

Being Black, Doing Black, and Shedding Light on Grey Areas

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Playlist Pairing:

'Black' Dave, 2019

'Breathe' Ella Mai, 2021

'Introvert' Little Simz, 2021

'If Not My Heart' Mega, 2022

'Keep Ya Head Up' 2Pac, 1993

"As we come more into touch with our own ancient, noneuropean consciousness of living as a situation to be experienced and interacted with, we learn more and more to cherish our feelings, and to respect those hidden sources of our power from where true knowledge and, therefore, lasting action comes"

– Audre Lorde (1984) "Sister Outsider", p.37

"*I Feel Lighter*" are the main words that will stick with me, possibly moreso than any research project I've ever undertaken. They were spoken immediately after we'd finished our creative workshop on Race and Mental Health. They resonated most because for the first time in a long while, I really felt it too - perhaps could really "*Feel!*" all of it - but mostly because the irony just felt so on brand for our themes and their dedication to trying to unpack contradiction and where all the identities entangle (i.e. being black, being a cambridge student, being a black cambridge student). So, to hear that an outcome of a project that could've had the potential to be so dark on paper, especially *here* at Cambridge right now in light of tragedy ongoing, especially *here right now* in light of the antiblackness that continues to surround us on all sides; even given how dark some of the content we'd engaged with in the session was (although thankfully from an ethics POV we were able to flip into something with action room owing to this method)... but yeah, instead, people were leaving feeling "*Lighter*". *Wild*.

"Caring for myself is not self-indulgence. It is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare"

- Audre Lorde (2017) "A Burst of Light: And Other Essays", p.130

After the year of "black squares" and vacant stares through yet another antiracist taskforce meet whilst *actual* action's proposed, it's genuinely really easy to forget just how *right* the words of our forebearers, the same ones so often decorating the walls and social media feeds of well-meaning people, actually were, and *continue* to be, for real. That's just being honest. Regardless of exposure, it's easy to disconnect with things when there's so much to be up against inside and outside of work, so this time round it felt powerful to reinvest words and who we are (including behind the scenes) back into the approach and to see what might grow. Whilst my second APP cycle (I did MH previously), this is personally my first ever research

inquiry which sought to deliberately *do black* - in material alignment with particularly black feminist and queer black feminist ideas of embracing contradiction and centring practicalities of community and a need for care - vs seeking to simply extract ideas about Black or "Suffering" in a hope that we might somehow pin it down or fix big 'unique' problems, such as attainment or antiblackness in their own standalone right. Especially when, as our project reiterated, there are practical crossovers which remain a problem that's completely cyclical and interconnected, and most importantly self-sustaining, even at research level. Context matters, and so does how it all fits together as something dynamic.

"For Black women as well as Black men, it is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others - for their use and to our detriment"

- Audre Lorde (1978) *The Black Scholar*, vol. 9, no. 7

With our limited scope, we just wanted to identify some simple "ins and outs" that might be actionable but, again, the field's gaps made it pretty huge to try and work out. The exact concepts (i.e. practical Nuances beyond Mental Wellbeing as good/bad, Representation, Excellence) we wanted to talk about didn't really seem to exist, even though - as a team of Black student researchers who had been through it all (and...well, in some cases *been through it*, you know) - these were, frustratingly, occurrences we saw everywhere we looked, *just never on paper*. Granted, we discovered that some concepts i.e. excellence or wellbeing or representation as a recruitment pyramid perhaps weren't written down for good reason because it's actually incredibly hard to find the words for what they are and even moreso for what they *do*, and what that does to a person sometimes, but ultimately if it's having an impact that can be adjusted we'd benefit from knowing. However, particularly from an underrepresented researcher perspective, a vast part of the struggle is finding an inquiry approach that doesn't just *add to the problem* i.e. enhancing mental health struggle or a demand to make people speak for things beyond them - it's not simply a matter of guidelines, this is real lives we're trying to assist and, often, these are the people doing the actual work we're trying to do and they're doing enough. So, how best to do that well?

"Even those of us righteously committed to black liberation struggle, who feel we have decolonized our minds, often find it hard to "speak" our experience. The more painful the issues we confront the greater our inarticulateness... Indeed, a fundamental task of black critical thinkers has been the struggle to break with the hegemonic modes of seeing, thinking, and being that block our capacity to see ourselves oppositionally, to imagine, describe, and invent ourselves [...]. Without this, how can we challenge and invite non-black allies and friends to dare to look at us differently, to dare to break their colonizing gaze?"

- bell hooks (1992) 'Black looks', pp. 2-3

Therefore, from the beginning, we chose to focus the research on what might generate not just the questions but the *environment* for actual honesty, useful contradiction, and ideally some 'light', especially given it's to discuss the problems which arise when those things are explicitly denied; at the very least, we said let's practice what we preach. The general ethos was that *Here you speak only for yourself, and of what's true in this moment even if that clashes with how you try to be perceived usually; even if it's "silly", even if it isn't "excellence"*; context matters and we can't join the dots without that information. I feel that we did our best, or at least tried, even if only as a tiny ripple in the water of our challenges - for once, at least in the moment whilst in the room with the participants, it felt more like taking a swim in said water vs drowning in it - including from a researcher ethics perspective. The workshop format definitely made space for that in my opinion.

"We cannot truly tell what we consider to be our own histories without knowing the other stories. And often we discover that those other stories are actually our own stories."

- Angela Davis (2015) *Freedom is a Constant Struggle*, pg. 135

Don't get me wrong, the overall process itself was difficult and not at all without challenge; I think we probably all - in true black cantab fashion - exceeded the allocated time expectations within about 2 weeks (mostly finding shared free time that still worked when it came around, or intensely researching inexcusable knowledge gaps) yet it took months longer than planned; then illness; rep work; deadlines; mess, but at least the collection when it came around felt clean. It properly caught us off guard. We hadn't really factored in *the scale* that shame (and free labour) kept people from accessing the 'hacks' that make this place doable - even if only ever just about; the dedicated efforts to propagate invaluable capital for access using our position which were directly emptying opportunity pockets - how much we'd do it all again in a heartbeat - but also how much we'd never really questioned whether it really *is* the *bare minimum* expectation, or just *for people like us*? Or that if we *didn't* do it, to what scale would the university be harmed and not just the students we want to reach out to, given what excellence does, and sorts out, and what it *sells*. A lot of questions beyond our scope but hopefully there's now a case to be made for asking them strategically.

"There are no new ideas still waiting in the wings to save us... There are only old and forgotten ones, new combinations, extrapolations and recognitions from within ourselves - along with the renewed courage to try them out."

- Lorde (1984) "Sister Outsider" pg. 38-39

So, again, the process hasn't been without challenge, and definitely not without limitations, but in the end we arrived at: deep topics, but also fire playlists; mutual support from strangers, and also (often much needed) criticism against self doubt from people who don't even know you; Genuine Academic and maybe self Discovery; jokes about - regardless of actual shades

- “how black” a place like Cambridge makes you, whilst celebrating the wealth of what that offers via a different ‘inspired/adjacent’ format which made space to just be whatever black is that day.

“We need to focus more on those black intellectuals, however rare our presence, who do not feel this lack [of connection to organic black culture] and whose work is primarily directed towards the enhancement of black critical consciousness and the strengthening of our collective capacity to engage in meaningful resistance struggle”

- bell hooks (1990) Postmodern Blackness

And then, naturally the main reason behind our inquiry, we still made Black-centred mental health research; connecting dots across previous APP research cycles; potentially, stumbled upon a new theory on how representation work forms an entire loop here at Cambridge, maybe even labour economy, in light of the insider hacks actually needed to survive here - nods at how it might intersect with concepts such as self-efficacy to thrive, as well as (another) nod at the *real* work and the *real attainment* marginalised students are engaging with every day...just *not on paper*. A small scope granted, and it's bigger than us without doubt, but hopefully now there's practical ways to consider what we might discover if we create the conditions for people to be themselves in relation, not to ideals, but to each other and what they're collectively up against. Hopefully it becomes something, but if it doesn't, I won't forget (however small) what staying afloat felt like and the words - even those parroted in lieu of support - that remind us that hope and, more importantly, *real action* will always be within our reach if we ensure that we continue to push for it on our own terms however messy they might be.

The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The Black mother within each of us - the poet - whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free.

- Lorde (1984) Sister Outsider, pg38