

Beauty + Justice Podcast
Episode 12: + The Power of the Collective with Dr. Ami Zota

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 our second to last episode. Whether this is your first time tuning in or you've been with us since the beginning, I'm grateful for you going on this ride with us. Throughout the series we've heard from a lot of different folks with diverse perspectives, all important and needed working in all different sectors of beauty, but how can we effectively build partnerships across these different sectors to inclusively and successfully advance beauty justice.

AMI ZOTA

I really think the most interesting questions can only be addressed by working with people who don't think like you like that's kind of where the magic happens.

LISSAH JOHNSON

That was our guest for this episode Dr. Ami Zota, she is Associate Professor of Environmental Health Sciences at the Columbia Mailman School of Public Health, and she's also the founding Director of the Agents of Change in Environmental Justice Program, which seeks to foster more diverse, equitable and inclusive leaders in environmental health and climate justice. Today she's joining Dr. Tamarra James-Todd to discuss the work she's doing with community partners to understand how racism and other -isms impact beauty product choice. They also talk about expanding the beauty justice conversation to include gender diverse folks and the value of not staying in your lane in order to build a coalition of folks from diverse backgrounds for effective beauty justice work. This is such a rich and inspiring conversation so let's get into it.

TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

I'm so excited to be here today with a friend and colleague, Dr. Ami Zota, who, Ami we met years ago, probably approaching 20 or so years ago, 15 maybe, I know, maybe I shouldn't say that, but really around the very issues that we're going to be talking about today, right, and so I want to take a moment out to allow you to introduce yourself to our listeners.

AMI ZOTA

Yes, good morning, Tamarra, and thank you so much for the invitation to you know, have a conversation on issues that are near and dear to both of our hearts and you know, to the work we do and the impact we seek to have, I am an Associate Professor in the Department of Environmental Health Sciences at Mailman School of Public Health and I'm a population health scientist and my my work broadly seeks to understand how these upstream factors, which you know in academic jargon, we think about social as well as structural determinants of health. So how they influence and impact our everyday environmental exposures. And what are the downstream impacts on on health of marginalized communities, particularly women of color? And I do this using a range of tools, so I do science, I do science-based advocacy work, I talk to policymakers, I train future leaders, and I do a lot of communication work.

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TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

So, Ami you're, you're doing a lot. I am amazed at the breadth, the breadth of work that you're doing in this space as far as you know from the science to the advocacy to the mentorship and leadership that you're that you're doing and I'm really excited about today's conversation because we're focusing in on the solutions. When we often think about disparities and so on people talk and talk and talk about this, but rarely do we get to a place of solution building and I'm excited about your work. But first I want to start with how did you start doing this work? Can you tell us a bit about your story and how you navigated into a space that really has been novel but blossoming in the last, you know, several years and really entering into space where you're identifying and trying to push solutions?

AMI ZOTA

Sure, and you know, I'm going to start from when I was an undergrad, I liked science, I liked mathematics, I wanted to pursue a technical degree. I was always really passionate though, about civil society, the social sciences. I always joked that I think I was a social scientist in former life. And was always trying to find ways to merge those interests, and I pursued environmental science and engineering, which was in the school public health. And so that's how I ended up in public health. I pursued training in Environmental Health Sciences with the emphasis on environmental justice and community-based participatory research. Long story short, found my way studying endocrine disrupting chemicals and thinking about personal care products as drivers of the chemicals in our bodies. And as I was doing that work, I realized there was a big focus on personal behavior. And so, for example, I published this paper that found that vaginal douching, which is a practice where you you clean the inside of your vagina and vulva with the often a fragrance solution was associated with higher phthalate exposures and this is a practice that's, you know, more common in the Black community and that we actually show that vaginal douching was in part responsible for higher phthalates exposures among Black women compared to white women. And so that paper got a lot of press and some of the media, you know, narrative became almost vilifying women who engage in this practice, and it ignored the social, cultural, and historical context for why we all use the products we do and you know kind of how beauty is socially constructed and and the power of beauty norms and so, I saw this kind of gap in the conversations we were having and in the scientific literature and I so I I wanted to reframe these issues within an environmental justice framework. And that was about, I don't know, 6-7 years ago and, you know, the work has just continually kind of picked up steam you and I have done work together in this space and it's amazing to see all the young scholars who are attracted to working in this area now.

TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

That that's really exciting in fact, you know, just for full disclosure, you know the article that you mentioned that came out what about maybe seven years ago or so really highlights what this podcast is about beauty injustice and so the cost of that. And that it's not, you know, just what the individual behavior is, right, you can make it about the individual and try to point fingers and do the blame game that way, but it's really about these upstream factors as you're saying and thinking about the why behind you know, why do people do what they do? And I'm wondering if you can say a bit more about that particular paper about beauty justice, what were some of the things that you noted or that you found in your work that have been some of the upstream drivers that you know contribute to why people are using what they're using, what have you, what have you found in your work?

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AMI ZOTA

Sure, thank you for that question—you know, in that paper we kind of focused on 3 categories of products. So, we focused on hair products, we focused on skin products, particularly skin lightening products and we also focused on fragranced feminine care products, particularly those that are used for odor control. And what we showed kind of by doing a review of not only the medical and public health literature, but also the more like the sociology literature and the marketing literature and even the, you know, Black feminism literature is, you know, structural racism and colonialism play a big role in how we think about beauty. I think we have to realize beauty is a form of power. You know, it has currency and it always has, you know that that idea that beauty is power goes back centuries and you know, particularly for women it's one of the only forms of power that they had historically, right. And that there is a hierarchy of beauty norms and you know Eurocentric notions of beauty rooted in white femininity are at the top of that pyramid and so, you know, it's people that ascribe to, you know, often blonde hair, you know, light skin, thin body, you know, are often at the top of the pyramid and so a lot of people are seeking, are striving for those beauty norms, right? There are social and economic benefits, right? So, if you have lighter skin in many countries, you know, your potential to marry up is much higher. Even in this country, right, if you, if you look at the Black and Latinx community, people who have fairer skin do better in the job market, there's a lot of issues around hair, you know this is you know something that you've been a pioneer on for many, many years, right? And the acceptable forms of hair. And this plays out, particularly in professional workplaces. So, this isn't just an issue for low income and so these norms, you know, can put pressure on all of us and, you know, one adaptive response can be using certain kind of products, often more toxic products, which then can become, you know, the chemicals can get into our bodies where they can have long term health impact, so it's really thinking about the layers of this issue kind of from the macro of these you know kind of century old social and economic processes like colonialism, all the way down to like, you know, the epigenetic clock and how that impacts health so and you know as I've it has this as I've continued to think about this work, I've also found that thinking about it through an intersectionality lens is also really helpful in the way we talk about it, because it's not just racism, right? It's racism plus sexism, right? Plus, often classism. So, it's often the people that are impacted by multiple -isms are the ones that are kind of disproportionately impacted.

TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

I think that you raised a really, really important issue around intersectionality and intersectional identities, and now about a year ago I remember hearing you on a I think it was kind of like a webinar that was being hosted by an organization there in New York, WeACT that was focusing in on the LGBTQ+ community and thinking about beauty, chemical exposures and so on and we often don't, you know, I think that the literature in this, this space of that particular intersectional identity has been very, very sparse. And so, I'm curious if you can say a bit about the ongoing work that you're doing with WeACT and how you might be engaging with populations that have, you know, multiple marginalized identities and still being able to do this work within communities you know that are facing a number of challenges in in these spaces.

AMI ZOTA

Sure so, WeACT for environmental justice as a grassroots environmental justice organization that's based in Harlem, New York, you know, the Harlem neighborhood of New York City they've been around

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since the 1980s, the Executive Director, Peggy Shepherd, who's also one of the co-founders of WeACT was, you know, is one of the founders of the EJ movement in in this country and you know they focus a lot on things like dirty industries. And you know where, you know, kind of place based pollution but a couple of years ago, they started getting into kind of beauty products and beauty justice. And I've actually been collaborating with them on this work since I was a Professor at George Washington University, so so they were somewhat inspired by this environmental injustice of beauty piece and wanted to use that framework to really guide their advocacy and policy work in this arena. So, we teamed up to, you know, so that they could collect data about product use and racialized beauty norms in the communities that they partner with because you know they wanted data of the, data of their own, you know, that is specific to the people and communities that they that they helped to organize. So, we work together to develop a survey, we surveyed nearly 300 women and femme-identifying individuals in, in the neighborhoods that WeACT serves and those are Northern Manhattan and the South Bronx and we, you know this, our our study, so the data analysis was led by my team at Columbia and we found that racialized beauty norms motivate the use of toxic beauty products among women with women of color. So, it's some of the first evidence to really kind of characterize these amorphous norms and specifically look at how they're driving product use. So, we specifically looked at how they motivate the use of chemical hair straighteners and skin lighteners, both of which have been linked to poor health outcomes. And so, among our respondents, beauty was the leading reason for using both chemical straighteners and skin lighteners. Interestingly, we found that chemical straightener use has declined among Black women. You know, sort of in line with the rise of the natural hair movement, while skin lightener use by Asian women remain steady. So, we, you know, we looked at a fairly diverse population, which is reflective of of the neighborhoods WeACT serves and you know it, you know, kind of unpacking the chemical hair straightener use, you know, which has been associated with increased breast cancer risk. There was a new study on increased uterine cancer risk. Women who, you know, we asked women and feminine identifying individuals about both their kind of views of let's say, you know, do you think, for example, that straight hair makes you look more beautiful or more professional or younger? And while they themselves didn't have those internalized views, when we ask them, what do others think, almost everyone kind of the overwhelming majority thought that others, which you know sort of, you can think of as society's associated straight hair with, you know, being more beautiful and more professional. The professional part really stuck out and those who thought that, you know, others found straight hair to be a more professional look, were more likely to report using chemical hair straighteners, so that's kind of an example of how we're trying to kind of link these, these amorphous kind of societal norms to product use.

TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

I mean, one of the things that strikes me in the in that in that study and other, you know studies that you've done is this marrying of exposure science and you know environmental health with the social sciences. And I know that you spoke spoken on this and the and the importance of it one of the challenges I think that we both see and in others is trying to integrate those social factors in and really being able to pull in the voices from the community members themselves and so, I'm wondering in in this work, it's striking to me that you're doing work that's both quantitative and qualitative in many ways, what, what do you know, for our listeners who don't really know what those terms mean, quantitative and qualitative, you know, you're sharing the stories of the people that are using these products and that's really the qualitative element of it. Can you say a bit more even whether it's this

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study or in in other studies that you've done where you've really tried to, you know, and you know, get down and understand the actual stories of why people do or feel that they have to do certain things like lighten their skin or straighten their hair, or change how they, you know, appear can you say more about the importance of storytelling in this work?

AMI ZOTA

Yeah, thank you for the question and I think increasingly, I'm trying to work in community-driven, you know, community-based participatory research teams to advance beauty justice. So, where you're not just coming up with the research questions in the ivory tower, but you have a community grassroots organization, you know, at the table from the beginning. So, the work in New York gets done very closely with WeACT for environmental justice. I'm part of another research team that with the Taking Stock Study that's based in South Los Angeles, another EJ community where Black—environmental reproductive justice organization called Black Women for Wellness, you know, they're the co-leads of that work with Bhavna Shamasunder, Dr. Bhavna Shamasunder who's a social scientist. So I think one kind of key, you know, key point about our work that is, you know, by design these are multi-disciplinary teams that you know both include researchers and community leaders and then even within kind of the research team, we we try to have, you know not only the public health, environmental health expertise, but more of the social scientists, social science and policy expertise so that we can really ask these, you know, kind of these types of questions and use, you know, methodology that kind of cuts across multiple disciplines because I, you know, I get bored easily, I don't want to do what everybody else does, you know, I don't like to stay in my lane per say. I I really think the most interesting questions can only be addressed by working with people who don't think like you, like that's kind of where the magic happens. And so, I think especially when you have these, you know, questions of justice and inequality, you know, we have to, we have to engage community expertise, but in a way that's authentic and that you know where the research is going to you know be delivered back to the communities to help drive systemic change, right? Because they're not going to be interested in partnering if all it is generating scholarly papers.

TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

Absolutely, and in the context of, you know, thinking about, you know, the end game, the goal here of really seeking justice in this case, seeking beauty justice, I'd like to, you know, think through or how do you think through this issue, of who needs to be at the table? What voices need to be raised to really think about, you know, justice, i.e., fairness, equity, all of these things that we really think about when we think of in the context of what is it going to take to have a more just space when it comes to beauty justice. So, I guess I have a couple of questions for you one is, you know, you as you just mentioned, you were able to start thinking about ways to bring people to the table to do this work with you and so you have community members and activists and so on, but oftentimes in academia we sit at our little silo and we try to stay in our lane—for those of us who are interested in leaving our lanes like actually being able to cross over and do more work and really seeking justice, what has it taken for you? How did you start opening those doors to and really, we're knocking on those doors to try to, you know, engage with and work, work across sectors.

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AMI ZOTA

That's a yeah, that's a great question and I think one that I get from you know, I think young people or people earlier in their career you know, are really curious about this because I think that's what they want to be doing, but they don't know how what the path looks like and you know, I mean just to full disclosure it's you know, I just kind of you know kept going, it's not that I had this 10 year plan that I'm executing, I just, you know, sort of follow what's interesting, what's impactful. You know, full, full disclosure, I I you know obviously what I can get funding for has a has a big impact on you know the the work that we all do you know because of the you know the institutional environments we exist in I think working in big coalitions or consortiums are really key, right, because you have certain expertise, you are one person, you know you should not be working, you know 12 hours a day. I I you know you have to you have to have work-life balance otherwise you're going to burnout, right? So, you figure out like what, what do I bring to the table? And you know, how can I play in a bigger sandbox as a good citizen with other people who are interested in in doing something that none of us can do on our own. So, for example, so, I mean I've worked in in coalitions like Project Tender, which is really focused on neurotoxicants and you know eliminating neurotoxicants through science-based advocacy, advocacy and policy. And then over the last 6 to 8 months, I've been working with a team of largely women of color to to really help incubate a beauty justice consortium that includes you know, you know in people who have expertise and research, cultural education, organizing and advocacy and really start to have conversations about, you know, how how can we start, you know, harnessing the the power of the collective so that we, you know, we can make more progress on these issues.

TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

One of the other things that I'm I'm really interested in hearing more about too and thinking about solutions now. So, this consortium's very important right to have all of these different levels and layers of expertise at the table, but also what we were talking about before around really highlighting increasing marginalized voices. And I'm wondering if you can say a bit about Agents of Change in Environmental Justice as another strategy for solution building around, you know, this work, but also you know work that's well beyond the space.

AMI ZOTA

Yeah, so I think one of the themes of my career is really trying to understand, you know, where are the gaps, what are people not doing because I instead of trying to be competitive and you know, be better at somebody else, you know, in this, in this narrow field, I, you know, why don't I try to do something that nobody else is doing right and so a couple of years ago I just realized that, you know, if you if you think about who's talking to the media, which I do a lot of this work because I think there's a lot of power in communication and educating everyday people on these issues because you know every you know, everyone reads the Washington Post or most people do right, you know, people who use these products, scientists read the, you know these papers, but also our our policymakers, our decision makers read these papers. So, there's a lot of power there and I I started, you know, noticing that there aren't enough voices from scientist of color talking to the media, and I think that matters because it drives the narratives around these issues and it also kind of drives how we think about science and medicine and who, when we think about what a scientist looks like it, you know it typically we think of an older white man, right. And so, I started this program Agents of Change and Environmental Justice, I I work with the media org, Environmental Health News and we seek we seek to train early career

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scientist, all of whom are from systemically marginalized backgrounds in leadership, science, communication, and public engagement with science. So, we really want them to be out there with their work and it's, I mean it's been so amazing. So, we, you know, in addition to, uhm, kind of, you know, giving, you know, helping them workshop their ideas, we actually we publish their, you know we create new platforms to elevate their voices. So, through print we published first person narrative essays in English and Spanish. We have a popular podcast that seeks to humanize their paths, their challenges, their big ideas of the fellows, and you know, we're kind of always growing the program and, you know, kind of finding new ways for them to uhm, you know, sort of build careers, you know that integrate scholarship and advocacy or activism.

TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

I really think that's terrific and important in speaking to this need to really think about the role of science communication in our ability to identify solutions for public health challenges like beauty justice. And so we talked about, you know, leadership in and working across sectors. We've talked about communication and asking and filling in asking questions about and filling in the research gap spaces. Are there other strategies that you would suggest people engage in really trying to do solution-oriented work whether that's, you know, a scientist or a, you know, an activist, someone who's interested in the community. What would you say, you know, are some strategies or ways that they can find solutions in their own communities, work or partner with others, you know, are there other ways that we can start working towards solution in the beauty justice space?

AMI ZOTA

I think there's a role for everyone, one thing that everyday people can do they can they can increase their own awareness about these issues. I'm sure you've talked about using consumer tools, whether it's the Think Dirty app or Clearya or the Detox Me app, they can they can have conversations with their friends, their mothers, their you know, partners about beauty, right. I mean, I think even having like a lot of our, you know, kind of behavior on this is rooted in our childhood, right, kind of when we didn't have control over what products we use and so even just having conversations with your family members about, well, you know, kind of, you know, well, what did we use and you know, kind of like, well, why were these practices done? Or you know, or you did you know? So, like my my mom didn't put skin lighteners on, you know, on us, but colorism is a huge, you know, force in the South Asian community. So, you know, well, did she, you know, did she face pressure to do this from others? You know, so I think there's a role for conversations, you can, you know, obviously you can volunteer with organizations that are doing the grassroots work. So, for example, in WeACT has a whole working group on, you know, beauty justice, that any of their members can be part of and then there's a, you know, ways to get involved with, you know, long term policy, whether it's at the state or federal level. Part of it is just trying to understand what are the levers for change and so in the beauty justice space, I kind of think about it being policy about changing the market, putting pressure on the private sector to do a better job at self-regulating and it's cultural education and a it's about building community power and I think as scientists it's you know, helping to do research that will kind of feed into these solutions. So, what I call solutions-oriented research.

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TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

I really have loved this conversation and I'm wondering if there are any other points that you might want to share with our listeners. One of the pieces that you brought up was around policies, and so I'm wondering if there are any policies that you would like to make sure that folks are aware of.

AMI ZOTA

Yeah, I would just say, you know, if you're excited by things that you're hearing on this podcast around those these issues or that you read about on different blogs or on social media like talk about it, you know, talk about it with other people, because that's really how change happens, I mean, I can't believe tell you still how many young people I I talked to, you know, I feel like I've been doing this work for a while, you've been doing this work for a while, I just assume that more people know about these issues, and then I'm always surprised when I talk to my students at you know there isn't this long standing awareness that in my mind, I think that there is right around these issues and so I think that is really just step one is creating more awareness of, you know, the lack of regulation of chemicals in our beauty products and how communities of color are over-targeted and under-protected and so I think just talking about these issues is step one and then you know there's a lots of ways to educate yourself about, you know, kind of what laws are currently in place and what you know what of truly health protected regulatory framework could look like and then you know the last thing I'll just say is there are some interesting new laws that are kind of popping up that that seek to, you know, kind of address this, the structural drivers like natural hair discrimination that many in the Black community face, like the Crown Act, and so that's something that I'm really interested in is seeing how the Crown Act and other kind of laws like that that are seeking to prohibit race-based hair discrimination, you know, what are you know, how are those going to be implemented and what are the impacts of those type of laws going to be so, you know, I would just, you know I would end this by saying if you're, you know, if your curiosity is sparked, you know, just follow it, you know, there's lots of information out there and then just talk about it.

TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

All right, so what you're saying to us is we will continue to talk about it and share this with our community and really try to achieve equity in beauty justice by continuing the conversation, so I'm delighted to have had you here today to continue this conversation and thank you for your time.

AMI ZOTA

Thank you so much and I'm so glad that you guys have done this podcast series.

LISSAH JOHNSON

Part of the justice work and beauty justice is making space and elevating the voices, perspectives, and desires of folks from historically excluded communities and those that have suffered the most from beauty injustice and in many different aspects of Ami's work she highlights how and why this kind of collaborative interdisciplinary and innovative work must be the way forward for beauty justice.

Thanks so much 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. And please join us next time for our final episode, you'll get to hear more from the main podcast staff, our main host and the

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head of the Environmental Reproductive Justice Lab, Dr. Tamarra James-Todd, our amazing producer and doctoral candidate Marissa Chan and me. You will also get to hear from the next generation on how they think about beauty. Be well listeners and talk to you again soon.

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