

Beauty + Justice Podcast

Ep 13 Part 2: + The Next Generation with the Beauty + Justice Team

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 final episode today we're going to continue getting to know the Beauty + Justice team because we're not just scientists, we're whole people too, and an enduring theme of this podcast has been about bringing your whole self to your work, including background personal histories and experiences and how all of this can make our work richer, bring to light important directions and insights, and give us a why. So, in this episode, Dr. Tamarra James-Todd, Marissa, and I will be talking about what beauty and beauty justice means to us personally and we will also get a dose of hope for the future and hear from some kiddos from the next generation about what beauty and beauty justice means to them. So, for a final time, here's Tamarra to get the conversation started.

TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

One thing that I want to make sure that we take a moment to do because I think it's important to do this in general as scientists, increasingly, what's happening, for example in scientific journals, is this positionality statement where there's expectation that folks have reflected on how their identities inform the science that they do. I think oftentimes we talk about scientific objectivity and in a way that kind of makes us think that we somehow can successfully divorce ourselves from and who we are and from our science and that that's untrue. I think we are seeing that more and more. And I also think that that has contributed to the disconnect between scientists and you know, just regular old community folks and I want to take a moment for us to if we feel comfortable, share a little bit about ourselves and you know Lissah and Marissa, I know that you already shared a little bit about your why for this work, but to the extent that you might feel more comfortable sharing that a bit more and then we'll wrap up with a final question that I have about what is beauty to you.

But I'm originally from Kansas City, MO, moving to the East Coast, I kind of always wanted to live on the East Coast, but moving here to the Boston area was it was definitely a different kind of experience. I'm from a place of barbecue and jazz and a fairly sizable Black community. I identify as a Black cis woman, and so growing up in the 80s meant hair day was getting your hair straightened. I used to get my hair relaxed until it all fell out. When I was about nine years old and from that point on said I don't want to straighten my hair and I remember my grandmother telling me that it was, it looked unkempt like I my curly, my natural curly hair was. Not, you know, acceptable and certainly back in the late 80s, early 90s, think I was like one of the only people wearing the curly, you know, curly, you know, Afro like hair. But my friend group accepted me and that's kind of I felt fine with that and moving south to Vanderbilt University to go to school I did feel ostracized because certainly in the southern part of the US at that time, people, you know, you straightened your hair if you had Afro like hair that the other was not beautiful. And again, kind of felt not enough in in that space. And it was in landing here in Boston and taking my first environmental health class, that really brought me to a connection of wait, you mean the stuff that you know most of my community is using could potentially be harmful and being aware of a lot of health outcomes that, whether it was early puberty or more obesity or diabetes, that maybe just maybe that a part of what was contributing to that wasn't just in the food or wasn't just back then in

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the, you know, early 2000s, it was like, oh, it's all biological difference which we now know Race is a social construct so you know there was no language around beauty justice, but this idea that what could be in consumer products could be harming people and again with my particular identity, my particular set of experiences really deciding that I was going to take up that issue and turn that into a dissertation and kind of continue to do this research. Much of which for a long time was on the side it wasn't cool to be doing this work as like my main research work, so I have been looking at other things that are equally as important to me, diabetes and obesity are very important issues to me due to the passing way of my dad from complications of type one diabetes. So really harnessing and thinking about that question is important, but being able to kind of, you know, circle back to this important and critically key question that you know all those years ago wasn't something that folks were looking at been studying this now for about 20 years so I'm curious if you all want to you don't have to share your why a little bit more and maybe how your experiences as humans really bring humanity to the work that you're doing in a way that makes the science real for other people.

LISSAH JOHNSON

So, I also identify as a Black cis woman I grew up in, Sacramento, CA, which is a fairly diverse place, but often I don't know, found myself in predominantly white spaces like in school and Tamarra throughout the podcast you've shared stories about your daughter and struggles with her hair and just her perception of her hair and I love the term out hair versus down hair. I really resonated with some of her experiences, because that was that was me as well. I can remember, like a couple of times, like a school event and like my hair, just not being what I wanted it to be. And so I like, didn't didn't want to go to school, didn't want to leave the house just because of fearing what classmates would say to me or just what classmates would actually say to me about my hair when it was in its natural state and just always like wanting, wanting down hair. And my mom was very into chemical, personal care products chemicals and safety before it was trendy, like she was checking labels and cross checking it with the EWG Skin Deep database, like when I was young like before it was trendy. Knew what parabens were, knew to avoid them. So she's sort of reluctantly let me get my hair straightened. Yeah, it was always a struggle of like I know that these products are not healthy or I can like I feel the burning on my scalp when I get my hair straightened, or like when I move to getting keratin, Brazilian keratin, straightening treatments like can smell the formaldehyde and like I can feel it in my throat and my eyes and my nose watering when I get that done, but also like wanting to feel like I could, I guess, blend into the spaces that I was in for like school in predominantly white spaces or feeling I needed to conform to like a specific standard of beauty in order to blend in or just like move throughout that space without drawing undue attention to myself. Yeah, I can just remember with my mom, like several points of sort of feeling stuck of like, how I don't know what, what can we as Black women do for our hair so that we can move through the world in a way that feels comfortable but are also healthy and not having to, like, compromise our health in order to do that and sort of that tension and dealing with that and trying to get to a place where I feel, I feel like I'm not making too many sacrifices for my health, but I'm still like able to move through the world in a way that feels comfortable has always stuck in my mind and made me want to focus more on how our environment, the social environment, the things that we're exposed to, how that affects our health, because as you were talking about Tamarra, we have an idea of these different health disparities and have talked about them as being biological. But it just seems so obvious to me, growing up that it was, there's all these things in our environment that we're exposed to that are I feel like different across cultures and races and why is nobody focusing on or like looking into the way that these different

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environmental exposures, chemicals impact health and so yeah really wanted to find a way to weave that into my work and sort of address the molecular mechanisms, the biological mechanisms which have I feel like, are people are focusing on that more but seemed lacking when I was growing up.

TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

Really appreciate that Lissah, because a) just your mom's awareness of what you know could be harmful and that she was, you know, trying and but still that feeling of I want to fit in and I want to be able to move through the world comfortable confidently and that how I show up just in my natural state may need to be transformed in order to do that. This kind of going back to like our, you know, the social constructs and and such that are at play, but really saying I'm going to do something about it and looking at how differences in what we used to show up in the world may really contribute to the health disparities that we see. So, I really appreciate, thank you for sharing that.

MARISSA CHAN

I really resonate with all the stories you both shared and I am appreciative that we are in a space where this is becoming the norm. I think there's so much power behind all of our stories, so I just really appreciate sharing and I'm happy to share mine. Yeah, so I was raised in a multicultural household—my mom's side is from the Caribbean, St. Vincent and St. Lucia and my dad's side is Chinese, so I'm Afro Caribbean and Chinese and while I did have both these experiences growing up in terms of a cultural background I didn't fit into the predominantly white community where I was raised in California. That's also funny, Lissah, our shared California experience—I always forget that we're both in California until we talk about it. But that was something that was really notable for me as well in terms of not fitting in with my schoolmates and my classmates, there would always be comments either both and where I would only get compliments when I straighten my hair or folks would want to touch my curly hair. So, kind of both these sides of things and that led me to chemically relaxing my hair when I was probably 13, I kept relaxing my hair until I went to undergrad, where I kept straightening my hair with heat, still trying to fit into certain spaces and places and feel comfortable navigating that all and in undergrad was the first time I actually learned about this work. It was through a New Yorker article about Dr. Tyrone Hayes, and it was a really interesting article that weaved together his experiences as a Black scientist as well as my first introduction to endocrine disrupting chemicals, which is kind of now a cornerstone of all of my work. For a while, that article became my answer to when people ask the question of why, like, why are you in this work? I'm like ohh I learned about this. And it was fascinating, but it also really angered me, it really angered me because no one, to my knowledge, was really speaking about this when we're finding these disparities in terms of exposure as well as health outcomes and really building this narrative in terms of who's exposed, and that's actually how it came across your work, Tamarra. I found you in undergrad one of your papers from your dissertation was one of my first instances where I'm like ohh someone's actually actively doing this work and so that's kind of how I ended up in this space. But it took until after undergrad I worked at a Black women's reproductive justice organization, Black Women for Wellness in South LA, and it took really being in that space, and also navigating being biracial, to recognize that my why to why I'm really in this work is based on my hair related experiences, which are also shared experiences as we're seeing amongst the Black community. So that's kind of how I really came into this space I have really appreciated the opportunity to like share these experiences I think it makes a lot of our work richer and I do think there is this narrative in research that we have to be divorced from the topic and that makes us objective and better scientists. But I think a lot of the work

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that we're doing is actively rejecting that narrative and as Lissah and I were recently talking about, this whole idea of disruptive science, which I really appreciated that that phrase and so I think that's kind of what we're doing in this space through sharing our stories as well as the work we're doing, we are actively engaging in disruptive science.

TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

I love that. I love that it kind of reminds me of one of our earlier podcast episodes on beauty liberation and this idea and I think what we're all talking about is our experiences can help inform the design of better studies. Because when you are outside of a community, you might not know the questions that are really relevant and key to being able to understand exposures that are occurring within a community. And it does speak to the partnerships, right, like we need to partner with with other folks still to really do, you know, our best at being able to address this. But I remember when I first started doing this work and I was saying that the word looking at hair products and at the time was looking at breast cancer risk and somebody was like, oh, like, shampoo, conditioner why would that matter, you just rinse that out. And I was like I'm not talking about shampoo and conditioner, that's not something that, you know, it's true, like we use it, but like we, you know, we also use other maintenance-based products on a much more frequent basis, repeatedly and that you know, and oftentimes those are things that are going to sit on our scalp for longer and and have more impact. But I think that that's also why it's going to be very, very important and powerful as we see other scientists of color come to the table asking questions about things like what is in nail polish or what it's happening inside nail salons and you know folks who are from those communities being able to ask key questions that other people may not know anything about or you know if if somebody is really interested in understanding skin lighteners and you know that's a part of their community experience, being able to ask the questions in ways in which it really gets to how people show up in the world, how they use these things every day and what impact that might have on health and I mean, those are just examples, but that's not so different than when the scientist is like you know ohh let's look at physical activity and they're like an avid person who enjoys running or, you know, or let's look at, you know, certain dietary patterns and they're really, you know, showing up in the world. They really are concerned about diet. The reality is that we all bring our experiences to the table and our identities to the table. And the more that we're aware of that the better our science can truly be. So, I want to end with the final question, you know, how do you guys define beauty? And what does beauty justice mean to you?

MARISSA CHAN

It's interesting because we've been asking that question over every interview and I feel like every time you ask I think like what, what are my definitions? It's still, I think it's constantly evolving, but for me I would say beauty, I don't know if I have really a definition, but for me it's rooted in confidence and comfort and in acceptance. And so, I think what is beautiful to me is when people get to act, look and just truly be who they want to be without concerns about outside or internal pressures from all these different avenues. And beauty justice the definition that is also something we've been chatting about previously, and I really think right now my definition has been really inspired by Tamara Gilkes Borr's episode, really focusing on the cost, and I think that's a really great way to look at it. So, I have been thinking of beauty justice right now as work that really aims to break down system structures as well as policies that have resulted in communities of color, but notably Black folks experiencing the social, the

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financial and economic as well as the physical cost of beauty and the movement towards community driven solutions. So, that is a working definition, but that's kind of where I'm at right now.

LISSAH JOHNSON

Yeah, that is a big question and I love getting to hear the different perspectives from people that have been on the podcast. And similarly to Marissa, have each time thought like, I wonder what my definition would be. And I think I really love what Dr. Blair Wylie, I believe said about just the diversity of beauty within humanity, and I think that my definition is also evolving in that, yeah, I've just come to see that beauty is more of an inherent an inherent trait in each of us and it's in the realizing, the noticing, the accepting in each of us I think it's really beautiful when we like tap into or find that inherent beauty within ourselves and allow that to shine through and are content with our, what makes us beautiful, our own version of beauty. I don't think there's one definition or like one standard or one like archetype of what's beautiful. And I love Marissa's definition of beauty justice, so I'm going to go with that.

TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

Marissa has been crafting that definition.

LISSAH JOHNSON

Yeah, it was great—no notes!

TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

I love it. I love it. I have been really, as you said, listening to different definitions of beauty, even at the beginning, right? We started this journey with asking adults how they defined beauty and I for a moment maybe this was a few weeks ago it was actually a pastor of a church I overheard a sermon that said something to this point that only humanity could take something that is intended to be absolutely beautiful in that, you know, we have people of different skin tones, hair textures, eye colors, you know, sizes, shapes, all of this and that by definition is beautiful like if you look at the totality, as you just said, you know Lissah what Blair highlighted of humanity and is inherently beautiful and only humanity could turn that thing that is actually beautiful into an actual weapon. And I think what beauty justice is, first, Marissa I love your definition and I I would, I would also like I would go with that, but it's also, I think, taking away the weapon so that we can, you know, see again, rethink again that you know what is actually, what is truly beautiful, and it's all of us it's us sitting on this call, it's us doing this work in collaboration with other folks who have different identities, different shapes, sizes, you know, skin colors, hair types, all those things and ways of thinking because when we show up in the world it also is like what we bring to the table that that, that, that indeed, sorry, that indeed is truly beautiful and so as we close out, we want to share with you the voices of the future. So, you'll hear in just a few minutes some voices of kiddos who have answered what is beauty, what does beauty mean to them.

KIDDO 1

Well, I think my hair is beautiful because there's not just one way to style it. You can cornrow it, you can braid it, you can straighten it or just keep it in its natural form. No matter what you do with your hair, it will always be beautiful. That's what makes my hair the most beautiful.

KIDDO 2

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That we all have crowns, and we can change them every day.

KIDDO 3

One thing I love about my hair is that I can do different styles with it. I also love that my curls show my ethnicity because I like to display my Blackness. I like when people give me compliments, it makes me feel better about my hair. I like when I get my hair done it also makes me feel like a new person with a new personality.

KIDDO 4

I think that beauty is a bit of a far off construct that people are and come up with to give them a reason to strive to materialistic satisfaction like cosmetic surgery, lip injections, Botox, things like that. I don't know when as a society, people collectively decided like this is what makes someone beautiful or not. So, I feel like being beautiful is a lot more than just saying someone's beautiful. I think it's a feeling.

KIDDO 5

Beauty is love. It's platonic love, romantic love, friendship, self love. When you feel beautiful, you feel loved. Love is important because love is what makes us feel beautiful.

KIDDO 6 + MOM

Mom: What other words would you describe beauty, how do you know...

Kiddo: Nice!

Mom: Ohhh okay, nice.

Kiddo: Kind! Respectful and just being yourself!

KIDDO 7 + MOM

Kiddo: I can tell when something or someone is beautiful, when they act kind, generous, and a little sassy too. Because some people who are beautiful like showing off a little, to actually show they are beautiful.

Mom: Wow, a little sassy, huh? And is there anything else you would like to add?

Kiddo: If you were me, what would you think?

Mom: Ohh you want to ask the question back to the audience?

Kiddo: Yep I doo!

TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

On that note, thank you so much and that's a wrap for us. We're excited that you joined us on this journey and we hope that you'll continue to contribute to this journey by sharing your beauty, your light and shining the light of your voice and the power that you have towards this issue and other injustices in the world to make the world a more beautiful place.

LISSAH JOHNSON

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So listeners, what is beauty and beauty justice mean? Where do you see yourself within the beauty justice movement? Has that changed since the beginning of this podcast? We've heard from so many different people working in all different areas of beauty justice. Maybe you've thought about beauty in a new, deeper, more personal or more critical way. And if you're anything like me, maybe you've gone through a transformation over the course of this podcast, but at the very least we hope you've seen how beauty is so much more than skin deep and so much vaster and more inclusive than the narrow standards that are often upheld. This podcast series is really meant to be a starting place for a continuing conversation, and we hope that you're able to see yourself within the movement and as part of the solution. Now let's keep the conversation going—these episodes will always be here for you to revisit and share with friends, family and colleagues, and we'd also love to hear what you learned from the podcast or how it impacted you so please feel free to reach out to the team to share and as always, we appreciate you leaving a rating and review wherever you listen. Be well, listeners and it's been an honor going on this journey with you.

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