

Beauty + Justice Podcast
EP1: + A Little History on Black Hair & Diversity

LISSAH JOHNSON

You're listening to the Beauty Plus 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 of beauty for everyone. These conversations are led by Doctor Tamara 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, Lisa Johnson, a PhD candidate at Harvard Chan.

Hey listeners, thanks for tuning into our very first episode. Today we'll be diving into some history and cultural context, specifically around Black hair, told by one of the leading scholars in this space.

LORI THARPS

We become enlightened when we share information because intersectionality is real because when you bring forward the minds and brains of people of diverse backgrounds, you become better, faster problem solvers.

LISSAH JOHNSON

That was Lori Tharps, our featured guest for today. She's a talented author and storyteller whose work focuses on race, identity, diversity, and culture. She is perhaps best known for the book she coauthored with Ayana Byrd called *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* and today on the podcast will be sharing some of her personal history and experience around Black hair and what led her to this work. She also has a lot of wisdom for us about the way forward for the beauty justice movement. Also, as a note before I pass it to Dr. James-Todd to get the conversation started—we'll have an extended version of this episode on our lab's website, which is linked in the episode bio, where you can hear more about Lori's journey to this field and some little-known history about diversity in America. Now let's get the conversation started.

TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

All right, so thank you again Lori for coming and joining us today. Really excited to have you here and I would love for you to take a moment out to self-introduce and let folks know I mean so many of us already know you and your work but would love to hear how you describe yourself in your own work.

LORI THARPS

Sure, well thank you for having me. It's very much a pleasure, my pleasure to be here. So, my name is Lori Tharps and I identify as a storyteller, an author, and an educator. And I guess you could say I consider myself like a creative activist because everything that I do with my work is done in the spirit of helping the world do better with issues of race and identity, and justice around the identity of our fellow humans.

TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

I love that.

Can you kind of tell us more about how you and Ayana Byrd decided to write *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America*. Like what led to that, and it was written 20 years ago—how has that

journey as far as kind of watching how that book kind of plays out you know over and over again over the last couple of decades.

LORI THARPS

Hair Story actually started out as my master's thesis in Graduate School, and really, you know, I went to Columbia journalism school and our thesis was supposed to be a long form article that we would research and write over the course of a year. And you know, the only requirement was that it was a topic that we knew would keep us interested for an entire year. I mean, that was the warning, you know, make sure you pick something that you really want to delve into and honestly, to this day I don't know what made me choose Black hair because in reality I have like 6 other topics that my advisor approved. But I was such a flake I would come up with this idea, write up a proposal, get the approval and then be like, yeah, I don't really want to do that. And by the time I came up with the idea of Black hair, my advisor was ready to kill me because I had changed my mind so many times up and I think she was a little irritated and she looked at my topic of Black hair and thought this is not worthy of a thesis. This is maybe a personal essay, but I don't see how this is—you're going to fail because your thesis was pretty much the majority of your grade, and it was a pass/fail, so there wasn't a lot of leeway there, wasn't a lot of wiggle room. All I know is that I knew I wanted to write about culture and race and I knew I wanted to have some personal connections for me so that I would be interested and I thought about the I almost feel like this was a divine notion because there was nothing significant going on with me and my hair when I was a 26 year old grad student in New York City, I had my hair relaxed like I had my whole entire life. I never had any major problems with my hair in the sense that I kept it straight and in a ponytail. That was it. It never was an issue. It was never a statement piece. It was more like look hair, you stay on my head, I'm good that was it. And so, there were a few incidents that were interesting, like I was an exchange student in Morocco. So, when I was 17 and my host family, in my host family, I had eight sisters and they all spoke Arabic. I don't speak Arabic and so it was a very quiet and lonely experience at first and then one night all of the sisters and a few female cousins, came over and locked themselves in a room. And I didn't know what was going on because I never know what's going on 'cause I didn't speak Arabic, but there was something happening and I peeked in the room and they were all giving each other relaxers, and it was like hair night at the house, and I was like--I know what's going on like I get this. This is not so foreign that I cannot understand what's happening it was Revlon. It was the same stuff we used at home. I mean it was so familiar and it was literally a turning point for me where I had found myself so disconnected from the family and we didn't have any way to communicate. After hair night, it was like all bets were off. We were all like best friends and it was like we breached this wall. This divide of culture through our hair so that experience really sat with me for, it was like 10 years later that I'm in grad school and as well as a couple of negative experiences just where people made fun of me. Or you know, the way I felt when I had gotten my hair cut really short when I was younger and people thought I was a boy and things like that where I realized that even though I, for the most part, ignored my hair and just kept it kind of out of the way and in the background, it still managed to make a significant impact in my life and I think that feeling was what made me think--what if I research Black hair and again to me it feels like it had to have been divine intervention because I had never read a book about Black hair, I had never seen hair discussed in any kind of academic way or historical way, mostly because there's books did not exist before Hair Story existed, so I was I was setting myself up clearly for a journalistic assignment. I wasn't planning on writing a book. Turned the thesis in, my advisor invited me to her home for tea, she was British, so having me come over for tea

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was a big thing. And the fact that she invited me to her home and not her office was also a big thing and what she wanted to do was apologize to me for disparaging my idea in the beginning and to tell me how wonderful this thesis was that she had photocopied it and sent it to a friend who was in the process of adopting a child, a Black child, and then she told me this had to be turned into a book.

TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

Wow. A one-eighty.

LORI THARPS

And I was like wow wow wow. I mean, I was just amazed. But I was also like overwhelmed because I was about to graduate, I needed a job, I had just thrown away and I had quit a very good job in PR to go to journalism school. So, the idea of writing a book was like telling somebody they should go ride an elephant in Central Park. I was like, sounds fun, but wouldn't even know where to begin so, okay. But then I met Ayana Byrd when we were both working at Vibe magazine like a year and a half later, and she had also written her undergraduate thesis on the kind of sociological implications of Black hair and beauty ideals for women, and the person who hired us both said to us one night it was like 3:00 o'clock in the morning we were there doing fact checking an issue and he wandered over and said, do you guys know that you both have some weird fascination with Black hair you both like written papers about it or something? And so we started talking and we found out that both of us had been encouraged to write a book about the work we had done, and from there we decided hey, even though we had never written a book before and neither one of us had even written like a cover story or a long feature or story and had it published, we said, well, let's write this book then and we kind of combined our two research background, our research papers and wrote a proposal, got an agent, and that's how hair story was born. And surprisingly, it sold rather quickly considering the year the book came out in 2001 so it's like 2000 that it sold it. It wasn't like there was a big clamor or a big call for books about Black hair, and ironically, our agent had told us that we weren't the first person we weren't the first people to propose a book about Black hair, we were just the first persons to finish the proposal like people had had this idea before, it just had never been seen through to completion, so that was in 2001, and it was we were really proud of the book. But we say that the book was like 10 years before its time before America was ready to really engage with this conversation about hair and what's more in the early 2000s like in 2004, 2005, the green movement kind of started, which launched the natural hair movement, which was huge. And also, when we finished writing hair story, the Internet was just beginning to become a thing which sounds crazy to us now, but we didn't have the Internet to do any research to talk to people via emails. We did everything like the old-fashioned way for hair story. So in 2013 we decided that we needed to update the book because we needed to incorporate the significance of both the Internet, which changed the way Black women could get information as well as products for their hair and created an entire new industry of Black hair YouTube video stars if you will and Black hair bloggers, but also the natural hair movement, which was again, it's like a revolution in Black hair culture that impacted mainstream society impacted the beauty industry massively impacted the cosmetic industry impacted the big box store economy massively. So, in 2014 the updated version came out where we addressed those two issues and honestly it wouldn't surprise me if we do a third addition because now the conversation, it's not that it has shifted, but the fact that the Crown Act has passed in many states, outlawing hair discrimination, which kind of undergirds the entirety of the history of Black hair in America, it almost seems that there should be a new chapter added that just that talks about legislation and hair

discrimination. Especially now you know, as I'm out of the United States. But you know, the United Kingdom also has a similar law that they have passed that's out that bans hair discrimination or hair-based discrimination. I should say. So, this journey has been incredible, and I always say that again, if you had told 26-year-old me that this book that I was writing that was based on my thesis would be the kind of cornerstone of my career, I would have laughed. I would have never thought and it's funny because my husband, who is a Spanish man, you know, born and raised outside of the United States from the very beginning. He told me this book was going to be a classic and that it was going to be my life's work and I was like you're funny, this is going to be a little book. Nobody gonna care, but I'm going to be proud of it, but it's going to disappear. Nobody gonna be talking about it. And here I am literally 20 years later I'm still very much talking about it, and you asked how it has affected my other work. Hair story literally set the stage for me to one look at African American culture and in much broader and more complex way, but it also taught me this idea that having conversations about race, identity, and culture that are based around kind of pedestrian, really basic things that anybody can connect with like hair, like food, like family dynamics is the best way to engage a diverse population over an issue more so than politics, legal issues, even you know issues of education or policy but that like automatically is going to bring contention and tension to the air, and people are going to be divided, whereas if the conversation begins about hair you can have you can you can you can cover the same, you know information but in a different way that's less threatening and more engaging, and really, I think move the needle on race relations. And yeah, on race relations and justice and community that that you can't when you're looking at more big picture items, so having my first big book being about hair really set the tone for how I would approach all of my other books and projects about you know, identity and race and things like that.

TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

I mean, I think you're spot on this idea that you know. I mean, I won't even just say the Black community, but certainly for this context of this book, like hair really connects these as you said that these subject matters that that may, particularly, you know, as a scientist, I think sometimes we you know can get very bogged down in our methods or whatever, but we kind of pull it back out to something like hair or family or you know, as you as you said, I think it's powerful. I had no idea. I should have known this that we share Columbia also Columbia University, also in common so you know and I just I'm going to take you back to like roughly the year 2000. So, I started in 2002 as a graduate student at Columbia and when I came in knowing exactly what I wanted to study, I wanted to study the impact of hair product chemicals in Black hair care products and their impacts on women's health. Specifically looking at reproductive health. And as you said, the Internet was just beginning. I mean, you know tried to look up the way back version of PubMed or whatever it was back then and and hardly anything, I ran across like a handful of articles, one of which was a study of you know, young children who as Black people you know that there's sometimes hair day or whatever. Like you know, we sit down and get our hair done, so these are these are little ones that were getting their hair done by their parents and but had developed breast and pubic hair and it turned out these products that were being used that were commercially available on the shelf, thought to be safe, contain different forms of estrogen. Once that usage stopped, precocious puberty ceased and I was hooked, I was hooked and yet I could not find anything Lori, to like really look at this. No one was really asking these questions about the impact of here, let alone the question of like why? Which is really the underpinnings of my work the one place that I could find, and I was so excited I don't even know where which bookstore I'd gone to you know, in

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in New York. But I ran across your book. And and was like someone has actually done so much of this work of understanding the social, historical, business, and because that was something as an epidemiologist, I hadn't even thought about, but just the money that's involved in this industry, right? Like I was, I was, very, I was struck. By this being a multibillion-dollar industry and and you know, kind of where do we go from here?

LISSAH JOHNSON

For so many people whose identity has been othered or marginalized—what is thought of as personal becomes political. And as Lori and Tamarra just described what is considered acceptable hair is a perfect example of this.

In the next part of the conversation, Lori makes a really interesting connection between the importance of centering diversity and intersectionality within the beauty justice movement. So, let's get back to the conversation!

TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

What do you think is kind of the way forward in changing our attitudes and beliefs around Black hair and beauty?

LORI THARPS

Well, it's interesting because I feel like I'm going to go back to where I started from the reason that I like preach the gospel of diversity, I'm gonna write that—down because I never said that, but I'm preaching the gospel of, I'm at that age where if I don't write things down, they just slip out of my head, preach the gospel of diversity. Alright, so I preach the gospel of diversity, not because I think rainbows are pretty, or because I think there's going to be a brown race that saves us all. I preach the Gospel of diversity because we become enlightened when we share information, because intersectionality is real. Because when you bring forward the minds and brains of people of diverse backgrounds, you become better, faster problem solvers. That's what I mean by the gospel of diversity. I again, I'm not saying like, oh my God, your dinner is going to be so good you'll be spicy. Right, no, I'm talking about on a much, I mean, sure, your dinner might be really good, great potluck, but really, really, I'm talking about on a much bigger scale of how much more we could get accomplished if we worked together and brought our own unique backgrounds and our whole selves to the table. So that's what I mean and that's been proven on, you know, Wall Street, Main Street, whatever, all the streets have proven that you know diverse teams are more productive and again, that productive means more productive problem solving. Which leads to a better bottom line if you're looking at it from a financial standpoint, but that can be extrapolated to you know how you have a better functioning neighborhood, how you have a better functioning, you know family structure. How you have a better functioning school system is when you you know bring forth the the best of a diverse group. So, when we talk about like beauty justice, I feel like beauty justice comes from this continuously intersectional approach to problem solving. This continuously diverse you know, bringing diverse voices to the table because we only recognize that there is injustice when we have these diverse voices bringing their experiences to the table. And I think we're seeing that in so many different ways like we're seeing beauty justice, for example, in your work, like on what you're doing, you know the fact that you're saying, hey, wait a minute, let's look at what's happening with these particular hair products targeted to these women. You can also look at people who were doing

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similar research on bleaching products, right? Like look at all of the research that is now being done about the chemical ingredients in bleaching creams and lightening creams, what's what's the physical and emotional and medical cost to, you know, buying into that system, there's a lot of work being done now fighting colorism and of course then you have the kind of tangential fights that go along with that it's not just a beauty fight, it is a health care. I mean, what bleaching creams do to the human body is criminal and it's very visible from day 4. I won't say day 1 because day 1 I'm so light I'm so great but you know by day four your skin is so damaged that it's turned red and splotchy or whatever else. And you know, internally horrible things are happening and then you have a legal fight. You know against these companies that are making these products that have been banned in some places and not in others. So, I think the way forward is a continuation of very visible, maybe social media campaigns, a very visible social campaign that is really around beauty and recognizing that you know all shades are pretty all shades are beautiful, that kind of thing. And then influenced by a scientific you know or scientific or medical community getting involved and starting their own campaign or investigations and publicizing the damaging the evidence that these particular beauty products, for example what kind of damage they do to the human body, to the environment and then then it becomes an environmental issue, right? And then you have environmentalists complaining and protesting and bringing attention to what these chemicals are doing to our water supply to our air supply, for example, and then hopefully it gets to the business. There have been. Uhm, successful campaigns against certain companies. Beauty companies for their support of, for example, a product that creates a company that sells lightening creams. For example, you know, a boycott protest or something like that and then like it kind of comes full circle. And that's when you get justice. So I really believe that the way forward is an intersectional approach to these issues, because like my only like problem, but my only let's see concern about labeling something beauty justice is that people will not realize that it has so many facets to it. If they hear beauty justice, it's like oh you mean you can't afford your makeup and she can or something like that as opposed to the truly multifaceted impact that things like makeups and hair products and you know diet culture. I mean that's all comes in the realm of beauty justice, in my opinion, if we put all these things under one a big umbrella and we all do our part then we can see beauty, justice that really spreads across all of these different components of women's body and how they are judged and how they were used and how they are abused and how they were valued so yeah, that's what I think is the way forward.

TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

That's really powerful. I really resonate with the point that you're making around you know how do we how do we recognize or know when we've kind of reached, you know, equity, like when we have, you know, justice has been served essentially and just understanding the importance of a multi-pronged approach that also recognizes the power of this kind of multiple movements happening at once that really speak to holistically about our bodies. We're not just our hair or just the size of our body or just the color of our skin we're, you know it's intersectional it's all of these things and more and so I love that. I am also recognizing that we're running out of time and is there anything else you wanted to make sure that our listeners hear about?

LORI THARPS

I feel like we too often make these conversations about women when men, particularly Black men, have been subjected to the same damaging messaging about the inadequacy, ugliness, inappropriateness of

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our hair such that they too have changed their behaviors and grooming habits based on this false belief that there is something inherently wrong with their hair. These systems that taught us, and that reinforced the idea that we can't get ahead that we aren't appropriate for public viewing that we aren't attractive. That is also true for men. I just want that to be in the backs of people's minds as they're thinking about these issues of beauty justice, because men are also, it's not even susceptible, men are also reeling with and having to unpack what it means to be OK with their bodies the way they were born it's it's heartbreaking and it's even more heartbreaking because we just don't expect that we don't realize that those conversations are happening. But why wouldn't they be happening? Black men have Black mothers who had Black mothers who had Black fathers who were, you know, raised from the same White supremacist nation, right? So, and globally the colonialism that happened that taught people the world over that if they were too dark, they weren't worthy. Just something that we need to be aware of that it's not just a women's issue

TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

It's very powerful and in my little anecdotal story is in doing my research. I had to do focus groups and that very topic came up. Now almost 20 years ago where we're interviewing all of these women. And the question was by the men, the husbands and sons of you know, these individuals are why aren't you interviewing us? They want to know our stories, and you know, as the student at the time, like actually I mean I, I would love to know your story I would, but I you know this is about women. This is not you know, and not recognizing the importance of being inclusive and also just gender as a, you know, like more holistically, we've done a fairly terrible job of understanding, you know, the role of gender and playing out of you know this beauty justice, environmental exposure issue, so I appreciate that that that encouragement to you know not only push forward with the work that all of us are doing, but to really be more inclusive in that work.

LORI THARPS

it's just something that we need to be aware that it's not just a women's issue, so.

TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

Absolutely it's not, and I am grateful that I'm starting to see the research in this area and start to take hold in and and others stepping up to the plate to start to look at this and its importance or relevance to to health broadly within the other half of our population. So, but no, you know again, I'm so grateful that you joined us today. Thank you so much and have a good evening and I will see you later.

LORI THARPS

You're welcome, thank you.

LISSAH JOHNSON

Lori demonstrated that speaking our truths through telling stories, especially about the things that cut across different communities and cultures, is an important part of healing and justice work. She also highlighted that diversity is crucial. This conversation raised some important questions like how do the limited narratives around diversity and the limited representation of different identities in mainstream culture impact our ability to imagine a more just and equitable future of beauty for everyone? One thing

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is clear, the path forward will require an intersectional approach, and recognition of the ways that the multiple social identities that we inhabit impact our experience of injustice. It's going to take folks from diverse disciplines and backgrounds working together to achieve inclusive and lasting beauty justice. Thank you all so much for tuning in to this episode of Beauty Plus Justice. We hope that Lori's words reminded you of the importance of your unique story and identity. Be well and join us next time as we dive into the cost of beauty and justice with Tamara Gilkes Borr from the Economist. This episode was produced and edited by Marissa Chan, Lissah Johnson and Felicia Heykoop with assistance from Ilkiana Chowdhury-Paulino. We received funding from the Environmental Defense Fund.