research like, oh God, you know, is this really important, it is important and it's not kind of a frivolous matter that doesn't have real life detrimental and positive implications. It's one of the first things that people see, and there's an interpretation based on what they see. So, in some ways I think we need to kind of recognize and embrace that changing the narrative about what this natural hair means, yeah.

DR. TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

I do think that that's where we want to get to a place where we don't have to sit and really contemplate like, oh, if I do this then all of the downstream effects, whether we're talking about hair or names or clothes or whatever, which I'm hopeful to your point about liberation. I think it's really about learning how to be free and who you are, so I'm grateful that you took the time out to share your story with us and again, I'm really grateful for your time.

LISSAH JOHNSON

At the heart of the beauty justice movement is the desire for everyone to be able to look the way they desire to look—that shouldn't be limited by standards or norms rooted in racist, sexist ideology or other structural factors like access to goods. And as we've explored in each episode throughout the series, beauty and conforming to the mainstream standard has significant implications for our health, our livelihood and our overall sense of well-being and the fact that some folks in our society don't have the freedom to look the way they want to look, particularly Black women should be concerning to us all this infringes on everyone's freedom. And so, beauty liberation, in particular, Black beauty liberation as Dr. Bankhead describes it, will require the changing of deeply held societal attitudes that cut across systems and individuals. We know from previous episodes that beauty justice will require systemic change in the form of new legislation, new business, supply chain operations, and new healthcare measures, but also change on an interpersonal level within our closest relationships will also be necessary.

In the next episode, we'll hear from Susan Peterkin about the perspectives and experiences of those working within the beauty industry on the way forward for beauty justice. Thanks so much everyone for joining us for another episode of Beauty + Justice. Don't forget to share the podcast with a friend and leave a rating and review wherever you listen to the podcast. Be well listeners.

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