

Episode 6: More of What's Going On? A Hair Affair

Released on June 17, 2019

- Anthony: The opinions expressed by the guests and contributors of this podcast are their own and do not necessarily reflect the views of Cornell University or its employees.
- Anthony: Thank you all for joining us today. My name is Anthony Sis and you are listening to the Inclusive Excellence Podcast.
- Anthony: Welcome back. Thank you for joining Sherron and me on another episode of the inclusive excellence podcast. Sherron, how are you doing today?
- Sherron: Today is a good day. I'm feeling good. I'm here. We've got some good conversations waiting for everyone to hear, so let's get it going.
- Anthony: All right, well thank you for sharing how you're doing today. Sherron, why don't you tell our listeners a little bit more about what's to come in today's episode?
- Sherron: Well, today we're actually going to do a continuation of the episode that we had two weeks ago and we, you and I, Anthony, we started talking about hair and the New York state law that was passed about not being able to discriminate against a person based on their hair. And with that said, let's go take a moment to introduce our guest.
- Sherron: But first I'm going to tell you that we have a new segment that's called More of What's Going On. When Anthony and I spoke last episode, it was called What's Going On and because now we're continuing the conversation, we're going to call it More of What's Going On. So with that I'd like to introduce Trisica Trisica Munroe. Trisica is our guest on today's podcast More of What's Going On and Trisica if you'll take a moment to let us know who you are and what wonderful insights you're going to bring to the podcast today.
- Trisica: Thank you for the introduction. So my name is Trisica Trisica Munroe. I'm the Program Manager for Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality studies and LGBT studies. Two small academic programs in the college of arts and sciences.
- Sherron: Thank you, Trisica.
- Anthony: All right. Before we get started, we always like to start each podcast episode with a question of the day and so I get the opportunity to ask today's question, which for all of us to answer. The question is: When it comes to inclusion, how do you foster an environment where people who come from different backgrounds know you value their ideas?
- Sherron: So, say that again please.
- Anthony: Yeah. So, when it comes to inclusion, how do you foster an environment where people who come from different backgrounds know you value their ideas?
- Sherron: Okay. Do you want to go for it? Do you want to take a chance?

- Trisica: Why don't you take it away first, Sherron?
- Sherron: Well, I went to a place that's personal, not necessarily relating to Cornell University. So, what I do, because in my personal life I do have lots of people from different environments and different backgrounds and cultures. I get incredibly curious. I want know everything and I'm always looking for ways to correlate and find parallels between my own background, my own history, my own heritage, and allow the person to share who they are. So, that's what I do. And of course, I do that at work as well. But I find more opportunities to do that in my personal life.
- Trisica: Excellent. That makes a lot of sense and it resonates to me as well. I think it's really important. You can foster an environment an inclusive environment if you communicate to people that you care about what their thoughts and opinions are in what we're doing. So, if someone joins an organization and they're brand new and he introduced them to everyone and then you say, "Well, what do you think about our strategy for this? Did you perhaps do it in a different way at your previous organization?" Things like that I think signals to someone that how they think and feel matters and is welcomed in that space.
- Sherron: So, when it comes to an inclusion, I foster an environment of letting people know that they're included and their ideas are welcome because I get very curious. I want to hear everything about them. So, what I do is ask questions. I ask questions with the intention of learning more about the individual. And I also try to find parallels to my own experience so that I can find ways where I can connect with them on a person to person level. So, I ask a lot of questions, I find parallels, and I try to use the information I learned in a constructive way. That's what I do.
- Trisica: That makes sense. And I think I would second that too Sherron, because I do the same thing and I think it's good practice too, to let someone know that they are welcome to share their ideas and that they're included by asking them for their feedback, by asking them, does this make sense? How would you do it? Do you have a different idea? And bringing people into and just creating collaborative space where there's comradery, where there's rapport, and where there's trust.
- Sherron: Oh yeah.
- Trisica: And so folks feel like they can share their ideas and that it's a space where sharing is welcome.
- Sherron: Right, right. That's great. And Anthony, thanks for that great question. And how about you try to answer it?
- Anthony: Yeah, I would just add to the piece, definitely adding with trust and how trust is important and how you essentially foster trust with new employees or just with new members that you're working with who come from different backgrounds. And so for me it's about getting to know the person individually on a one on one level. Because I think oftentimes with ideas and feedback, a lot of people tend to be a little bit shy to share some of those ideas in a larger group setting.

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- Anthony: So, I think hopefully establishing that trust individually with the person for them to then be able to feel comfortable sharing that information with a larger group or in a team meeting or in a staff meeting. I think that's one way in which I try to foster inclusion is just getting to know the person individually and from a personal but also a professional workplace perspective.
- Sherron: Thank you. That was a great question. And for our listeners out there, every episode we try to start with a new question and just so you know, only one of us know what the question is. So, it's a surprise to the person who has the answer. So, just letting you know that if you are feeling brave and you want to get on the show, be prepared to answer the question of the day.
- Sherron: Let's see, more of what's going on. Well, I was reflecting back on my comments from the last episode of our podcast and it reminded me of an episode of Living Single. Do you remember that TV show? Was it the '80s or '90s?
- Trisica: It was the '90s.
- Sherron: It was the '90s?
- Anthony: Yeah, '90s.
- Sherron: The four single women living together in a house and they had a handyman who worked in their building or in their apartment and there was a friend of the girls, and I believe his name was Kyle Barker. Anybody out there, if I'm remembering this improperly, definitely feel free to leave comments and correct me on that.
- Sherron: But there was an episode of Living Single where Kyle Barker was contemplating whether or not he should cut his hair to look more like what his profession dictated he should look like. So, that was a great episode. So with that said, I'm just going to throw a little question at our guest here, Trisica. I'm going to put you on the spot. So, let's hear about what are your thoughts on hair and presentation of self and who polices hair and things like that? And let's see how we can see what that feels like in a professional environment. Professional being in air quotes.
- Trisica: Thank you, Sherron. I think a lot of the times black girls, black boys, people of color, our hair and our bodies are often heavily policed by the dominant culture, which values European aesthetics and presentations. So, that's definitely true. And I think that very often what gets missed is that there's a basic dignity and respect component that I think sometimes gets missed. We're in, it's like, "I am an autonomous human being and so I get to control what I look like and how I present." And what is professional based on my phenotypic traits varies from someone else who has different phenotypic presentation and that's its own thing. But at the same time, this sense that for black people we can't be professional just as a starting point. Blackness is not professional to begin with.
- Anthony: Wow.

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- Sherron: She's going deep. She's going deep. She's going way in there. So please, continue.
- Trisica: Sorry. And so I think it often starts from that standpoint where the white gaze looks at black people and says, "You're not professional." And so there's this sort of, "I'm not seeing you as a human being who has control over your body and your presentation." And whether you wear a suit in this environment can look lots of different ways. But then when it comes to something like grooming practices or your amount of facial hair and how you wear your hair just as a matter of keeping your hair protected, your personal style and things like that, things get really wild very quickly, I think very often. And there's almost this like Omni present desire to control blackness at all points. Like it's this wild thing that must be contained. The minute a black person pops up, it's like, "Okay, there is a rupture here. Blackness is entered and it must be contained and it must be squashed."
- Sherron: Well, it must be watched.
- Anthony: Yeah. I think that's the most-
- Trisica: And it must be diminished.
- Sherron: Monitored, diminished.
- Anthony: Monitored. Exactly.
- Trisica: And just shoved down as small as it possibly can because it's too loud, too much, too big, too whatever. And this shows up a lot in hair. So, for example, one of my faculty, we had a faculty lunch not too long ago with a professor at [inaudible 00:10:13] in PMA and where she showed some clips of her Black Girlhood Project.
- Anthony: Sorry, just to clarify. What does PMA stand for again?
- Trisica: Performing and media arts. It's a department in the college of arts and sciences.
- Anthony: Awesome, thank you.
- Sherron: Shameless plug, but we'll take it.
- Trisica: And so she showed some clips of her Black Girlhood Project and that's one of the things she brought up in her project is that there's this school to prison pipeline for black girls in particular. And one of the dimensions that gets black girls in particular in trouble is their hair. And so there are all these alarming stories we hear about in the news all the time about a teacher snatching the braids out of a student, literally yanking them out of a student's hair, or another educator cutting someone's braids and saying, "What are you going to go home and tell your mama?" And just really gruesome, awful things like that. Or folks going to interviews and they might have locks and people saying, "Well, that

doesn't really fit our aesthetic and we don't think locks are professional." Or what have you.

Trisica: And so, you can look out there and there are all these stories, each one more alarming than the next, than the other, example after example after example of this hyper policing of black people, of this hyper policing of ... Not even hyper policing, just policing in general of what black people look like, how black people show up in spaces. And it's conveying the message, on the one hand, that you didn't get to determine what you look like because we don't recognize you as a human being who can have style and have presentation that you want to be proud of and that it's part of your cultural heritage.

Trisica: And then there's the other thing where it's like the black body is a locus of control for the white dominant society. And so it's this interesting configuration that comes together and then manifests around hair as well.

Trisica: And then when you told me about this topic, I also thought about how historically this control has manifested. And I thought immediately about the Tignon laws in Louisiana, in new Orleans, when black women who were mixed and were considered becoming too light skin and we're competing with white women for male attention. And I think it was the governor at the time, the Spanish governor at the time, came up with the Tignon laws to cover their hair and it was supposed to be a marker of diminishment and lower status, but then these women were fabulous and amazing with it and they had all of these really beautiful and lavish ways of tying their hair and then that created other problems.

Sherron: It seems like so many of the issues that come out of policing, it really, at the core of it all, is just about fear.

Trisica: Yeah.

Sherron: It's just about fear. People always feeling as though I cannot allow you to express yourself fully because I have my own set of fears that you are going to whatever, fill in the blank. Whether it is take my job, whether it is take away some authority from me, whether you are going to overshadow me or something like that. All of that comes right back down to fear and that is what I find is so hard to understand. Why does so much fear just exist for no reason? If you just live and let people live and be the best person they can be, you will see that you will be able to do better if you allow those around you to do their best as well. What do you think about that?

Anthony: I think for me, what I ultimately had been hearing in all of this is the internal messages that black people, that other people from other marginalized communities, get as a response to those types of laws. That they're not good enough, that they don't present good enough, that in Spanish there's this phrase, [Spanish language 00:00:14:14], among black Spanish speaking folks and it essentially translates to, "bad hair."

- Anthony: Why is it bad hair? Because that's the internal message that we've been taught historically speaking through laws and through our social interactions with people of other races. When we hear about what the dominant culture values and then how does that affect us internally in terms of our own self image too, as people of color, as black people have internalized that. And so it made me think a little bit ... I know you talked briefly about the connections with race and gender, particularly when it comes to blackness and things like that. Talk a little bit more about that. The intersection with race and gender it comes to hair in the workplace.
- Trisica: Oh absolutely. So, black men and black women, however you present in the world, when you're black it comes at you regardless because black men are subject to the same kind of pressures to present in a certain way that fits a certain dominant aesthetic. And then black women have the double bind too, because everything about the black woman isn't classified as traditionally feminine to begin with in the stereotypical imagination of black women.
- Trisica: So, black women have then this double bind where we're often seen as aggressive and angry and all this other stuff. And then to add that to hair presentation and the racism around what our hair looks like adds another layer to the whole mix, I think. And so sometimes too, the pressures for black women is often to have very straight so-called relaxed hair. Relaxed.
- Sherron: Relaxed.
- Anthony: Like, why is it called relaxed?
- Trisica: There's nothing relaxed about it.
- Anthony: Right.
- Sherron: Just to have a little clarification to our listeners out there. Relaxed hair is our natural black hair that has had been chemically treated to make it stay straight even after and in between washes so that our natural kink, our natural curl, our natural texture, is not so "unruly" and it becomes relaxed by means of using a relaxer. So, that's basically a perm that straightens our hair. And I believe for white people, maybe non whites as well, but when they use the term a perm, they're adding texture, they're adding curl to it and when black people say they're getting a perm, they are straightening their hair.
- Trisica: We're removing texture.
- Sherron: By chemical means. We are removing texture.
- Trisica: Yes, exactly. And so, there's that pressure to have very straight hair, very long hair. And there's this misconception that natural curly, kinky, coily, whatever you want to call it, hair isn't ... One, isn't long, isn't professional, it's often deemed as being unkempt, and things like that and then that gets even deeper in certain professions where the style of presentation is often very conservative. So you're

thinking suits, ties, and so there are some black women who feel a pressure to conform to that standard by wearing their hair very straight in that kind of environment and feel that an afro or locks is contrary to that kind of a presentation.

Sherron: I have to confess that, like I said in our last episode, that although my hair was growing in its natural state for quite a few years, I was very dependent on wigs. So if you go to my Facebook page, you'll see years back that I had wigs, all different styles and colors and things like that. Because once again, that to me is another perfect example of code switching. When I am in a certain setting, I want to present a certain way. So, therefore I'm going to keep my straight black hair wig on and then when I'm no longer in that setting, on weekend or evenings and I want to do something that's very outside of my professional world, I would wear my hair naturally, whether it's in braids, plats, twists, coils, what have you.

Sherron: And unfortunately it worked for a long time until I just got tired of it. I really got tired of it and like I said, I was owning myself. So, I decided to do what I wanted to do with my hair. I made decisions and I went through with it. I followed through with it. So yeah, that whole presenting one way and then in another way, it totally speaks to the code switch thing that people do, code switching.

Trisica: Yeah, absolutely. That totally makes sense. For me, I abandoned perms and relaxers in college because I never liked how I looked with straight hair. And then when I was in college, I was like, "There's nothing actually straight about me, so I might as well not have straight hair either." So, I completely abandoned straight here and I never went back. And so as a professional person, I've never presented with what I would call European affirming looks. I've never worn my hair straight.

Trisica: I just can't do it. I want nothing to do with straight hair at all at any point. So I've always worn braids or curly or fro-y extensions or something like that when I want to protect my natural hair. And so I've never had that bind for me in a professional setting where I felt that I needed to fit in in a certain way because, and this is where my own queer identity comes in, because I felt I'm going to show up and be different no matter what.

Sherron: No matter what.

Trisica: So, you're going to know upfront what you're getting in an interview. I also made the choice, and it might be because I'm millennial, an older millennial, but I made the choice very early on that if someone didn't want to work with me, I would prefer that, then them thinking that I was a different kind of person than I actually was. And so, it was very important to me.

Trisica: So, when I do interviews, I show up and I go, "I'm queer, just so you know." So, if there's anyone who has a problem with that, we can not work together. And it's cool because I want to know that right away. So I tend to like come up front with who I am immediately and my hair and how I dress is part of that so people know what they're getting with me. And then if you hire me, it's like, "You know what you were getting with me because there was nothing to discover."

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- Sherron: So, there is a meme out there. It's a photo of ... I feel like it's the same woman. One with bone straight hair in a traditional Cleopatra-style bob and then side by side it's the same woman and she has this lovely Angela Davis afro and the caption for the straight hair, it says, "Me at the interview." And then afro it says, "Me after I get the job."
- Sherron: It is absolutely telling because that's exactly what you just touched on about how I present in the interview. For you, you have made the choice to be who you are at every phase of your employment, which is so empowering for you. But there are people who have to play the game. I've heard someone say you have to fit in until you get in or something along those lines.
- Sherron: It is legitimately a game. That's what it comes down to. How we present ourselves becomes a type of game. At what point can I wear a rainbow belt to go with my outfit? At what point do I put my earrings in if I'm a man and I'm in a very conservative place and it doesn't seem like men should be wearing earrings in this environment. At what point do I do that? At what point do I wear something that may show off my tattoo on my arm? And questions like that. So, it's a really good game about how much of myself am I going to put out there? When do I feel comfortable enough to be vulnerable or to be open to let people see who I am?
- Trisica: No, absolutely. And it can be really scary and I show up how I show up regardless, but I have gotten interesting pushback in some corners of the world of the university.
- Sherron: Let's hear about those moments of pushback.
- Trisica: So, I have gotten some pushback from more conservative ... I once worked in a pretty conservative unit and it was definitely the type of place where you wore full business, either a full business look or business casual every single day. There was no casual Fridays at all ever.
- Trisica: And I did get some pushback interpersonally about my natural hair. Number one, because when I am not wearing braids my hair is an afro and I style it in all sorts of different ways and I work twists or something like that. So, there's that and then there's also in that setting it was communicated to me, by other black folks interestingly enough.
- Sherron: Oh, okay.
- Trisica: Yes. By other black folks, by other black women, that head wraps that black women sometimes wear, very stylistically the cool ones with the knots.
- Sherron: Oh, I know exactly what they are.
- Trisica: Love them. That those weren't appropriate for that setting no matter how cute or very well tied or neat they were. That certain types of earrings were not appropriate. So, the look that those students bought into was very much one

where it's like, if you're going to wear jewelry it's going to be pearls and studs and heels and your hair needed to be pin straight and like it was all a Stepford business kind of situation. It was very interesting.

Sherron: It sounds really, really restricted.

Trisica: Yeah.

Sherron: So if you can't bring yourself to work in your authenticity, then how can you do authentic work?

Trisica: Yeah, exactly.

Sherron: If only half of you gets to show up.

Anthony: And then what does that teaching the students alternatively too? Especially if there were ... I'm sure there were students from other countries and other backgrounds, so alternatively going back to the internal messaging of what that policing of hairstyles is really about, what that ultimately tells people. In order to succeed, in order to thrive, you have to fit a certain mold. And I think that's so detrimental.

Trisica: Yeah, it is detrimental. But there's also an interesting thing to that because those students that were busy policing that kind of presentation, it was almost like they were doing this invisible dance that no one else was actually participating in. So, they were busy trying to maintain a certain presentation and checking out the other black folks and making sure, "Are you ascribing to this dominant presentation that we think is actually supposed to be playing out here?" When actually no one else cared.

Anthony: Oh.

Sherron: Oh. That's really good. It's so good you said that because I'm that clip that I referred to earlier from Living Single, when Kyle was thinking about cutting his hair and he did a presentation to the seniors who are white men. They were like, "Okay." And so the white men were like, "Well, why is this an issue? Who was telling you that this wasn't okay?" And as it turns out, it was the black person in the room who was giving him guidance about what is acceptable and is not acceptable most likely based on his own experience. But it's a really interesting clip. It's very telling. And considering that this was done in the '90s, here we are still talking about it today.

Anthony: Well, and I think a large part of it is because it's controlled externally through these other forces, through these other systems, that tell us that we're not good enough, that black people aren't good enough because of their hair presentation and things like that. So, it's external, but in the workplace there are certain things that I think we can foster to make sure and reaffirm that people can show up in their authentic selves through their hair styles and expressions and things like that.

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Sherron: Well, thank you so much Trisica for bringing all that wonderful information and once again, we're not answering, we're not solving world problems. We are just having really good conversations and hopefully we're getting our listeners out there, we're getting you listeners to think, to ask questions, and to engage in your own robust conversations on all kinds of topics and particularly more of what's going on.

Trisica: Thank you for having me.

Sherron: You're so, so welcome.

Anthony: Thank you for participating.

Sherron: And thank you everyone for listening to today's episode of Inclusive Excellence Podcast. And if you liked this episode, please leave us a comment and like us on SoundCloud to let people know about the podcast. You can also send us email at what, Anthony?

Anthony: ie-academy@cornell.edu.

Sherron: Fantastic. And if you or a fellow colleague would like to be interviewed on an upcoming episode, please email us at ie-academy@cornell.edu. My name is Sherron Brown.

Anthony: My name is Anthony Sis.

Sherron: And thank you for listening to another episode of the Inclusive Excellence Podcast and thank you to our guests, Trisica Munroe. Yay.

Trisica: Yay.

Sherron: And of course, our wonderful sound person.

Anthony: Bert.

Sherron: Bert.

Anthony: Sound engineer. Thank you so much.

Sherron: Bert Odom-Reed, thank you so much.

Anthony: From Cornell Broadcast Studio for making us sound wonderful each and every episode