Beauty is more than skin deep: how African American women used beauty to change history

Beauty is often dismissed as superficial, but for African American women, it has long been a powerful form of resistance, identity and self-expression. **Dr Laila Haidarali**, a historian at **Queen's University** in Canada, is investigating how beauty practices – through fashion, modelling and media – played a vital role in shaping Black women's public image and political engagement during the 20th century.

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PROFILE

Field of research
20th century African American women's history

Research project
Investigating how African American women used beauty to shape their public image during the mid-20th century

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Talk like a ...
historian

Civil Rights Movement — a mass movement in the US (especially during the 1950s and 1960s) aimed at ending racial segregation and discrimination against African Americans

Haute couture — high-end fashion, often associated with Paris fashion houses

Respectability politics — a strategy, leveraged by different groups of African Americans, to assert equality and access to civil rights and economic opportunities by enacting middle-class values and behaviours

From hairstyles and skin tones to fashion and public image, beauty was a form of political resistance and self-definition for many African American women throughout the 20th century. This intersection of beauty and politics – so often overlooked – forms the foundation of Dr Laila Haidarali's project, 'Beauty and The Unfinished Business of Democracy'.

What shaped African American women's beauty in the mid-20th century?

"The inspiration for my project comes from my scholarly interest in drawing a longer line between two important developments in the history of African American women's civil rights activism," says Laila, a historian at Queen's University. "I want to show how the respectability politics that characterised the Civil Rights Movement are intertwined with the claims of an increasingly radical Black Power movement that, in 1966, asserted 'Black is Beautiful'."

Laila's research is set during the 1940s and 1950s, when millions of African Americans left rural Southern USA and moved to cities in the North, Midwest and West. These growing urban communities became hubs of Black life, creativity and enterprise. In cities like New York, Chicago and Philadelphia, African American women were at the heart of a booming beauty culture – working as hairstylists, entrepreneurs and fashion designers. For them, beauty was more than appearance – it was a tool for self-expression, pride and political resistance. Laila's research shows how beauty was used as a positive protest and as leverage to enter the integrated urban, job market.

How does Laila study the history of African American women's beauty?

To understand how African American women shaped media and beauty culture, Laila uses historical sources such as records from the first Black-owned modelling agencies that opened in the late 1940s. These institutions played a key role in creating new opportunities and images of beauty during a time of great change.

Brandford Models on tour in Jamaica in September 1956
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"For scholars of Black history, archival research presents rich opportunities, but also poses significant limitations," says Laila. "The historic exclusion of Black voices and perspectives from official repositories of knowledge undermines the historian's reliance on archival evidence in various important ways. Black scholars speak powerfully about 'the violence of the archives'." Laila addresses this by digging deeply into different types of records and reading between the lines to find overlooked or hidden figures. She also turns to the Black press, especially influential magazines like *Ebony* and *Jet*, which proudly showcased beauty, success and everyday life. These publications, created by and for African American communities, were powerful tools of self-representation and cultural resistance.

How did ideas of African American beauty change?

Laila's research shows how, after World War II, a new image of beauty – focused on 'Brown-skin' African American women – began to take shape in Black magazines and community fashion shows. This image was carefully crafted by a growing network of Black editors, business owners, models and everyday women who worked together to create a more positive and glamorous portrayal of African Americans.

Brown-skin models became a symbol of elegance, dignity and modern Black womanhood, offering a bold alternative to racist stereotypes. Laila frames this display of beauty as a 'positive protest' against white supremacy. These models combined style with values like good manners and hard work. Although their beauty often aligned with conservative ideas about gender, they offered a powerful challenge to public ideas of who could be seen as beautiful in mid-20th century America.

> **"Brown-skin models became a symbol of elegance, dignity and modern Black womanhood."**

How did African American women reshape their public image?

"Firstly, it was hard work," says Laila. "My research shows how many different groups of women, independently of each other, laboured to produce new images or public visions of themselves, and that labour held great importance on personal, professional and community levels." Entrepreneurs like Barbara Watson, who ran the first modelling agency for Black women (Brandford Models), travelled abroad to bring high-quality fashion to Black communities, challenging the poor-quality clothing typically marketed to them. Her work showed how fashion could be a powerful tool for economic independence, self-respect and entry into the integrated workplace.

"Individual women who worked as models also demonstrate how that labour role was fraught with obstacles to attaining success on the mainstream stage," explains Laila. For example, Dorothea Towles was the first African American model to achieve acclaim as an 'haute couture' model in Paris. Through fashion and modelling, such women didn't just challenge beauty norms – they created new paths for empowerment and representation. However, when Dorothea returned to the US in the early 1950s, she found few opportunities for work. In her words, 'doors remained closed to her as a Black woman'.

What can modern society learn from Laila's research?

Laila's research challenges the idea that beauty is superficial. "At first glance, the history of African American women as Brown-skin models may seem to celebrate a narrow, middle-class, heteronormative version of beauty, and may lead some to judge this cohort of women as mimicking whiteness, or 'wanting to be white'," says Laila. "However, this history is more complex. It was a way to express racial pride rather than to deny it – it was a positive protest."

In a segregated society that devalued them, African American women used beauty to assert self-worth, professionalism and belonging. Their carefully composed appearances helped them claim visibility in a world that rendered them invisible. Studying this history shows how race, gender and class have long shaped ideas of who is worthy. It reminds us that while beauty may not be everything, it has real power – and that power, historically denied to Black women, has been used by them as a form of resistance and pleasure.

About *African American women's history*

African American women's history studies the lives, voices and contributions of Black women throughout US history. It explores how they navigated systems of racism, sexism and classism while shaping politics, culture, communities and movements. Often overlooked in mainstream historical narratives, African American women's experiences provide a more inclusive and complex understanding of the American past. The field is highly interdisciplinary, drawing from history, gender studies, literature, art, sociology and cultural studies to explore how identity and representation have developed over time.

Understanding African American women's history is important for everyone – regardless of gender or race – because it challenges long-standing assumptions about who shapes history. "Traditional narratives have often positioned men, especially white men, as the main actors of the past," says Laila. African American women's history disrupts that view, revealing how Black women have always played essential roles in resisting white supremacy, supporting their communities and advocating for equality.

African American women's history helps explain how deeply race and gender shape our society – from legal structures and political systems to cultural norms and ideas of beauty. It shows that race is not a biological fact but a social construct with real, lived consequences. "The way Black women have been judged based on appearance, behaviour and perceived respectability tells us much about the values of the society around them," says Laila. "Yet, their strategies of self-definition, resistance and creativity have also paved the way for new ways of being seen and heard."

Pathway from school to *African American women's history*

"As I often tell my students, African American history is US history!" says Laila. "So, we need to start there to begin understanding the Black experience; we need to have a good grounding in US history and ways to question and trouble that meta-narrative."

Study history at high school, then at university take courses in history, women's/gender studies and Black/African American studies.

Women's/gender studies will provide tools to analyse power, identity and social structures through a feminist lens, while Black/African American studies are vital for understanding the history and experiences of Black people.

Laila recommends engaging with Black expressive culture through subjects such as literature, art, music, drama and fashion, which will help you understand how African American women have expressed themselves and been represented through time.

Explore careers in *African American women's history*

With a background in African American women's history, career opportunities will be available in academic research, education, museum/archive curation and advocacy.

"Go to museums," advises Laila. "Question, think and reflect on the ways that the past has been represented." Visiting museums not only builds your historical understanding but also improves your awareness of how history is constructed and displayed. These spaces are also potential workplaces for historians interested in public education, curation and storytelling.

Explore the websites of the Association of Black Women Historians (**abwh.org**), the Organization of American Historians (**oah.org**) and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (**nypl.org/locations/schomburg**), which offer educational resources, essays, interviews, digitised archives and internships.

Explore your local and national archives. Seek out documents and texts relevant to the Black experience.

Sylvia Fitt Jones, a Brandford Model, prepares for a photo shoot in 1954
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Meet *Laila*

I was a busy teenager. My parents made sure I participated in non-academic activities such as swimming, tennis, piano and ballet. Yet, my main interests were reading fiction and poetry, writing stories and poems of my own, and drawing and painting.

I've always enjoyed history. I grew up in Trinidad and Tobago and it was my high school history teacher who piqued my interest in US history. It was new to me and lent itself to great storytelling. Of course, history is more than storytelling, though the telling of a good story remains a cornerstone of the historian's craft.

Growing up as a Muslim girl in a predominantly Christian country was not always easy, but I am thankful to have been born and raised in a multicultural, multiethnic and diverse society. My Catholic convent school education played an important part in my understanding of faith, gender roles and racial identities. At the age when most adolescents want to fit in and belong to their peer group, I felt my otherness quite acutely. For example, unlike my classmates, my name was not Anglicised. This highlighted my difference (and still does today).

When I was nineteen, my family relocated to Canada, and I went to university in a different city from where they settled. It was exciting to be on my own for the first time in my life, but it was also challenging. As a Caribbean immigrant woman of colour on a largely white campus, I was not completely at ease, nor happy. Yet, my greatest academic achievements began there.

My interest in US history deepened during my time at university because it was the main field of history where race and gender appeared as important aspects of the historical narrative. I credit the pioneering work of Black feminist scholars for positioning women, gender, race and class as central to a deeper understanding of US history.

Poetry remains my primary form of personal expression. It's my dream to publish a collection of poetry! I enjoy the creative process of making something out of nothing and crafting words to shape meaning and bring ideas to life.

Laila's *top tips*

1. Read books. And then read more books.
2. Look for mentors and role models and reflect on why you admire them.
3. Embrace your own unique qualities and perspectives, but don't close yourself from engaging with other points of view.
4. Listen carefully. When the time is right, speak up. Learn how to articulate what you mean. Keep in mind that it takes time to develop your own voice.
5. Question what you don't understand, and don't expect everyone to have all the answers. But we can always work to find them!
6. Don't give up – don't allow any failure or obstacles to limit your reach. Find purpose in your passion.