

EVENT TITLE: Trauma, Tresses, & Truth: Untangling Our Hair Through Personal Narratives

Event Description: From schools to boardrooms to military squadrons, Black and Afro-Latina natural hair continues to transfix, confound, and enrage members of White society. Why is this still the case? The perception, policing, and persecution of our hair is an incontrovertible form of structural oppression. Four contributors read essays from the upcoming book of the same name (Chicago Review Press 2022). Their work interrogates a systemic bias that is cognizable, legible, and in need of course correction.

EVENT CATEGORY: Nonfiction Readings

Opening Remarks and Housekeeping Announcements

Thank you for choosing to attend our panel today, Trauma, Tresses, & Truth. I'm Lyzette Wanzer, she/her/hers, an author, writing coach, and professional development instructor for creative writers. Natural hair has always been political. Trauma, Tresses, & Truth: Untangling Our Hair Through Personal Narratives, is our upcoming book from Chicago Review Press. It consists of a collection of essays from 20 writers interrogating the complex and convoluted relationship Afro Latina and African American women have with their hair. The book illuminates both the absurdity of trying to enforce white haircare grooming standards on Black women, and the muted but invasive means by

which society shames natural hair from infancy through adulthood. The book will publish in Fall of this year.

Harvard sociologist Orlando Patterson noted the following in his book *Slavery and Social Death*: “Hair type rapidly became the real symbolic badge of slavery, although like many powerful symbols, it was disguised, in this case by the linguistic device of using the term ‘black,’ which nominally threw the emphasis to color. No one who has grown up in a multiracial society, however, is unaware of the fact that hair difference is what carries the real symbolic potency.”

Our natural hair resides on the lower end of mainstream society's beauty assessment scale. These essays provide a lens into how, why, and the myriad manners in which, the Black body remains misread and misunderstood. Particularly relevant during this time of emboldened white supremacy, racism, and provocative othering, our work explores how writing about one of the still-remaining systemic biases in schools, academia, and corporate America might lead to greater understanding and respect. This is work that pushes for identities without apologies. I'd like to mention that the idea for this book was catalyzed by several audience members at the 2020 AWP Conference in San Antonio. One of those audience members is a book contributor, but not here on today's panel. Each of us will read excerpts from the upcoming book. And now, I will introduce the panelists.

Carmen Bardequez-Brown is a poet and educator from Puerto Rico. She migrated to the United States in 1984. Her work is showcased in Ray Santiesteban's documentary "Latino Poets in the United States." She has read at The Nuyorican Poets Café, The Fez, Mad Alex Foundation, Smoke, and The Soho Arts Fest.
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Lyndsey Ellis, our second presenter, is a fiction writer, essayist, editor, and author of the debut novel, Bone Broth. She was a recipient of the San Francisco Foundation's Joseph Henry Jackson Literary Award and a Barbara Deming Memorial Fund recipient. She has also received a Kimbilio Fellowship. Her work appears in several publications.

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Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa's debut novel, Daughters of the Stone was shortlisted for the 2010 PEN/Robert W. Bingham Prize. The English and Spanish language editions of her second novel, A Woman of Endurance, will be released in April 2022 by HarperCollins, Amistad.

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And I am **Lyzette Wanzer, Event Organizer & Moderator.**

My work appears in over 25 literary journals, books, and magazines. My work reflects peri-racial, social, and economic African-American experiences. My research interests are in critical race theory, Black feminism, intersectionality, and the lyric essay.

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<https://shuffle.do/projects/trauma-tresses-truth-untangling-our-hair-through-personal-narrative/the-book>

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Moderator Questions

- 1) Which specific—and typically uncrystallized—tensions associated with natural hair are responsible for inheriting social, familial, and workplace mistreatment?
- 2) How has situational power and privilege operated in your life to make others feel they have the right to dictate to you how to wear your hair?

- 3) In what ways is the process of attaining the hegemonic ideology of *pelo bueno* a violent journey for Latina women?
- 4) Over the past several years, a number of highly publicized incidents have occurred regarding middle and high school dress codes that appear to target students of color. How do you think these schools' dress codes accentuate the majority culture's preoccupation with African American hair in general, and natural hair in particular?
- 5) What happens when an employer's dress code or attire policy bars certain hairstyles, resulting in adverse actions against those who refuse to conform by altering their hair texture, length, or style? Many victims comply through fear of termination or being seen as unemployable. In the Latina community, characteristics like hair are both race- and status-charged. What can employers and school

administrators do to ensure they are not discriminating against natural hair?

6) Federal courts in the United States have said that, under Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the only protected natural hairstyles are Afros. Why do you suppose Afros were singled out for protection in this Act, but not braids, dreadlocks, or twists?