

CONNECTING THE DOTS

● ● ● ● ● BY ILISE HARRIS ● ● ● ● ●

Authenticity is a buzzword. We can either take something and make it our own, lending it authenticity, or we can preserve it in its original form to retain its authenticity.

Globalization and immigration continue to broaden the definition of beauty. Follow the dots—we are all connected, somehow, in this vast tribe of humanity.

I recently did the make-up on a shoot for a Halloween costume based on the character Shuri, the superhero princess from the blockbuster movie *Black Panther*. The perfectly symmetrical pattern of white dots painted on her face was a riff on the tribal markings used by many tribes in Africa.

Shuri reminded me of my safari honeymoon in Kenya many moons ago. We'd seen teenage boys of the Masai tribesmen, who had just been ritually circumcised, wearing white-dot face paint. This memory came flooding back to me as I recently started seeing dots again, sometimes in bright colors and in a variety of patterns on women of color on the streets in New York.

I pitched this trend story to *Make-Up Artist* magazine, and off I went on a field trip to Curlfest for inspiration. Curlfest is a giant annual outdoor festival in Prospect Park, Brooklyn—primarily for women of color who embrace their natural hair. I went to steep myself in this unapologetic celebration of Afro-centric beauty. I was on the hunt for women wearing dots, carrying a colorful handful of Kat Von D Beauty Tattoo Liners in my purse!

When I teach make-up artists, I always ask them to ask themselves: *Who, What, Where, When* and *Why?* Without a backstory, without context, without knowing something about the history and evolution of style, we are empty vessels putting forward cookie cutter technique. As artists, we need to make choices—mascara, no mascara, sheer lip or saturated, complexion, matte or dewy? Making thoughtful decisions is what keeps our work authentic, fluid and meaningful.

Fashion and beauty often borrow from indigenous cultures; think how Ralph Lauren's designs came straight from Native American motifs. We've become more sensitive to appropriation, the act of taking from a culture without permission. There is a debate even within the African-American community about whether it is OK to wear dot make-up. In the blog *OkayAfrica.com*, there was a discussion about this. Zipporah Gene says, "On the scale of global issues, I admit this is petty, but it is something that should still be addressed. It won't be long before Zara starts selling tribal face paints."



Photos by Ilise Harris, permission granted by Curly Girl Collective, curators of CURLFEST - the world's largest natural beauty festival

And award-winning writer Demetria Irwin says, "White supremacy has had hundreds of years in the United States to do an insidiously excellent job of separating black people in this country from their African roots in every way. To shame or fault African-Americans for seeking to reclaim and exalt that very same culture is missing the mark." Irwin concedes to Zipporah's point about African-Americans being capable of cultural appropriation, but insists that, "This particular argument ain't it."

I spoke to Carmen Webber, stylist, designer and founder of Conscious Threads L.L.C., who's been wearing dots for 20 years. She said, "It's my living protest to the way indigenous people are still treated today, all over the world. I'm paying homage not only to Africans, but to Australian and Native American aboriginal peoples."

Africa is home to an estimated 3,000 tribes. Tribal make-up can represent hunting, religious or military activity. It can be used as a social marker—distinguishing boys from men, and men from elders. It can convey status and tribal identity. This type of make-up may include facial tattoos or scarring.

Colors are universal in their meaning. Red signifies urgency and danger, purple royalty and luxury. Blue brings peace and calm. Green is for life and growth. Yellow is joy and warmth, white purity and light. Black can be many things, among them power, mystery and drama.

Attending Curlfest brought the dot trend into context for me. Thousands of mostly African-American women gathering on the grass in Prospect Park to revel and claim their natural, authentic beauty. I saw grandmothers and children. There were vendors selling haircare products, jewelry and clothing. After so many years of oppression—even by the cosmetic and hair industries—it was a joy to see so many women owning their goddess. **MA**

KEY PRODUCTS:

For this story, I created all the lines and dots with Kat Von D Ink Liners in Neruda, Woolf, Bukowski and Trooper Black. For the brows, M.A.C. Shape + Shade Brow Tint in Taupe. For the highlighter, M.A.C. Mineralize Skinfinish in Gold Deposit. And for the lips, I used M.A.C. Mattes in Stone, In the Spirit, Deep Rooted and Matte Royal. I used Dressed Up from Hairstory on model's hair; it's only sold through hairdressers (shophairstory.com/www.shopDirectLink/300154169).



“Globalization and immigration continue to broaden the definition of beauty. Follow the dots—we are all connected, somehow, in this vast tribe of humanity.”

—Ilise Harris



Make-up and hair by Ilise Harris (IliseHarris.com)
Model: Ilene @krushmgmt
Photographer: Georgia Nerheim (Georgiaphotonyc.com)
Body sculpture (pages 45, 46) on loan from Great Stuff, New York





