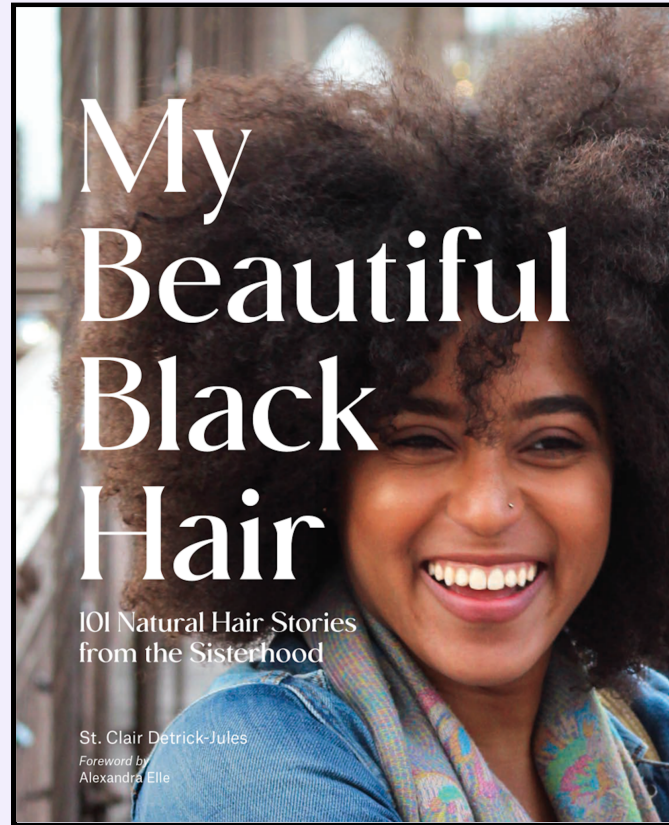


A Guide to Discussing *My Beautiful Black Hair*



Discussion Questions

1. *My Beautiful Black Hair* includes first-person narratives from 101 Black women with natural hair. What is gained from this format? Why is it important for Black women to be able to share their stories?
2. To what extent does our exterior — including our hair — define us? Is it possible for us to create an identity that is disconnected from our exterior? Describe the different ways in which the women in *My Beautiful Black Hair* see their hair in relation to their identity.
3. To what extent are we trapped in our identities? To what extent are we liberated by our identities? How much of our identity is interior versus exterior?

4. What kinds of cultural, racial, and structural barriers hindered many of the women in *My Beautiful Black Hair* from immediately embracing their natural hair?
5. How does global anti-Blackness play a role in the perception and treatment of Afrocentric hairstyles? How is discrimination against Black hair a stand-in for anti-Blackness?
6. How can the women of *My Beautiful Black Hair* help us redefine our perception of Black hair? How does this book stand in contrast to other portrayals of Black hair in the media?
7. Consider the context in which *My Beautiful Black Hair* was created: St. Clair's younger sister was bullied by her white classmates into hating her

afro, thus prompting St. Clair to create this book. To what negative experiences are young Black girls subjected, and how can we all play our role in supporting these girls?

8. How do the photographs in *My Beautiful Black Hair* offer a sense of representation, belonging, and community to Black women and girls? Why is this important? How can we all do our part to create more representation?

9. According to a recent study¹ by Dove, Black women's hair is 3.4 times more likely to be perceived as unprofessional. How do the women of *My Beautiful Black Hair* shatter these stereotypes? Why is this critically important?

¹ https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5edc69fd622c36173f56651f/t/5edeaa2fe5ddef345e087361/1591650865168/Dove_research_brochure2020_FINAL3.pdf

10. Of the eight chapters — “The Big Chop” / Going Natural, Embracing Blackness, Hair as Identity, Self-Love / Self-Discovery, Sisterhood, Mothers and Daughters, White Spaces, and Liberation — to which chapter did you relate most deeply?
11. How can the letters to Khloe act, by extension, as letters to all young Black girls? Why are such letters necessary — especially coming from Black women who were once in their shoes?
12. What lessons can *My Beautiful Black Hair* teach us outside of the realm of hair? How are we forced to reconsider notions of identity, family, beauty, (self-) love, and community care?
13. The CROWN (Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair) Act, which has been passed in several states and is on the docket in

others, prohibits discrimination against Afrocentric hair textures and styles in the workplace and public schools. How might this act impact the lives of the women in the book? How can everyone — including non-Black people — benefit from this form of justice? Why is the law necessary in the first place, and why did it take so long for the legal system to step in? Finally, will the law actually stop daily acts of hair discrimination?

14. Black women spend more money on hair care-related items than any other demographic; many Black hair care products are also found to be “toxic, containing chemicals that are carcinogenic, linked to hormone disorders, reproductive health challenges, and contributing to obesity rates.”² Looking at Black hair through this lens, how can the

² <https://bwwia.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/One-Hair-Story-Final-small-file-size-3142016.pdf>

de-stigmatization of natural hair contribute to economic equity and health justice for Black women?

15. For Black women: Through these natural hair stories, we see many Black women who have internalized the white supremacist belief that straight hair is better than curly, kinky hair. How can we, as a community, work to rid ourselves and others of these negative belief systems?

16. For allies: Consider the difference between diversity (the presence of differences within a group) and equity (the consistent redistribution of power and resources to those who have been marginalized). How can non-Black allies work to create a society that is not only diverse, but also equitable? How does hair factor into this equation?

17. For everyone: Keeping in mind that our stories are our expertise, what personal stories do we, as individuals, want to share with the world? What do others have to gain by hearing our stories?

Quotes to Discuss

32 short, thought-provoking excerpts from women in *My Beautiful Black Hair*

1. “I hope that every Black girl knows that whatever beauty she sees in other people is already in her as well, and that her hair is the representation of all of her ancestors and all of the beautiful people that came before her, and it’s something she should be very proud of.” (Page 31)

— Catherine Lantigua

2. “[H]aving natural hair is like planting a flower: You can’t just plant the flower and expect it to grow and stay healthy on its own. You have to water it and nurture it.” (Page 35)

— Alexis Taylor

3. “[A]ll it took was a little bit of encouragement for me to love my natural hair. So now I like to pass that positivity along. For example, I had a class with a girl who always came in wearing wigs for the first half of the semester, and then one day she came in with her natural hair. As soon as I saw her, I was like, ‘Oh my gosh, I love your hair.’ And I don’t know if my compliment encouraged her to keep it that way, but after that I only ever saw her with natural hair.” (Page 46)

— Ebony Farmer-Mangum

4. “A person could look at me and think I wear my hair like this because I’m a soul sister who’s woke and ‘for the culture.’ And I’m not against that at all, but that’s not *why* I went natural. I was getting relaxers, bleaching my hair, dyeing it, and a bunch of other stuff that I had no business doing. Eventually it caught up with me, and I was like, *OK, either I have to stop doing this cold turkey, or I’m going to be bald.*” (Page 50)

— Giovanna Harris

5. “We have a wounded history. But without that wounded history, we wouldn’t have our resilience.... My look is bound to disrupt some things. But I’m OK with that disruption. I intentionally—whether it be an interview or a new job—wear my hair as big as possible. Just so people are aware, like, ‘Yeah, she’s Black, undoubtedly.’ And that’s how I wanna be recognized, like my Blackness is not to be compromised or watered down for anybody.” (Page 57)

— Keyla Ynoa

6. “I was getting relaxers so often that I was essentially erasing my Blackness. Going natural meant that I had to fully accept my Blackness, because this hair texture is something that you associate with being Black.” (Page 60)

— Francesca Polanco

7. “Every morning when you wake up, your hair has something new to tell you. Your hair is a part of you, so let it be a part of your spirit too.” (Page 62)

— Hassiet Asberom

8. “I found that the consciousness that came with feminism sometimes clashed in the context of Black liberation, but I knew I couldn’t make a choice. I was both: Black and female. And both parts of me had to be liberated from the chains of oppression, both psychologically and spiritually.” (Page 65)

— Elise Bryant

9. “As African Americans, we’ve created our *own* culture, and I’m very proud of this culture that we’ve created in the midst of so much chaos and oppression. But I just think about how we could’ve had so much more if we weren’t completely stripped from all forms of African culture—including our hair traditions.” (Page 66)

— Asha Hadiya

10. “Some Dominicans have this idea that the Dominican Republic is a ‘white’ country when, in reality, there’s Blackness embedded within our DNA. So when I started embracing my short, curly hair, there was a lot of shame involved because my family wasn’t supportive of it. I had to unlearn the idea that kinky, curly hair is dirty and not as beautiful as straight hair. And the process of unlearning this was difficult, but it helped me emerge stronger and helped me grow and advocate for myself and for my natural hair, and for autonomy with my body in general.” (Page 71)

— Perla Montas

11. “As I go through my twenties, I find myself having even more pride in who I am as a Black woman. My foundation is becoming more unshakeable. Even though it’s discouraging to see racism, I would never change who I am or the community I belong to. Because at the end of the day, the issue stands with the system—it’s never really about who I am as a Black person and as a woman. If people participate in misogynoir, I can’t control that; I can only control who I allow in my space and where I put my energy. So I only spend time with people who encourage me and lift up all parts of me—including my hair.” (Page 72)

— Phylicia A. Cotton

12. “In the seventh grade, I decided to wear my hair in an afro and everybody laughed at me. And I think that if you’re an aware woman of color in this world, that’s kind of your thing, whether you like it or not: You go through this world making people react or making them think or provoking them. Even if you’re not doing anything. Even if you’re just breathing. Which can be great. It can also be an incredible burden. But since when has being Black in America not been a burden?” (Page 87)

— Brigid Carmichael

13. “There’s just been so much in my life—and I’m sure in other people’s lives, as well—that’s up in the air, so much that’s unknown. But I like when I can depend on something. And my locs have given me that security I was looking for. Because for the past six years, I’ve woken up and they’ve been here with me. I don’t even

think of my hair in a way that's separate from me now like I used to; it's really just an extension of myself. Each strand is so important to me." (Page 88)

— Elana Nelson

14. "When I enter a room, my hair speaks for itself. It speaks about who I am, about my values, about how I decide to portray myself to the world." (Page 98)

— Danyeli Rodriguez Del Orbe

15. "When I saw it fall on the floor, I cried. But I think the best way to explain my haircut was that I literally felt free. I felt like I could focus on something else other than my hair. The veil was lifted. I finally had to deal with the things that my hair was protecting me from, like all my insecurities, and the thoughts of *Will people still compliment me even when I don't have my big hair anymore?* I felt like my relationship with my hair changed because it wasn't big anymore. I learned to love my hair again from a different perspective, like not using it as a veil, but instead using it as a crown." (Page 102)

— Micailah Guthrie

16. "It's OK to have moments where you don't feel beautiful. But you don't stay in those places. You pick yourself up, you put your head back on your shoulders, and you wear your crown as proudly as you can." (Page 120)

— Maya Garnett

17. “White people shouldn’t look at someone’s afro and say, ‘Oh my God, this person didn’t comb their hair.’ This person *did* comb their hair; this is just how it dries. And there’s a term for that: *cultural relativism*—when you analyze someone else based on your own parameters.” (Page 124)

— Zahra Ahmed

18. “There’s so much beauty in Blackness, and that deserves to be celebrated. I know it’s hard, but don’t give up. Loving yourself is a process; if you fail one day, there’s always tomorrow. You’ll get there.” (Page 158)

— Maya Finoh

19. “I also don’t think we should be judging people who are still deciding to wear weaves and relaxers. It’s easy to think, *We’ve passed that*. But some people haven’t, and it’s very understandable as to why they haven’t; it’s hard to go natural when you don’t see your hair type being held up as beautiful. Instead, our goal should be to create a society where, at some point, these people would be comfortable enough to go natural.” (Page 161)

— Maya Fleming

20. “I take such great pride in being a Black woman. We stand at the intersection of misogyny and racism, but we have so much strength. We’re becoming more outspoken and taking up space in places that weren’t meant for us. And we’re inspirational.” (Page 166)

— Kayla White

21. “So even though I don’t wear my hair as a political statement, I’m not afraid of people automatically assuming that I stand with Black lives. Because I do. And I’m not afraid of any judgment that comes with that. As Nina Simone said, ‘I’ll tell you what freedom means to me: no fear.’” (Page 167)

— Alexis Palmer

22. “When Siobhan was born, *I knew*: I wanted her to have natural hair. Because when I had a relaxer, I couldn’t go swimming, I tried not to sweat, I was always paranoid when it rained. I always call it the prison of our hair, and I didn’t want my daughter to be imprisoned the way I was; I didn’t want her to have that life. I wanted her to be free.” (Page 174)

— Karyn-Siobhan Robinson

23. “I just wanted to be accepted so badly, but the need to be accepted is really overpowering and the root of a lot of self-hate. It gets to the point where you become like a beggar saying, ‘Please, just give me some acceptance. I’ll do anything.’ And it makes a lot of us want to tone down our Blackness. It’s what made me keep my hair in a bun for the first three years of high school.” (Page 193)

— Kilala Vincent

24. “[W]hen I was sixteen, I told my mom, ‘I don’t wanna do this anymore. I don’t want to have my hair straight; I just want to see how it *really* looks.’ My mom said, ‘You don’t know how your hair looks; it’s not gonna be a texture that you think is pretty, it’s not gonna be manageable.’ And then I remember she pulled me on the

floor and forcibly placed the relaxing cream onto my scalp and onto my hair. I felt powerless. I felt that I didn't even have control over my body, my hair, and part of my identity.

“We often only see the effects of colonization, of so many hundreds of years of these settlers coming and imposing their traditions and ways. Sometimes we feel so disconnected from where our ancestors came from because it's been so long, and we just don't know the history of our ancestors prior to being in the Americas. So how do you unlearn hundreds of years of colonialism? It takes a long time, but I think it's possible by reclaiming the hair that we were born with and embracing the features that our ancestors had. I see a lot of power in taking ownership and making my own decisions in terms of my hair.” (Page 197)

— Johanna Fugueroa

25. “And then even when I first started wearing my hair curly, it was curly with a ton of product, curly with a ton of gel, curly but brushed back, curly but made to be smaller. I just felt the need to tame it. But not anymore.” (Page 207)

— Nimesha Gerlus

26. “[The headmaster at my school] told me, ‘I'm glad you're adjusting well here. I really like your fluff today. But I've just gotten emails today from your teachers about your hair.’ Apparently, teachers were writing in because my hair was an ‘unnatural hairstyle’ and it had become a distraction to my classmates. ‘Your hair is actually against dress code,’ he said. My natural hair, according to my white teachers, was an unnatural hairstyle, and therefore it was against dress code. At first I thought the headmaster was joking. I laughed and

tried to walk away, but he said, ‘No, really, you can’t go to class. I need you to come to the office.’ They called my mom into the office too. She asked me what I’d done to get in trouble. ‘I didn’t do anything,’ I said. ‘I didn’t straighten my hair this morning.’ She started laughing because she thought it was a joke, but my headmaster was serious: I wasn’t allowed to go to the rest of my classes that day.” (Page 210)

— Kamarah Noel

27. “[W]hether it’s TV or films or social media, really all of the images that we’re fed don’t look like this— like me, like women with tight curls. And especially when I was younger, if I *did* see someone who looked like me, that person was always cast as a negative person. Somehow that person was wrong. That’s definitely a thing: lighter is better. But it’s crazy because our culture is exploited all the time. So it takes a lot of un-brainwashing to be like, *The women I see in the media are beautiful, but they don’t represent the only form of beauty*. I do believe Black women have it hard ... but there’s still an avenue to self-love for us.” (Page 215)

— Malika Benton

28. “If I were to go into an interview with my ’fro, I have to think about how they’re gonna perceive me if it’s a predominantly white workplace. I don’t want them to view me as different because I have a big ’fro, but I also don’t want to hide my natural hair. Because it’s not ‘unmanageable,’ and it *is* professional. And I do want to lead by example and show little girls growing up today that their hair *is* normal and they shouldn’t feel forced to straighten it. It’s just a lot to think about.” (Page 220)

— Ashley Nicholson

29. “Being yourself doesn’t mean that you’re bringing somebody else down. In fact, by showing who you are, you’re actually giving others permission to be themselves too. So let your hair do what it wants.” (Page 224)

— Rosa Baez

30. “Sometimes when I speak out about social justice, my mom’s like, ‘Stop, you’re doing too much.’ But I have to. I keep thinking about all the recent studies that have proven what we already know about the policing of Black bodies and of Black kids in school: that we’re punished more often and suspended at higher rates with ridiculous proportions of aggression. We’re prone to being sent to the next level of authority. We’ve seen kids in the news who’ve gotten in trouble for wearing braids and locs in school. Everything just begins so early, whether it’s corporal punishment or administrative punishment in school or just being taught that your body—including your hair—is not OK.” (Page 228)

— Christie Hoyte Hayes

31. “My parents were already in America, but I was still in Gambia. I was four or five—right in that ego stage—when my aunts, unbeknownst to me, started perming my hair. They didn’t have bad intentions, but the unfortunate part is that I was too young to make that decision on my own. They conformed *for* me. And this was the time when my mind was developing and I was starting to figure out my identity and hear that little nagging voice in the back of my head telling me, *This is what you need to do to fit in*. But loving yourself and fitting in are two very different things, right?” (Page 240)

— Adam Mbai

32. “So everybody on both sides of my family thought that perming my hair was the best option—including myself. Because everybody on my Salvadorian side has straight hair, and everybody on my Dominican side straightens their hair. So there was a time in my life when I was constantly getting my hair straightened too because I thought that’s what beauty was; I thought that’s what *beautiful* meant.” (Page 248)

— Bianca Martinez