

Audio Title: Tamela J Gordon
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Transcript

Rebekah Borucki: Hey, friend! I heard you were looking for our spot and I'm here to help you.

So, you're going to go past the corner bodega and down the block from the fresh cuts barbershop, and there you'll find a brick row house at the intersection of Literature Place and Social Justice Blvd. That's where you will find the stoop.

Our host Amanda Lytle will be there to welcome you to the conversation. *The Book Stoop* is the place for the hottest takes on book culture, nerd culture, current events, with best-selling authors, change-makers, and risk-takers, our favorite kinds of people.

I'm Rebekah Borucki, President of Row House Publishing, and this is season two of our podcast. Thank you for listening.

Now, I'm going to let you get to Amanda.

Amanda Lytle: Thanks Bex. Hey friend. Let me be the second to welcome you to our spot, *The Book Stoop*. I feel incredibly honored to be the host of this podcast and I'm so grateful to have you here.

Today on *The Book Stoop* I'm speaking with Tamela J. Gordon. Tamela is a New York-bred, Miami-revitalized, New Orleans lustin' Black writer, book critic, self-care coach and performer.

Her platforms are dedicated to providing content and resources for marginalized people in need of self-care. Online she's the founder of Black Lit Book Club, a virtual book café that centers, promotes and critiques Black literature. In the conversation today, Tamela shares the back story to hood wellness and where the exploration of affordable self-care practices began, particularly for marginalized intersections of identity.

Tamela talks about life as a nurturer, emotional growth, the power of community and online spaces and the three phases of her personal teeth journey offering some insights on establishing boundaries.

Before we jump in, I want to invite you to share *The Book Stoop* with your community. If you're loving this episode, grab a screenshot and tag us on Instagram, @rowhousepub. Every share, five-star rating and written review helps us find more listeners and climb the charts. So we're super grateful for your help.

I've asked Tamela our rather fitting question that we ask when we start *The Book Stoop* podcast, recognizing as well that she has just moved and settled in as we start this conversation. So I ask, "What are you reading these days?"

Tamela J. Gordon: I am currently reading Tarana Burke's *Unbound* and it's really good. But I love it because Tarana has been a contributor in the book called "How We Fight White Supremacy," which I believe was released if not late 2019, then 2020, as well as the book that she just edited with Brené Brown, *You Are Your Best Thing*.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah.

Tamela J. Gordon: So, you know, she has kind of been giving teasers for the past couple of years and it has been so amazing to read her full voice. You know, no limitations, no kind of essay or quick snippet. Just a pure Tarana Burke and it's really good, very easy read.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah, I've heard fantastic things about it. I remember listening to Tarana on Brené Brown's podcast like well over a year ago and I was just so blown away. I was like oh my gosh, I need to read everything by Tarana Burke.

Tamela J. Gordon: Yeah, yeah.

Amanda Lytle: Because she's just beautiful. She's so stunning. Yeah.

Tamela J. Gordon: And it's a really great pairing honestly. I know that there were a few naysayers that had their – I shouldn't say judgements because Brené Brown had a hand in it and essentially "You Are Your Best Thing" is an anthology that is all about shame resistance and fighting humiliation and all of the things that come under the umbrella of racism.

It is exclusively written by Black people and there was an attitude from some that's like, "Well, why would Brené Brown have anything to do with it?" and I love that they addressed it in the intro, for the fact that like Brené Brown is a shame-ologist, you know, and she's very transparent in admitting that there are avenues that are not her lane and then is not something that she can study or really get a grasp on.

So she really just wanted to add what she knows and what she understands about shame resilience, and it just made such a perfect amazing pairing. I think everyone should read that book. *Unbound* is, you know, of course amazing as well. But for anyone that is in the shame resilience kind of part of their journey, *You Are Your Best Thing* is really outstanding.

Amanda Lytle: I really admire that about Brené Brown that she just owns her shit, and she knows what her lane is, and she stays in it.

Tamela J. Gordon: Right, right? It's a transparency for me. You know, I love that. I love that so much about her.

Amanda Lytle: OK, this is great. I'm so excited to be speaking with you. I have a couple of questions and I would love to dive into what hood wellness means to you in the back story there.

Tamela J. Gordon: OK. You know, hood wellness is all about inclusive, free to cheap self-care practices, rituals and routines and I have been really – start advocate for self-care for people who navigate marginalized intersections since – I guess I would say like late 2015 and I have hosted a lot of vision board parties. Actually I had a self-care fair in – I think it was 2018 and Rebekah Borucki actually did a really adorable little seminar about vision boards.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah.

Tamela J. Gordon: And, you know, that was the basis of it and even as someone who – you know, I'm a Black queer woman. I've only looked at self-care through my own intersection and just, you know, I would talk to people about like, you know, sometimes a bubble bath is just really good and then I would get feedback. Like well, I don't have a bathtub or I'm too fat to fit in a tub or there is no tub in my rehabilitation center.

It just really got me thinking about, “Well, what does water therapy look like for people who don't have access to it? What does aromatherapy look like for people who can't afford \$10 essential oils?” things of that nature and it basically took me on this journey of getting to the root of self-care and how it really is all about healing and growth and manifesting intentions and release and I started to compile everything that I had learned and known up until this point about what that looks like. That's essentially what hood wellness is.

I finished with the book proposal for it, and I've written a good chunk of it so far and it's really dedicated to people who are involved in social justice, those who have physical or emotional or mental handicaps, those who are, you know, navigating issues that aren't really addressed in mainstream self-care. That's what it's all about.

Amanda Lytle: This is fantastic. I have a couple of questions. OK.

Tamela J. Gordon: Yes.

Amanda Lytle: So I want to go back to the water therapy and aromatherapy. You hit a great point when you said not everyone has a bath. Not everyone can fit in the bath. Not everyone can afford the aromatherapy. So what are some suggestions? Like what are some things that you offer and talk about that offers a substitute or an alternative to this?

Tamela J. Gordon: Well, regarding water therapy, anything as basic as a foot soap or turning off the television and any background noise when it's raining, you know, listening to a waterfall playlist while you're meditating or cleaning or even before you go to bed as well as sitting by the ocean or lake or anything that one would have access to.

When it comes to aromatherapy, I think it's when you think of smell, it really is like such a huge part of the human experience for those of us that have access to that sense and when you think

about even your childhood, certain smells that invoke certain memories. I know for myself, you know, cleaning with Fabuloso, I instantly think of my abuela.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah.

Tamela J. Gordon: And I think of Saturday mornings, and I think of like stacks of pancakes and just, you know, running around in my jammies until like two o'clock. You know, it takes on a different meaning when you use it with intention. Of course like I use it when I'm cleaning up regardless.

But when I am mindful enough to say, you know what, I really want to be present while I'm cleaning and really smell it and really think about that, it takes on another level. Of course, you know, things like fragrances and incense. But again there are so many smells that we have access to that you don't think about. Certain foods that your parents or your grandparents might have cooked, and that smell brings you right back to that place.

You know, that's what Black beans do to me. That's what certain stews do to me, and I will actually literally cook that and incorporate those herbs so that I have those smells in my house. I mean it really does wonders to the mood.

Amanda Lytle: So when it comes to social justice and equality and the book and how it's being written, I'm curious about format. But we can come back to that. What it's offering, you were talking about the intersectionalities in different communities and I'm so curious about what this book is offering. OK. I guess we will talk about format. In terms of format, I'm so curious.

Tamela J. Gordon: Yeah. What is the format?

Amanda Lytle: Yeah.

Tamela J. Gordon: It's essentially broken into five different sections on groups that I know of to be marginalized and how their self-care would differ and how it looks. So for example, the first section relates to self-care for people who participate in social justice and especially for those who have skin in the game, those who are Black and brown and marginalized genders. It's going to take a hell of a lot more than a bubble bath and a day spa, right?

Amanda Lytle: Uh-huh.

Tamela J. Gordon: So it's how to have boundaries. It's a self-care routine that has to involve and incorporate things that nourish what's lacking from doing that work and so it has to include solitude and boundaries so that there isn't an excessive amount of turmoil and negativity and giving what you don't got.

You know, boundaries are major act of self-care, and it also looks like hydration because for many of us, our bodies are our source of protest and everything from stress and violence literally. You know, in the book I talk a lot about mothers of the movement who happen to be the mothers

of Black men and children who were murdered by the police and unfortunately, a lot of these mothers and also daughters and girlfriends have died prematurely or have physical ailments that have been created from this work.

Some of them is Erica Garner who was – I believe he was only 27 and she only lived two years after her father I believe, Eric Garner, who was murdered by the police in I want to say 2013. In the last two or three years of her life, it was documented that she had attended more than two dozen protests. She also had a heart attack moments after giving birth and then died after having another one three weeks later and this was someone who her final years were really spent protesting and it is well-documented.

She would say very often in the news that she was tired, that she was so tired, that she never had time to grieve. Kalief Browder's mother was another woman who died of a heart attack and then there is Diamond Reynolds who was the girlfriend of Philando Castile, who has dealt with a myriad of depression, PTSD, all from being beside that kind of violence and losing a loved one so graphically, so painfully, so publicly, you know, and of course we think, well, those are the more drastic examples.

But the reality is a lot of us don't know the weight that this movement does to us until it's too late, until the doctor is telling us that we've got diabetes or that, you know, the blood pressure is getting to a point of no return and that's why it is important that for those of us who practice self-care, that it is truly tailored to our lifestyle, to our intersection as well as to what it is that we're trying to accomplish.

So I discussed about those who are in social justice, and I also touched on those of us who are trying to work with very little. You know, those of us who don't have a limitless bank account and what does that look like. Those of us who are focused on emotional growth and, you know, that looks different as well. Therapy is self-care. Meditation is self-care. Reading is self-care and all of these things are super important. But it varies based on where your intersection is and what it is you're trying to accomplish.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah. Even when you just said therapy, it's just like money signs, cha-ching, cha-ching. Like therapy in itself, if you don't have access to benefits of some sort, like it's so expensive.

Tamela J. Gordon: It really is, you know. I have a talk therapy, you know, and even more. It's like 145 a month and that's the cheapest that I've ever had therapy and even that is not really cheap, you know, at all.

Amanda Lytle: Right. No. Yeah, great point. You also mentioned a lot of things that just prove that it's through such a holistic healing style of lens. Like it's so inclusive. But it's very holistic. You're looking at an entire being and what they're coming forward with and that's why I think why this really hits the cord of my heart. I'm loving this because you're able to recognize that not only does everyone have the – like you said the limitless bank account to afford this stuff.

But everybody's story and everybody's trauma and everybody – just who they are as an individual, how they've taken things, how they receive things, what they do for work, where they live, the climate that they live in, all of this stuff.

Amanda Lytle: Absolutely.

Tamela J. Gordon: Yes, it's part of their being. It's part of where they're at in this moment.

Amanda Lytle: Absolutely. If self-care is not intersectional, then there's a really good chance that it is not going to speak to those who need it most. It must be. It has to be.

[Music]

Amanda Lytle: Hey, friend. We are coming straight back to *The Book Stoop* after a quick break.

Amanda Lytle: You also mentioned boundaries earlier and this is something I feel like the word "boundaries" I've heard more in the last couple of years than ever. But they are so freaking important for our overall well-being.

Tamela J. Gordon: Absolutely.

Amanda Lytle: They're hard, they're hard to establish, right?

Tamela J. Gordon: No, I know, I know, especially when you – a lot of times I feel like I am child-free and single, right? And, you know, I'm going through a journey. Actually it's about my teeth and I call it three phases and the first phase was I had to have full – I want permanent implants and in order to have that, in order to have something put in, they're going to take something out and I always knew that – I was in dentures and that I was going to need full extractions.

So the first phase was that and I realized when I was doing that how accessible that I had been to people, how accessible that I had been to peers and family and friends and call me. I'm going to pick up on the second ring and you stop by and there I am and there I realize like there's going to be a period of time where a bitch has no teeth in her mouth and I'm not going to want to do and I'm not going to want to video chat and I'm not going to want to talk late at night or early in the morning.

I'm going to be scared and I'm going to be hungry and I'm going to be confused and I really felt like I was super good with boundaries before that until I realized that I needed boundaries to protect my accessibility and I could not believe how difficult it was for me to say to someone I am not picking up the phone after 8:00 anymore and I am not answering any questions about my *hell [0:17:41] [Phonetic]* until I am prepared to talk about it.

I'm not willing to be accessible on this way that I was before because of that and more often than not, you know, we respond to boundaries almost like a trauma response. You know, like you did this. Now I'm doing that and that's how we do it. So this is how I'm going to do it too.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah, reactive.

Tamela J. Gordon: You know exactly totally reactive as opposed to being proactive where it's empowering and it's like, "Wait a second. What do I need or what is it that I need that I'm not getting?" and I need to create a guideline here. So that I have a little bit of buffer and I can get it and I can get used to trying to strive for it without apologizing for it or marginalizing myself and my time and things of that nature.

So I love talking about boundaries because it's like you said, it's such a buzzword right now. It's such a thing. You know, boundaries, boundaries, and it's one of those things. It's a shadow work. You hear about it so often and then it becomes so hard to understand how to put it into practice, you know.

So I was really – I'm still looking forward to that section in hood wellness to talk about what it looks like to create a line of defense and a kind of curated guideline that protects us from ourselves and from other people as well.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah. You've shared a really – like thank you for sharing that, just a personal experience even just with this teeth transition because that for you has actually provided you with such a concrete set of proof I guess really as to how strong your boundaries were, like how set in stone they were, right?

Tamela J. Gordon: Yeah, yeah.

Amanda Lytle: But so many of us I think we don't really have that where it is so distinct. It is so defined. Like this is where you're at in this moment where, yeah, you were forced to pause and really reevaluate like what boundaries do you have and where do you need to alter them.

Tamela J. Gordon: Yeah, yeah, and I was able to do it in a way that was empowering without being reactionary because the thing was that I didn't want anyone – and it's a funny thing, you know. The boundaries and creating them are our business and then the reaction that everyone has to them is their business. So it's so super challenging trying to create it in a way where I'm not being an asshole. You know, it's a non-negotiable and it's super hard at first and I think the hardest part is really understanding that it's a necessity. You know because we get so used to not treating ourselves and our needs. Like it is a necessity.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah.

Tamela J. Gordon: And the reality is that it is, and I was really fortunate that I had this window of time on when I realized when I found the right dentist and we went through the procedure and what that was going to look like and that I was able to sit down and say, "OK. Where is my

window of availability and when is that window going to be closed and what is this going to look like for me to tell my loved ones, you know, I know that we're used to having this dynamic but it's just not going to be possible?"

How prepared – you know, preparing myself. There's so much feedback that's very passive. You know, people get really weird when they can't have unlimited access to you and it can come in the form of condescension and passive aggression, you know, and it was really important that I didn't focus on that because I had done enough research on self-care and physical health and emotional health to know that right now I was kind of like entwined in all of it.

So my physical health and my healing was dependent on my mental health and my emotional health and so I do feel as though I did organically, but I feel like it worked with itself, you know, because it – and I had always loved the feedback that I got. But I always felt good after saying it.

Amanda Lytle: Right. Yeah, accurate and it's – the more you understand about emotional and mental well-being and what you need as a person, it's also the ability to understand that other people's reactions and responses are their own. You know, it has nothing to do with you. But even understanding that when you're first starting to navigate people's reactions to your boundaries, it's like, "Oh, shit. I've pissed them off."

Tamela J. Gordon: Right, right, absolutely.

Amanda Lytle: You know. I know.

Tamela J. Gordon: Absolutely.

Amanda Lytle: OK. I have a question about the creative process now with writing this book and recognizing that – you had also mentioned solitude because we've all been forced into a variety of spaces that isolation is a thing, right?

But when it comes to isolation and solitude, in my opinion, they're quite different. So solitude, you've mentioned earlier is so necessary. It's so important and I want you to talk a bit about the creative process and how taking time for solitude has helped you with this creative process and what the creative process in writing hood wellness has been like.

Tamela J. Gordon: It's so funny that you ask me that because in 2019, I relocated to Miami from New York, and I did it with the mentality of diving into solitude. You know, I lived with my family. I always had roommates. You know, I never lived on my own. So I was like, "This is going to be so amazing. You know, I'm like going into my Diane Keaton era of life and I'm going to live by myself and drink huge cups of coffee in the morning," and it was so effing adorable until the pandemic hit.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah.

Tamela J. Gordon: And the solitude quickly turned into isolation, and I lived in a little neighborhood called Little Havana and it is primarily Cuban and I'm Cuban, but I don't speak Spanish. So I was surrounded by people who didn't – we didn't even carry the same language and there was this constant barrier, and I knew that – you know, I had been working on hood wellness for years and I knew that if I was going to get it on paper, I was going to have to get the hell out of Miami.

So I actually came here to New Orleans for two months and I got to keep that locked and it was exactly what I needed because it allowed me to be in a city and be able to be seen without, you know, party time or being on anyone's schedule and it really helped.

My writing style is a lot like Toni Morrison's where she says it in her documentary *The Pieces I Am*. She wakes up really early in the morning and she said, you know, the morning I am super sharp. But by 12:00, I'm kind of regular.

So I get up super early and I just allow myself to write and because I am a stay-at-home writer, I'm able to really curate my whole day around my ideas, you know, and I do tarot card readings and a lot of that witchy stuff.

So my whole day really is centered in creativity. But I get most of my best writing done in the morning honestly.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah. So besides morning, when do you feel most inspired? Is there an event or people that you talk to, things that you listen to, music, rituals?

Tamela J. Gordon: I normally feel most inspired after a couple of hours of reading, specifically reading something that has nothing to do with what I'm writing.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah.

Tamela J. Gordon: Yeah. Right now I'm loving a lot of trashy street-lit.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah. It's like escapism.

Tamela J. Gordon: Exactly.

Amanda Lytle: It just pulls you away so far from your reality.

Tamela J. Gordon: Exactly, you know, because being a writer – I'm a high school dropout and I am not – I'm not affiliated with any kind of network or group of people that, you know, gives me a stature. So I always felt this pressure to be super perfect. You know, every comma has got to be where it needs to be, and it has got to be really clean and really perfect. It has only been in the past couple of years that I realized like my strongest shit is the stuff that I just like to write and then – and done with it.

So I really enjoy a few hours of reading something out of the box and then getting back to my original stuff and writing it and being so focused on what it is that I have to say that I'm not like, "How is the format? Does it sound right?" and this is going – you know, and just kind of like shitting it out honestly.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah. In this writing process of writing hood wellness, has it been something you've had to walk away from and come back to?

Tamela J. Gordon: Absolutely. Specifically in writing about emotional growth and what self-care for emotional growth looks like because I have my own growing to do. So there are always these moments where I'm like, "Bitch, are you sure you've got this down to a science?"

Amanda Lytle: Right. And after writing about it. I know what you mean. It's like that impostor syndrome.

Tamela J. Gordon: Right.

Amanda Lytle: I get it.

Tamela J. Gordon: Yeah, absolutely. You know, and I write a lot about the power of self-awareness and every time I write about it and talk about it, I have to laugh because I'm waiting and there always will be a moment like within 72 hours where I do or say something where I have no sense of self-awareness.

Amanda Lytle: It's a test.

Tamela J. Gordon: I need to read that chapter, yeah, yeah. Another aspect that I write about is the spiritual act of minding your business. The obvious part of not gossiping and no bad mouthing, you know. But it's also about how we invest our time in things that have nothing to do with us and how we, you know, can kind of pour into things that really we don't need to pour into. You know, sometimes we have to walk away from that because there is that weird feeling of again – you know, especially being – when you're a marginalized gender.

I feel like we just have this like, this matriarchship in our heads where it's like we have to nurture, we have to fix, we have to kind of be there. We have to mediate and so there's also – I'm constantly vacillating the fact and I know the importance of minding my business and being self-aware. But I definitely do not have it down to a science. But I still know how important it is.

Amanda Lytle: Oh, totally. That sounds like there's such a connection though even to that still continuing to grow and evolve, connecting back to being needed with the boundaries, right? Where you had to take time for yourself and other people's reactions were like, "Um, hello! I still need you," where it's that instinct we just need to jump at what they need, right?

Tamela J. Gordon: Yes, absolutely, absolutely.

Amanda Lytle: I would love to ask you a little bit about online spaces and maybe just that the constant that they provide because you have done a lot of moving in the last few years and I know that online spaces and online communities can be such a source of nourishment too. So can you talk a bit about that?

Tamela J. Gordon: Absolutely. The first online space that I created was back in 2017 and it was – it's a Black lit book club and it's completely centered in literature written by Black people, specifically Black marginalized genders. But every now and again, I will put *a dude* [0:29:34] [*Phonetic*] in there.

It grew really quick and the quicker it grew, the more it got overwhelmed and I was like, whoa, and there is just like this influx of white women that wanted to quote Maya Angelou all day and just really, you know, show off how much they love the classics.

But there was a gap in their connection with modern Black literature and with other genders of Black literature. That was my first space that I did and it's still going, and I still love it. But since then, I have created another group called [0:30:15] [*Indiscernible*] and it is specifically for Black marginalized genders and it allows us to really – you know, we talk about what we're going through. We laugh at memes and we're even playing a trip in 2022 here in New Orleans and that's another group.

Then a third one which is the nicest, most adorable white lady from Oakland, and she has a self-care group, and I was a member of it and there was one day when – and it's like 55,000 members so far I believe. There was one day where there was a conversation that took place about trans-people and it really went off the rails and this woman just – you know, bless her heart. She's like 61 years old. She did not have the tools to navigate this conversation in a way that was safe and effective and basically kind of pulled her coattail a little bit and let her know, you know, holding space, it isn't easy. But if you're going to do it, you got to do it right.

We had a couple of conversations about that and then she added me on as an admin. So it's literally just me and her who run this group of 55,000 plus people and I have trained the moderators of the group to know how to hold an inclusive space without – you know, just the things that normally happen, the micro aggression and the – you know, I did an interview earlier this year with a woman from the Washington Post because she wanted to know the complexities of being a Black woman and facilitating spaces on Facebook and I had to explain to her the irony that, you know, this group of 55,000 women and they talk about everything under the sun. The group that there has never been an issue that we couldn't handle.

How a group of marginalized woman that is less of 200 women, we are constantly getting reported and flagged and warned for the most miniscule issues and so it's incredibly challenging trying to facilitate space for specifically Black women and without question, it anchors me in the sense that in the depth of my isolation, I've had these spaces where I can come in and be like oh my gosh, you guys, like I am really lonely today or I am really tired of eating mashed potatoes and, you know, seedless smoothies.

I can really share things with them that I wouldn't – maybe not put on my pages and it allows us to build and express ourselves without that weight that comes with social media. You know, you got to stand upright and you're only as good as your last tweet and you got to get everything right all the time. You know, I don't really facilitate those kinds of spaces.

Amanda Lytle: Uh-uh. No, the expectation of them. My gosh.

Tamela J. Gordon: Right, right.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah. Oh, this has been so beautiful. Thank you. I wanted to give you the opportunity to give a shoutout to an account, a person, an organization, disruptor, activist or change agent.

Tamela J. Gordon: The Black fairy godmother Simone Gordon. Yeah. She is an amazing, amazing philanthropist and a fundraiser who is based in New Jersey and her entire platform is devoted to raising funds and resources to black and brown families who are going through everything from domestic violence, poverty, unemployment, and she is just so amazing. She's constantly inspiring me.

Amanda Lytle: Fantastic. I will link that account. This is fantastic. Thank you so much for being a guest on *The Book Stoop*.

Tamela J. Gordon: Thank you. This was a lot of fun honestly. This is the most fun I had in this bathroom.

Amanda Lytle: Oh, good luck with your move too. That's a huge deal.

Tamela J. Gordon: I know. Thank you so much.

Amanda Lytle: Thank you so much for being with us. Please be sure to follow us on your podcast app and leave a rating where you're able. Written reviews help us reach more listeners too. Be sure to check out the show notes for all the links and share *The Book Stoop* with your community. Talk soon.

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