

'Do I even belong?'

Interrogating Afro-diasporic navigation of Identity, Race and Space in the search for Belonging

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This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature: Anita Mwango Moragia

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INTRODUCTION

The departure point for this creative project is based on my experience as an African living in diaspora.

While I felt many things during my time 'away' from the African continent, one constant was always this feeling of unbelonging, and this need to find belonging. As such, this project centers around the theme 'finding belonging in diaspora'.

Growing up in Kenya, I had never really come to terms with the politics of my Kenyanness not to mention my blackness. I had simply just been me. While in Kenya, the only real identifiers I had to contend with that carried heavy politics were my gender and my tribal affiliation. After leaving Kenya and arriving in Canada for school at the age of 16, for the first time in my life I felt black and I felt African. Both identities I felt did not belong in this Canadian space.

Over the course of 9 years, I lived in both Canada and London and neither ever warmed me like home. In most, if not all the predominantly white spaces I frequented, I always felt too little of something and too much of something else. As such,, I found myself intentionally and unintentionally drawn to those like me, in colour, in language, and culture. It is only today I have realised that those intentional and unintentional unions I formed were a result of my search for belonging, which I came to find is common in the diaspora experience.

Ann Hua, a black diaspora scholar, defines diaspora as a community of people who have been dispersed from their homeland to other locations because of genocide, slavery, migration, and war (Hua, 2013; 31). It's important to note that for many, induction into the Afro-diaspora is involuntary. As Hua notes, political unrest, genocide, war, and slavery has forced many to leave their homes and either seek asylum or become indentured laborers elsewhere. We have seen this throughout the eras, from the 15th-century trans-Atlantic slave trade, capturing of Africans, transporting them to the Americas and coercing them into slavery (Gates Jr., 2017), to the 20th-century dispersion of Rwandese nationals fleeing genocide§ (Guichaoua, André & Webster, Don E. 2015). The identity of diaspora comes in both anticipated and unanticipated ways. Fortunately, my induction into the Afro-diasporic community was a voluntary one and the bulk of this project interacts with voluntary Afro-diasporic migrants.

During my time in Canada and London, I met many members of the Afro-diasporic community who ended up in these countries in a variety of different ways and for a variety of different reasons. The theme of 'finding belonging' was omnipresent among my fellow Afro-diasporic community members and it would manifest itself in various ways. For instance, wanting to go to African restaurants to feel more '*at-home*', or wanting to visit African night clubs to listen to more music from '*home*'. Interestingly, I also began to see that this journey towards 'finding belonging' also manifested in Afro-diasporic communities rejecting assimilation into their new societies and creating spaces of resistance, through organising protests or hosting discussions that centred around issues of race.

I soon came to realise that this Afro-diasporic journey of 'finding belonging' was deeply rooted in notions of race and identity and because of the complex histories Western societies carried surrounding identity and race, Afro-diasporic communities living in these societies have constantly found themselves oscillating between resisting these spaces or assimilating within them.

As a means of creatively exploring how notions of identity, race and belonging manifest in the context of Afro-diaspora, I have created a mixed media online platform entitled *melaninthecity.com*. Through a combination of feature articles and photography projects, this platform digitally interrogates the experiences surrounding assimilation and resistance, of over 40 different Afro-diasporic people across Canada, the UK, and the US.

To critically assess the meaning of these experiences against contemporary scholarly theory, I have accompanied this creative project with the below critical reflection. Within this reflection, I will examine how existing theories surrounding race, identity and belonging interact with emergent themes within this project and further how these themes contribute to wider discussions surrounding diaspora.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To translate the inspiration behind this project, I need to retrace the theoretical framework I used to inspire the theme of this project - '*finding belonging in diaspora*'. Below, I recount key arguments given by academic theorists who have contributed to scholarly conversations surrounding identity race and belonging in the context of diaspora.

National Identity, Nationalism and Diaspora

The earliest recorded and probably most pertinent scholarship surrounding national identity can be traced back to Benedict Anderson's theory of imagined political communities. In the early 1980s, Anderson coined the term 'imagined political community' to describe national identity as a shared mindstate of kinship (Anderson, 1991; 6). Anderson described the community as imagined because he believed that "even the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them or even hear from them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson, 1991; 6). Secondly, he describes it as a community because he believed that "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail, the nation is always be conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (Anderson, 1991; 7).

Anderson's theory of imagined political communities contributed to discussions on national identity in two ways. Firstly, it divorced the idea that national identity was confined to a political geographical boundary and instead resituated it as an identity formed in the mind. In doing so, Anderson relocated the idea of national identity as a state of mind as opposed to a state of place, thereby, opening up this idea that nationalism not only belonged to those inside the physical and

geographical boundaries of the nation but that it also belonged to communities outside these boundaries. This becomes an important observation to make when we later discuss how national identity and nationalism interacts with diaspora.

A few years later British academic, Michael Billig added to Anderson's theory on national identity. While Billig, agreed with Anderson that the genesis of national identity began in one's mind (Billig, 1995; 70), he further extended this argument claiming that national identity was influenced and maintained by individuals' differences, specifically - historical differences. Billig believed that while national identity was a state of mind, for this identity to exist individuals needed to understand the difference between 'us' and 'them' (Billig, 1995; 61). He reasoned that if something or someone was foreign and different to ourselves, only then can we begin to understand our national identity as something unique to us and foreign to them (Billig, 1995; 61). For Billig, national identity is a state of mind that is predicated by an understanding of one's historical difference to others. Each community has a different history to another (Billig, 1995; 70) and all nations are not borne out of the same history, instead, they have multiple and diverse histories, borne out of multiple and diverse struggles for hegemony (Billig, 1995; 71). Within these historical differences among nations, communities within these nations sharing similar histories surrounding hegemonic struggle, congregate in their imaginaries under a shared national identity. For instance, my national identity is Kenyan and according to Billig as someone who identifies as Kenyan, my Kenyan identity only exists in opposition to other nationalities. Therefore, the reason I am Kenyan is because I am neither Ugandan nor Tanzanian. As a Kenyan national, my history of becoming is not the same as that of Ugandans or Tanzanians. I only share this national history with fellow Kenyans and because of this our shared histories and sameness within this national context connects us across our imaginaries under a united Kenyan national identity but it also differentiates us from those who do not share the same history.

However, national identity is not a stagnant mindstate that simply sits as a vacuum in the mind. It is also physically and systemically performed in various ways through acts of nationalism. National identity influences the physical performance of nationalism in various ways such as the celebrations of national holidays, the singing of national anthems and the wearing national colours. These are all examples of how communities of people belonging to certain nations perform their national identity as a means of celebrating their national identities but also differentiating themselves as belonging to one nation and not the other.

While Billig's argument also highlights national identity as a construct of the mind, his argument rests on how national identity is predicated by historical differences. Specifically, how these differences influence the physical and systemic performance of nationalism in various ways and how these performances establish more physical and temporal boundaries between communities of different nations.

Anderson's theory of imagined political communities and Billig's theory on national identity are parallel. Both scholars refute the idea that national identity is confined within the physicality of a national border and agree that the construction of a national identity rests within the locus of the mind. While Billig's argument also highlights national identity as a construct of the mind, his argument rests on how national identity is predicated by historical differences. Specifically, how

these differences influence the physical and systemic performance of nationalism in various ways and how these performances establish more physical and temporal boundaries between communities of different nations.

Thus far we have explored how national identity and nationalism are constructed and performed within the physical and geographical boundaries of the nation. However, it's important to explore how national identity is navigated by communities living outside of the nation. Recontextualising this conversation to include this project's community of interest, the Afro-diaspora, below I expand on how notions of national identity and nationalism manifest within this specific community of dispersed people.

The New African Diaspora, Racial Performance and National Identity

Earlier, we defined 'diaspora' to reference communities of people who have been dispersed from their homeland to other locations for both voluntarily and involuntarily reasons (Hua, 2013; 31). However, it's important to revisit this definition, to specifically include the experience of our community in-focus, the Afro-diaspora.

Black diaspora scholars Heyd and Honkanen coined the term 'New African Diaspora', to define a voluntary migration of people who have their origin in Sub-Saharan Africa and contribute to a globally dispersed diaspora -distinct from the historical African diaspora that came into existence through forced migration, such as slave trade (Heyd and Honkanen, 2015;16). Unlike 'the old African diaspora', coerced into systemic slavery, Heyd and Honkanen describe the 'new African diaspora' as a community of voluntary migrants, who are highly educated and socio-economically successful people (Heyd, Theresa & Honkanen, Mirka, 2015;17). By Heyd and Honkanen's definition, this project specifically interacts with participants of the New African Diaspora community; migrants who came to be through voluntary mobility from the African continent to the US, Canada, and Europe, who are educated and also occupy a moderate socioeconomic status.

While Heyd and Honkanen define the New African Diaspora to be a community with more agency, mobility and economic stability than their predecessors, the 'old African diaspora', scholars such as Delphine Fongang might argue that despite having better education and enjoying a higher socio-economic status, the condition of all diasporic subjects is that they will never fully belong anywhere (Fongang, 2013; 46). This is because they will "constantly struggle to assert their subjectivities in spaces that marginalise them" (Fongang, 2013; 46).

Comparing, Fongang's theory on diasporic communities constantly enduring unbelonging, against Billig's theories on national identity being predicated by historical differences, we begin to see how a feeling of difference, in the context of diaspora, ultimately contributes to feelings of unbelonging. Considering we are discussing a community that is racialised, it becomes increasingly important to consider how difference and un-belonging in the context of diaspora, are affected by the complexities of race.

Contributing factors surrounding race and marginalisation affect how national identity is performed in the context of Afro-diaspora. Some critical race theorists agree with Fongang that, feeling 'unbelonging' in the context of Afro-diaspora informs how these communities perform their racial identities as well as other subsequent identities thereafter.

Previously, I explained how nationalism is a performance of national identity. Scholars Harry Elam and Kennel Jackson supplement that racial identity can also be a performance, particularly in the context of Afro-diaspora. They explain that throughout the history of the African diaspora, the performance of racial identity has always existed (Elam, Jr. and Jackson, 2005; 223). Black people have historically been known to use, dance, music and other cultural mediums to symbolise what it means to be black and by extension, what it means to be white (Elam, Jr. and Jackson, 2005; 224). In the same way, Billig explained that national identity exists in opposition to those who are different from us, Elam and Jackson reason that Afro-diasporic communities have always existed and performed their identities in opposition to dominant white communities as a means of highlighting their marginalities.

Performance of black identity in the context of diaspora "has always been an expression of black consciousness and the product of the interactions between blacks and the dominant white culture" (Elam, Jr. and Jackson, 2005; 223). Afro-diasporic communities use racial performance not only as a mechanism for asserting the marginalities of their identities but also as a tool for surviving the racial inequalities within the nation (Elam, Jr. and Jackson, 2005; 224). Scholars such as David Guss have argued that racial performance can be used by marginalised communities to criticise the racial inequalities within the nation, but it can also be used to influence a change in the conditions of said marginalised communities (Guss, 2000; 8-9).

While Elam and Jackson unveiled how racial performance has historically been used by Afro-diasporic communities, their referencing remains archaically rooted in the experiences of 'the old African diaspora'. While the 'new African diaspora' may be a more contemporary diasporic community, who experience greater freedoms and access than 'the old African diaspora', it's important to recall that despite this, new diasporic communities still experience systemic racism and marginalisation (Fongang, 2013; 46). While new Afro-diasporic communities possess certain privileges that previous generations did not have, it is evident that they are still entrapped in societies that discriminate and oppress them. This situates Afro-diasporic communities as existing in a dual state of access and oppression, thereby probing the question, how do new Afro-diasporic communities navigate the performance of racial identity in their new diasporic settings? Especially considering these new Afro-diasporic communities are entangled in societies that continue to racially marginalise them, while also granting them access in ways earlier generations of Afro-diasporic communities did not have.

Cosmopolitanism vs. Assimilation

Considering Afro-diasporic people are both a migrant and marginalised community existing in an ever-globalising world, the topic of cosmopolitanism becomes crucial to discuss in its relation to identity, race, and diaspora.

In *Cosmopolitanisms: New Thinking and New Directions*, Jeffery Holton defines cosmopolitanism as a term derived from the Greek word *cosmos* -meaning world, and *polis* -referencing a self-governing political community (Holton, 2009; 4). When both terms are brought together and housed under the theory of cosmopolitanism, they aim “to represent the idea that citizenship can and ought to be founded on a worldwide community composed of citizens of the world or cosmopolitan” (Holton, 2009; 4).

In *Cosmopolitan Vision*, Ulrich Beck reasons, to truly achieve a cosmopolitan city, individuals need to “break out of the self-narcissism of the national outlook” (Beck, 2006; 2). Holton paraphrases this rejection of self-narcissism by the individual in the cosmopolitan city to mean that individuals who are living together in the same world are obligated to help each other and/or be tolerant to each other’s values and different ways of life, irrespective of cultural differences and geographic borders (Holton, 2009; 4.) Both Beck and Holton present cosmopolitanism as an idealistic theory that congregates all individuals irrespective of race, creed or class, in a utilitarian approach to advocate for the greater good for all.

Due to increased access to media and the migration of people between borders, cosmopolitanism has become less about political obligation and more about how travel and experiencing different people and cultures makes us feel more at home (Holton, 2009; 2). Even in its contemporary definition, universality and homogeneity are still concepts that remain central to cosmopolitanism and cosmopolitans alike. However, it is this assumption of a global homogeneity and universal equality that cosmopolitan theory is most criticised for. By reasoning that ‘belonging’ comes from more international travel and intercultural relations, cosmopolitanism assumes the following. Firstly, that everyone has the means to voluntarily travel, which rejects the experience of those who are forced to travel, as a result of captivity or in search of asylum. In doing so, cosmopolitanism fails to recognise the harsh realities of coerced travel, such as xenophobia, racism, and anti-immigration, all of which contributed towards imparting feelings of unbelonging and fear on diasporic communities involuntarily travelling under these circumstances. As a theory, cosmopolitanism fails to account account for the experiences of marginalised communities, instead, it favours elites who enjoy the privileges of voluntary travel and whose national belonging divorces them from the marginalising experiences of xenophobia, racism, and anti-immigration. Elijah Anderson illustrates these shortcomings of cosmopolitanism in his presentation of the cosmopolitan canopy.

The cosmopolitan canopy is derived from Anderson’s experience at the Reading Terminal Market in Philadelphia. He describes this market, which is sheltered under a canopy, to be a highly diverse market of shops and restaurants offering a multitude of goods and services (Anderson, 2011; 31). Within this canopy, Anderson observes Italians, Jewish, Asians, and Black communities eating lunch together, homeless people strolling and enjoying unhindered access to public washrooms (Anderson, 2011; 36). He goes on to share that regardless of race, creed or class, people are interacting with each other despite their differences and at some points even discussing them (Anderson, 2011; 38). He attributes the physical proximity of the individuals in the market as contributing to an increase in familiarity and direct engagement amongst patrons of the market (Anderson, 2011; 58). The harmony and intercultural fellowship observed in the

cosmopolitan canopy is sustained by the civility of its patrons to each other. When individuals behave courteously to each other, they construct a neutral setting whereby all can exist peacefully (Anderson, 2011; 66).

Despite the cosmopolitan canopy's seeming ability to peacefully congregate diverse people in one place and have them interact across racial, cultural and socio-economic lines, Anderson cautions that outside the cosmopolitan canopy, in the public space, there remain realities of racial tension and intolerance (Anderson, 2011; 43). The realities of racial tension and intolerance in the public space highlights the systemic challenges faced by marginalised racialised groups in contrast to the privileges faced by dominant white ones.

As a result, the cosmopolitan canopy becomes exposed in constructing a false impression of intercultural fellowship, in a context where marginalised communities are still affected by the realities of racial, social and economic inequality.

Scholars such as Kelly Woltman and Bruce Newbold would add, the civility adopted by marginalised communities in the cosmopolitan canopy is a form of assimilation. Meaning, that these communities have adopted a practice that works to culturally, socially and economically incorporate them into white-dominated societies (Woltman and Newbold, 2009; 72). As such, the practice of civility by marginalised communities in the cosmopolitan canopy becomes rooted in assimilation and works to accomplish two things. Firstly, to harmonise marginalised communities with dominant white communities. Secondly, to assist these marginalised communities to leverage harmonisation with dominant white communities and gain social advancement (Woltman and Newbold, 2009; 72).

Illustrating Identity, Race, and Civility in the Afro-diaspora

Much like Anderson's cosmopolitan canopy, the cities Afro-diasporic communities inhabit are small and compact urban spaces that house diverse communities of people. Similar to the close interactions observed within the Reading Terminal Market, Afro-diasporic inhabitants within the cosmopolitan city also remain in close proximity, interacting with other diasporic and local subjects from different parts of the world. However, because national identity is predicated by an acknowledgment of difference (Billig, 1995; 61), it is only natural that the intercultural interactions these communities experience will eventually highlight the intercultural differences between community members. The social and systemic marginalisation Afro-diasporic communities face in their everyday interactions within the cosmopolitan city will exacerbate the differences between them and dominant white community members. This highlight the privileges dominant white communities have, while also highlighting the privileges Afro-diasporic communities do not have.

Upon feeling marginalised by their host country, Afro-diasporic communities will likely lean on performing their racial identities in various ways to counter the dominance of white supremacy that oppresses them in the cosmopolitan city (Elam, Jr. and Jackson, 2005; 224). The performance of racial identity will likely assist these communities in feeling belonging but also act as a coping mechanism in aiding these communities to endure and possibly overcome some racial inequalities.

However, it's crucial to caution that the performance of racial identity by Afro-diasporic communities could risk upsetting the neutrality of the cosmopolitan city in two ways. Firstly, overt performances of racial identity by Afro-diasporic communities will likely reject the cosmopolitan city's assumption of a cultural equilibrium, and as a consequence, read by privileged white elites as an unnecessary antagonism of the city's peace. Secondly, considering the cosmopolitan city is controlled by dominant white elites, upsetting their assumption of a cultural equilibrium by performing racial identity and exposing racial inequalities, marginalised individuals within this community could risk further social and economic disenfranchisement.

Therefore, Afro-diasporic communities are likely to employ characteristics of 'civility', in order to harmoniously assimilate into white-dominated societies as a means of avoiding further disenfranchisement. In this way, civility becomes a tool used by Afro-diasporic communities to neutralises racial performances by way of assimilation.

In his article, *Preserving white hegemony: Skilled migration, 'Asians' and middle-class assimilation*, Jon Stratton argues that ethnic differences have always been used to distance migrant diasporic communities from achieving middle-class status (Stratton, 2009; 16) and as such, these communities have had to adopt 'assimilation' as a tactic of survival to maintain and/or attain social and economic advancement in white-dominated societies (Stratton, 2009; 16).

Putting together the above theories, it's evident that cosmopolitanism fails to acknowledge or offer solutions specific to the marginalization of Afro-diasporic communities. Instead, as a theory, it expects these communities to neutralise their marginalities and use 'assimilation' as a form of currency to obtain social advancement. Considering the societal suppression of this marginalised community, the question arises, what tool can we use as scholars to better understand the marginalities of Afro-diasporic communities?

Is the Answer Intersectionality?

Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge's argue that cosmopolitanism fails to account for the intersectionalities of marginalised communities. Unlike cosmopolitanism, intersectionality interrogates the multiple layers of people's identities, such as race, gender, and sexuality (Collins and Sirma, 2016; 2).

While cosmopolitanism neutralises the complexities of individuals under the guise of a cultural equilibrium, intersectionality aims to understand these complexities as a means of empowering individuals, especially those that are marginalised (Collins and Sirma, 2016; 2). In contrast to cosmopolitanism, intersectionality does not assume equality-of-all but rather it acknowledges the inequalities of marginalised communities, as a means towards achieving the greater good for all. By nature, intersectionality rejects notions of civility and instead encourages individuals to embrace the fullness of their identities, if they are to be truly understood and empowered within a society. In comparing

intersectionality to cosmopolitanism, it seems that intersectionality emerges as the more superior approach towards achieving equality and justice for all.

Bringing It All Together

By exploring scholarly themes surrounding identity, racial performance, diaspora, and cosmopolitanism we begin to see how these theoretical arguments could potentially interact with the real-life experiences of Afro-diasporic communities in cosmopolitan cities.

As I unpack emergent themes observed throughout this project, I will question how Afro-diasporic communities use racial performance to oscillate between civility and resistance. I will specifically examine how and when these communities use civility, as well as communicate how its continued use, maintains the marginalisation of Afro-diasporic communities. Lastly, I will implement an intersectional approach towards observing and discussing the experiences of Afro-diasporic participants of this project, as a means of comprehensively analysing how intricacies within identity might be influencing various communities and sub-communities within Afro-diaspora, respectively.

I hope to conclude this reflection, with new insights on how the above themes contribute to conversations surrounding how navigations of identity, race, and diaspora are predicated by overarching systems of power.

ON BUILDING MELANIN THE CITY

As previously mentioned, this project was inspired by my own experiences living as part of the Afro-diaspora in Toronto, Vancouver, and London. I wanted to select participants whose experiences and nuances I could relate to and implement as I built a reflexive and comprehensive project. As such, all the participants in this project are from Afro-diasporic communities, predominantly based in either North American or European settings.

In conceptualising this project, I wanted to convey as complete a picture as possible of the contemporary Afro-diasporic experience within a Western city and how this community navigates different aspects of city-life. To do this, I knew I had to list the overarching factors I felt contributed to individuals' experience of a city; I came up with the following eight categories:

1. Academia
2. Entrepreneurship
3. Entertainment
4. Health
5. Identity
6. LGBTQ+

7. News
8. Social

After settling on the eight areas of interest, I decided to do a mixed-media exploration of the diasporic experience and thus split the project up into two sections; feature articles and photography projects.

Feature Articles

This project includes six feature articles under the categories, *Entrepreneurship, Entertainment, Health, LGBTQ+, News and Social*.

I began researching the different Afro-diasporic communities contributing to these areas of life in their various cities. Soon after, I shortlisted individuals of interest, I sent out invitations to interview potential participants. The feedback I received was generally positive, with people willing and eager to participate. After securing 7 interviews, I began drafting interview questions for each of the participants. In drafting these questions, I was careful to give enough room for participants to tell their stories while still ensuring that the questions remained within the themes of the project. Each interview was carried out via phone. While it was difficult coordinating time difference all interviews went smoothly with little going amiss.

However, there were some minor ethical obstacles, seeing as I needed to record each interview. To maintain transparency, I asked each participant for their consent to be recorded and carried on with the interviews. Thereafter, I asked the participants to send me any relevant media about their work. After this, I wrote feature articles accompanying each recorded interview and published each article under its relevant category on the website.

Photography Projects

This project includes two photography projects under the categories, *Academia and Identity*.

The photos taken for the *Academia* category were taken in London, UK when I was completing my first masters at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Within the first couple of months of classes, I noticed the word decolonisation floating around a lot and was quite puzzled. Lecturers and students were constantly calling for the decolonisation of the curriculum but reading packs were still very centred around white male scholars. At the same time, I was having conversations with fellow black African female Academics who had enjoyed learning all their lives but found it frustrating that Academic spaces were still revolving around the white-male experience. I wanted to explore this tension between black African female academics and predominantly white-male Academic institutions through photos. Thus, I solicited each of these women and asked if I could take a photo of them and hear their thoughts on what their Academic

experience as black African women in the diaspora has meant to them. In total, I photographed 8 women and asked each to write a short paragraph expressing their relationship with knowledge and the institution of knowledge.

The photos taken for the *Identity* category were in Vancouver, Canada shortly before I moved to London. Two more unarmed black men were shot and killed by white police officers and soon after there was a congregation at the Vancouver Public Art Gallery, protesting the continued killing and treatment of black people in the US. Over 200 people gathered; black identity and black diasporic experience was the topic of the day. As I had attended many gatherings like this prior, I wanted to memorialise the power of the moment and volunteered myself as the photographer of the day. I wanted to capture the pain and power Afro-diasporic people experience during times like these, where feelings of otherness and marginalisation surrounding identity were heightened. As such, I took my camera and my whiteboard to the gathering and approached Afro-diasporic community members asking if they wanted to be photographed defining what Blackness meant to them. Most were receptive and I managed to get a diverse amount of quality photographs. Considering it was an emotionally volatile time for the Afro-diasporic community, some ethical considerations I had to make were to ensure I was approaching people in a warm and consensual manner, to avoid triggering or re-victimising participants. Additionally, I had to ask for participants' consent to re-publish photos once edited, to which all who took part were comfortable with.

Although both these sets of photos were taken before my acceptance into this Graduate program, they remain powerful encapsulations of the direct and diverse experiences of Afro-diasporic communities. The visualisation of these communities juxtaposed against their quoted experiences, is provocative and epitomises on-the-ground voices of the Afro-diaspora. Excluding them from this project would have been a disservice to its purpose.

Naming of the Project, Building the Logo and Buying the Domain

The name of this project is called '*Melanin The City*' and correspondingly, the name of the domain is called *melaninthecity.com*.

'*Melanin*' refers to the "the dark brown to black pigment occurring in the hair, skin, and iris of the eye in people" (Oxford, 2019). Considering the project explores the experiences of Afro-diasporic communities in cosmopolitan cities, the name '*Melanin the City*' was the perfect way to convey the Afro-diasporic experience because it truly epitomises what it means to navigate cosmopolitan spaces as a marginalised identity.

I also constructed the logo of the website to reflect this experience. Using *Logomaker*, I designed the logo of the project to reflect an illustration of a city on the left, and on its right side -a quill completing a script. The words '*Melanin the City*' rest strategically within the constrict of the logo. Cooperatively, all the moving pieces of this logo represent the story of a marginalised community in a city being told. By juxtaposing the quill and architecture of the city against the words

'*Melanin the City*', helps communicate that, the stories of those with melanin, those of black diasporic identity, -are still being told.

REFLECTING ON MELANIN THE CITY

As I reflect on this project in its entirety, I will comment on emergent themes observed in each category and comment on how these themes interact with the above scholarship, before expanding on overarching themes observed throughout the project as a whole.

Feature Articles

Entrepreneurship: *Peppeh Dem! Redefining Branding with The Peppeh Company*

Upon reflecting on this article featuring the Toronto-based black-owned company *Peppeh-co.*, it was important for me to consider the context in which a black-owned business in Canada is operating in.

Research argues that traditionally, white immigrants from Europe to Canada have established institutionally complete ethnic enclaves, of which their ethnic businesses are a big part of (Texeira, 2001; 2056). Contrastingly, African and non-white immigrants in Canada have struggled to establish these institutionally complete ethnic enclaves due to racial discrimination either in the labour force or when it comes to accessing resources to start a business (Texeira, 2001; 2056).

However, for those African and non-white immigrants that do manage to gain access to entrepreneurship they do so for two reasons. The first is that they are trying to escape racial discrimination in the labour force by owning their own business and the second is that they feel they offer a unique and profitable cultural characteristic to the market (Texeira, 2001; 2056-2057).

In contextualising *Peppeh Co.*'s existence within a Canadian context, it becomes clear that owners Clarence and Emmanuel's decision to start a branding business underpinned by their African heritage is because they felt their cultural heritage was a defining characteristic in the Canadian branding industry.

"My business partner is Nigerian, I'm Ghanaian and when we think about other marketing firms, we try to think about what differentiates us. We both came to Canada as international students. We both went to North American universities - everyone else has. We've both worked for fortune 500 companies -everyone else has. What was different was our experience and upbringing in another world" Clarence said.

As a business owned by two Africans in the diaspora, it's evident that *Peppeh Co.* not only uses African heritage as a cultural performance to assert visibility in a traditionally discriminatory space but also to ascertain economic gain. Elam and Jackson would argue that *Peppeh Co.* is performing the racial identities of its owners by highlighting cultural heritage

as a business approach. As a result, the company is increasing the visibility of minorities in a traditionally marginalised industry, as well as challenging the racial segregation within it (Elam, Jr. and Jackson, 2005; 224).

While the visibility of businesses like *Peppeh Co.* in the Canadian market inspires fellow entrepreneurs within the Afro-diasporic community to offset their culturally-inspired businesses, it does not directly challenge the specific systemic barriers hindering marginalised entrepreneurs. Anderson would contend that while *Peppeh Co.*'s visibility in the Canadian marketplace may represent some kind of diversification, it still exists in neutrality to the white status quo.

Considering the company does not directly challenge or speak up against the racially prejudiced systemic barriers in the Canadian marketplace, it exists peacefully and in cohesion with dominant white businesses (Anderson, 2011; 66). However, it's important to remember that a direct interrogation of the marketplace through overt racial performance, in this case, could risk upsetting the white status quo, which in turn could result in social and economic disenfranchisement of *Peppeh Co.* As such, *Peppeh Co* uses civility as a tool to socially assimilate and economically advance in the white-dominated marketing industry.

Entertainment: Heard it Through...The Grapevine TV Show!

The entertainment industry in the US also has a history of stifling black narratives and systemically obstructing the participation of marginalised communities in the industry.

Dating back to the 19th century, the use of blackface¹ by white actors to ridicule black people through minstrelsy (Stanfield, 1997; 411), to the lack of black actors nominated for Academy Awards, prompting the movement #OscarsSoWhite (Zaru, 2018), the US has a heavy history of erasing black narratives from the entertainment space. As such, black narratives in the entertainment industry have always been controlled by the gatekeepers of the space; White Hollywood. However, since the inception of social media, that dynamic has slightly shifted.

Recent developments of social media platforms, such as YouTube, which allows users to mediate their own stories, has revolutionised how Black people regain control of their narratives from a predominantly white entertainment industry. By having a majority Black cast discuss topics directly affecting black people, *The Grapevine TV* is using YouTube as a medium to reclaim black narratives from white Hollywood. As outlined in the accompanying feature article, *The Grapevine TV Show* ensures that black narratives remain in black custody, by ensuring that topics discussed are those directly affecting black communities and that the panel discussing these topics are predominantly black. This is to ensure that topics discussed include critical race perspectives that contribute towards decolonising narratives and exposing the systemic racism in various parts of US culture.

¹ White actors using burnt cork to paint their faces black as a means of depicting black people (Stanfield, 1997; 411).

As a television show that still operates within the wider fabric of the US entertainment industry, it's evident that *The Grapevine TV Show* exists counter to white Hollywood. Elam and Jackson would contend that *The Grapevine TV Show* is using YouTube as a platform to perform racial identity and marginality as a means to illustrate what it means to be black in the US and by extension, what it also means to be white (Elam, Jr. and Jackson, 2005; 224). Anderson would supplement, by its direct interrogation of white supremacy through mediated discussions, the show also rejects the illusion of harmony and intercultural fellowship that white Hollywood purports. As a result, *The Grapevine TV Show* rejects any civility that might be required to assimilate into the norms of white Hollywood (Anderson, 2011; 66). This is because civility includes the adoption of neutrality (Anderson, 2011; 66) and in this case, neutrality means accepting the current status quo, which is racial inequality in US entertainment and the continued occupation/erasure of black narratives by white Hollywood.

In this particular case, YouTube arises as a platform that provides marginalised communities a space to construct a counterculture against white Hollywood and white supremacy in general. The affordances of the platform enable black initiatives, such as *The Grapevine TV Show*, to publish content that reclaims black narratives, address racial inequalities and also disrupt white-dominated entertainment industries.

Unlike *Peppeh Co.* opting to adopt civility as a means of assimilating in the white-dominated Canadian marketplace, *The Grapevine TV Show* adopts resistance and perhaps the reason for this is an entertainment landscape might be more forgiving of overt racial performance than a more corporate landscape.

Health: *Running While Black with Run Plus Co*

"It's interesting because we always see white people running," *Run Plus Co.* Founder Ayo said. While this sentence may make it seem like running-for-leisure is a racial preference, it is actually more complex than that.

While at first *Run Plus Co.* seemed to have come to fruition by accident, upon further reflection on this article and its implications on the narrative surrounding Afro-diasporic health in Toronto, *Run Plus Co.*'s existence appears to be more intentional than not.

In our feature article, we saw how barriers to safe secure neighbourhoods and higher financial obligations, prevent Afro-diasporic communities from finding time and space to adopt running as a hobby. Therefore, it comes as no surprise when corresponding research shows that people from racial and ethnic minority groups have disproportionately sedentary lifestyles in comparison to white people (Marshall, 2007; 44). Leisure and race are historically intertwined (Shinew, 2004; 183) and as such we cannot divorce these implications from the experiences of *Run Plus Co.* and its racialised participants.

Afro-diasporic individuals who joined Toronto's *Run Plus Co.* expressed feeling safe and excited that the running club connected with other Afro-diasporic community members. The initiative not only asserts that running as a form of leisure

is something that can and should be normalised in Afro-diasporic communities but it also provides a space where Afro-diasporic individuals travel from their various spaces in the city and use running as a medium to bond over their cultures as well as their shared feeling of marginalisation from traditionally white running clubs.

David Guss would argue that in this case, running is used as a medium to form intra-community bonds as well as a racial performance to assert the visibility of Afro-diasporic people in spaces that have historically erased them (Guss, 2000; 8-9). Additionally, a group of black people running through the city of Toronto, becomes a performance of criticism, rejecting the narrative that “*black people don’t run for leisure*”. While *Run Plus Co.* does exist to directly antagonise and resist the neutrality of the white-dominated cosmopolitan city in the way *By Blacks*, *Limitless Africans* and *The Grapevine TV* do the racial politics embedded in access to leisure implicate its participation encouraging diversity in spaces that have traditionally lacked it.

Run Plus Co shows less resistance to the white-dominated society than it’s fellow Afro-diaspora initiatives, *The Grapevine TV* and *By Blacks*. Perhaps this is because, while the participants of *Run Plus Co* are Afro-diasporic community members, they are also individuals who occupy middle-class status. As such, their adjacency to upper-class white elites makes them less likely to participate in initiatives that risk antagonising the status quo and jeopardising their social advancement.

LGBTQ: *Limit(less) Africans Reconstructing Africanness & Queerness*

We already know that Afro-diasporic communities are traditionally marginalised but LGBTQ people within these communities are marginalised even further by their queer identity. Therefore, in reflecting on this section of this creative project, I implemented a more thorough intersectional approach to fully unpack emergent themes.

Acknowledging the queer intersection of the LGBTQ Afro-diaspora helps to understand the marginalization that this community endures across both race and sexual orientation. It also acknowledges that this group of people endure a specific type of marginalisation in contrast to their heteronormative Afro-diasporic counterparts.

Research has shown that while kinship within African communities has traditionally been regulated through marriages, said marriages have not necessarily always appraised monogamy the way we do today (Morgan & Wieringa, 2005; Murray & Roscoe, 1998). Many instances of polygamy and same-sex relations are been shown to have existed and socially accepted in precolonial African societies (van Zyl, 2011; 338). However, scholars argue that during colonisation, the implementation of Christian marriage and policing of sexuality gave rise to the normalization of heteronormativity on the African continent (van Zyl, 2011; 338). In underscoring heteronormativity as culturally ‘African’, queer identity becomes seen as un-African and belonging to the West.

Contextualising this in a diaspora setting which founder of *Limitless Africans* Mikael Owunna is operating from, the queer identity of Africans in this space is seen as a direct influence of their current Western setting and mutually exclusive from

their African identity. Therefore, individuals in this setting are marginalised across two dimensions; queerness and blackness.

In retaliation, Owunna's project visually portrays these two identities as existing in an intimate duality. Using photography as a visual medium, Owunna asserts a counter-narrative, where African and queer identity can and do exist in tandem, outside of Western influence. This feature article arguably illustrates the most racial performance of this entire creative project because it highlights two marginal identities; Africanness and queerness. Photographing queer black individuals donning African attire becomes a performance of both queerness and race.

Owunna's photography completely rejects notions of civility and assimilation (Anderson, 2011; 66). This is because unlike their heterosexual Afro-diasporic counterparts, queer Afro-diasporic individuals face marginalisation across race and sexual orientation. As such, adopting civility means assimilating in the marginalising society that comes with it.

Therefore, as a means of asserting identity and resisting assimilation into oppressive white and cis-heteronormative societies, this photography project has unveiled how queer Afro-diasporic communities can use photography as a form of identity performance to normalise that both queerness and black Africanness are identities that can exist in tandem.

News: *Mediating Blackness*

"Right now, the media only has time for extremes and what that means for the black community is that we are covered in extremes; murder, mugshots and so on", Co-Founder of Canadian Magazine, *By Blacks*, Camille Dundas said in this article.

In this quote, Dundas touches on the age-old issue of narrative-control, that has historically plagued Canadian media houses. In his book *The Media Gaze*, Augie Fleras discusses how narratives produced by Canadian Media houses are controlled by white stream interests, who perpetuate Eurocentric agendas, which in turn, inform the prejudiced reporting of ethnic minorities by journalists (Fleras, 2011; 53). The constant prejudiced reporting of ethnic minorities by white-dominated media houses contributes to a prejudiced culture against minorities from the top-down. When bias media is produced from white-dominated media houses at the top and is consumed by the wider society at the bottom, the biases implicit within this media travel from the top-down. As a result, this transfer of bias not only solidifies a media culture that produces prejudiced narratives towards ethnic minorities (Fleras, 2011; 137) but it also contributes towards a societal consciousness that manifests in various prejudices against ethnic minorities. Media plays an important role in society because it determines "who is desirable in terms of race, gender, class, age and sexuality"(Fleras, 2011; 136) and when the media is biased, communities that are on the receiving-end of this bias experience discrimination and marginalisation.

Toronto-based media professional, Camille Dundas realised the power white-dominated media houses were having on black communities in Canada and in an attempt to reclaim black narratives she, along with her husband, founded *By Blacks*

-an online magazine that aims to tell the nuanced stories of the black Canadian experience. As seen in the accompanying article, *By Blacks* was not only borne out of black frustration but it was also intended as resistance against white-dominated media. The magazine directly counters negative stereotypes white media perpetuates by publishing positive and nuanced stories about the Black Canadian community. Additionally, as we saw in the feature article, as a means of encouraging its visitors to contribute towards the economic empowerment of the black Canadian community, the magazine also has an in-built directory of various black-owned Canadian businesses.

Contextualising this within our theory, it's evident that *By Blacks*, rejects the notion that everything is equal, specifically in the Canadian media space. In creating a platform to produce specifically black stories and media, *By Blacks* exists in direct opposition to white-dominated media houses. As such, *By Blacks* emerges as a platform that assists black Canadian communities to see themselves in a more nuanced light, as well as provide this community a voice of resistance, which challenges prejudiced narratives perpetuated by white-dominated media. Subsequently, *By Blacks* rejects assimilating in the neutrality of the cosmopolitan city because it understands that assimilation means being complicit in the illusion of racial equality, which in turn contributes to the continued marginalisation of black and ethnic minorities in the wider fabric of society.

Again, unlike *Peppeh Co.* but much like *The Grapevine TV Show*, *By Blacks* operates in a creative industry where racial performance can be seen as something creative as opposed to antagonistic. As such, initiatives like *By Blacks* don't risk social and economic disenfranchisement in the way *Peppeh Co.* might in a more rigid corporate industry.

Social: From Africa to Toronto, with love.

"I don't feel 100% Nigerian, but I don't feel 100% Canadian either. It's always been a feeling of being less of each one but more of something else and I'm just trying to find a middle balance", said Chinedu Ubakam, founder of Toronto-based social pop-up Supafrik.

As a member of the Afro-diaspora, navigating the social scene in your new 'home' can be an extremely daunting experience. Many diasporic individuals share Chinedu's sentiments in never really feeling like they fully belong and as such, they oscillate in this third culture space.

This is unsurprising considering the brazen discrimination of marginalised communities from social spaces that are deeply entrenched in Canadian history books. From the 1940's arrest of Victoria Desmond, a black woman who refused to give up her seat in a segregated theatre in Nova Scotia (Thompson, 2017; 145), to racist door policies barring black people from entering some of Toronto's high end clubs (Boles, 2016); the ostracization of non-white communities from social spaces is not new to Canada.

That is why Chinedu's initiative, *Supafrik*, is particularly sentimental for Afro-diasporic communities navigating Canadian social spaces. As an initiative, it caters to Afro-diasporic individuals who might feel conflicted over their social belonging and it also carves out spaces where these individuals are unapologetically themselves, in a way they haven't been able to do so before. In this space, traditional African cuisine is served, both traditional and contemporary African music is played, and various African customs are performed. *Supafrik* creates a space in Toronto and other major Western cities, where Afro-diasporic individuals can come into a space and feel belonging. Individuals meet with others existing as both Africans and members of the diaspora, and instead of awkwardly hanging in this third-culture space, they celebrate it.

As a curator of social events in the city of Toronto, *Supafrik* challenges both historical and existing prejudices the city imposes on marginalised communities and creates spaces where these communities can socially congregate as well as practice and perform their culture and heritage in the most potent of ways.

Supafrik exists to celebrate African culture in the diaspora and does not exist to directly challenge racist policies that dominate Canadian social spaces. Considering the intention of *Supafrik* is for individuals to unapologetically indulge in heritage and culture, the use of racial performance to foster spaces of belonging is distinct. The primary aim of *Supafrik* is to assist Afro-diasporic individuals to find belonging in their cities. While *Supafrik* is creating counter spaces to Toronto's social scene, it is still assimilating within the wider fabric of this society, without directly confronting the marginalising policies it perpetuates against its community members.

Again, it's important to remember that in the same way Afro-diasporic members of *Run Plus Co* occupied middle-class status, *Supafrik* members do too. In the same way, Afro-diasporic participants of *Run Plus Co* wanted to participate in an initiative that allowed them to feel belonging without risking their social advancement in white-dominated spaces, *Supafrik* participants also wanted to participate in an initiative where they could feel belonging in social spaces without risking their social standing in wider white-dominated spaces.

PHOTOGRAPHY

Academia is...

"I'd rather carry the 'stigma' that comes with being a black feminist than be complicit in my own dehumanization. That, to me, is what being a black/African woman in academia means".

This was a phrase one of the participants in this particular photography project referenced and I thought that it perfectly encapsulated the conflicting experience that black women endure in white-dominated institutions. By mediating the visibility of black African women in an Academic space, this photography project does two things. Firstly, it encapsulates the experience of Afro-diasporic female Academics by directly antagonising existing systemic barriers that exclude other

black African women from entering these spaces. Secondly, it disrupts the normalisation of white male supremacy in environments where knowledge is produced.

Traditionally, academic spaces in the West have always had systemic barriers in place, that have limited ethnic minorities access to these spaces. These barriers have resulted in lower enrolment rates of these communities into Academic institutions and even to this day, research continues to expose institutions offering both undergraduate and graduate programs, as having low minority representation in comparison to white representation (Gamez & Herda; 2010, 17).

This project focuses on the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and research from LSE's Department of Social Policy shows that black African candidates receive 5 fewer offer letters per 100 applications in comparison to their white British counterparts (Noden, Shine & Madood, 2014). The lack of diversity in institutions of higher learning becomes problematic because these spaces are the locus of society's knowledge production. When minorities are excluded from conversations surrounding knowledge production, their voices are silenced from the societal influence and their experiences erased. Also, the exclusion of minority voices and experience from spaces of knowledge production, disproportionately elevates white voices and white experience, thereby maintaining oppressive power dynamics that continue to marginalise minorities.

In this project, the minority community represented is both black and female. From an intersectional perspective, similar to black LGBTQ+ communities, it's evident that black women also experience two-dimensional discrimination, by virtue of their gender and their race. This project highlights the duality of those exclusions through the mixed-media use of photography and interview.

These photographs not only cement the presence of black African women in spaces that have and continue to reject them, but their accompanying messages also assert the nuanced experiences of Afro-diasporic women at Western institutions, (particularly one as reputable as the London School of Economics and Political Science). As a result, they re-centre the Academic interests of these women in spaces where their interests have historically been side-lined.

Collectively, this photography project acts as a racially performative tool in assisting this community to assert black and female identity as well as reject assimilation into institutions that continue to ostracise them and centre white male voices and experiences.

Similar to *Limitless Africans*, black female students at LSE also face discrimination across two dimensions. By virtue of this, these two groups experience more marginalising circumstances than most and are therefore more likely to use their racial performance to participate in initiatives and movements that reject assimilating into the very institutions that so heavily oppress them.

Blackness is...

This photography project arrived at a politically sensitive time, particularly for black people. I took these photos in 2016 at a Black Lives Matter protest in Vancouver, Canada. The protest happened after the shooting of two black men in the US; Philando Castille and Alton Sterling. Although both men were unarmed and unthreatening, both were still shot and killed by white policemen. Castille and Sterling's deaths came at a time where the killing of unarmed black men by white police officers seemed to be an increasingly popular headline in US news. When news broke of Castille and Sterling's deaths, black communities in North America were caught at a particularly sensitive time and came together in solidarity to protest the unjust killings of their community members. The photos in this project were taken at a protest in Vancouver, Canada, documenting how Afro-diasporic communities in this context identified with their black identities at such a politically volatile time.

An overarching theme that emerged throughout this photography project was resistance.

One of the signs explicitly read, "Blackness is RESISTANCE".

This comes as no surprise considering Afro-diasporic communities in North America have historically been treated disposably and as such, have had to collectively embody a characteristic of resistance. In a series of essays published in *The African Diaspora*, Niyi Afolabi argues that the experience of black people in the West has always been one of dispossession, dehumanization, and alienation (Afolabi, 1999; 315). From the 15th century institutionalisation of slavery, forcing black people to become indentured laborers under slavery, to the disproportionate killing of unarmed black men through to the 20th century; the violent treatment of black people in the US and the West in general, has been ongoing. As a result, acts of violence and injustices inflicted on black bodies have become desensitised and the continued disenfranchisement of this community has become commonplace (Afolabi, 1999; 315). In order to overcome these circumstances, black communities have had to adopt racial performance, in the form of protests and other acts, as a means of asserting their marginalities and confronting systems that continue to oppress them (Elam, Jr. and Jackson, 2005; 224).

The protest documented in this photography project perfectly encapsulates how a black community in Vancouver comes together during a politically volatile time and uses protest and identity-expression to confront racism. The physical presence of black bodies in a space that denounces the violence and oppression of minorities is not only a bold act of resistance but also a confrontation of the white-dominated systems that impose this oppression (Elam, Jr. and Jackson, 2005; 224). Further, the visual narration of identity embodied in these photos illustrates a temporary rejection of assimilation by Vancouver's black community, into a society that continues to disenfranchise them. I call this a temporary rejection of assimilation because the protest was held for only a day. Participants gathered, confronted racism and then returned to their daily routines the day after. As such, they continued to assimilate into the societies that racially profile and discriminate against them. While the majority of the protest members were black, it's important to note that they were also middle-class. As we have seen, the occupation of both black and middle-class identities presents a complex

decision to individuals, having to choose between assimilating into oppressive societies to secure their social status or rejecting these societies and risk further disenfranchisement.

Collectively, this protest and the photos that accompany it, illustrate how black communities in Vancouver stood in solidarity with black communities in the US, and used protest and photography as mediums of racial performance to highlight their marginalities and temporarily reject assimilation into the societies that continue to disenfranchise them. Considering their combined occupation of middle-class identity and their social and economic reliance on white institutions, participants could only temporarily participate in protests that antagonised oppressive white-dominated institutions in order to avoid jeopardising their social status.

OVERALL PROJECT REFLECTION

In considering the project as a whole, it's evident that in each category, racial performance is used by Afro-diasporic communities in two ways; either to create belonging or to resist oppression.

The initiatives that sought to create spaces of belonging for Afro-diasporic communities, such as, *Peppeh Co. Run Plus Co.*, *Supafrik*, were initiatives that outwardly operated in a culture of civility within oppressive white-dominated societies. In each of these spaces, there was no direct antagonism of racial inequality or overt resistance to white dominance, instead these initiatives just sought to simply run their projects or businesses. Anderson would argue that because of their impartiality to racial inequality in the cosmopolitan city, these initiatives exist in neutrality (Anderson, 2011; 66). As a result, they assimilate into the social, cultural and economic norms of their white-dominated society as a means of maintaining or attaining social advancement (Woltman and Newbold, 2009; 72).

As we saw in both the feature articles and reflection, these initiatives existed for the sole purpose of either, securing business, expanding the running club, or creating fun social experiences -fighting for racial equality came secondary or not at all. However, due to the politicised nature of racialised communities, the sheer existence of Afro-diasporic initiatives in traditionally white-dominated spaces becomes an act of resistance but the adoption of assimilation stifles any significant change.

Part of the reason some initiatives adopted civility as a form of assimilation, was because they depended on their initiatives for economic stability, resistance came secondary - if at all. The owners of *Peppeh Co*, *Run Plus Co* and *Supafrik* depend on their businesses for economic survival or occupied middle-class statuses as corporate employees in white-dominated industries. As such, implicating their businesses/initiatives in acts of resistance risked upsetting the white status quo their businesses/employment depend on, thereby putting their overall social and economic stability at risk. Therefore, adopting characteristics of civility as a form of assimilation for these black-owned businesses and initiatives not only becomes a tool for surviving white-dominated industries but it also helps in socially and economically advancing in them.

Of the Afro-diasporic initiatives in this project that sought to directly interrogate racial inequality, such as *The Grapevine TV Show*, *ByBlacks*, and *Blackness is*, were initiatives that used racial performance as a tool to resist oppression from white elites. All these initiatives used their racial identities in various ways, to expose and critique the racial inequalities and discrimination prevalent in their respective industries. Elam and Jackson would contend that each of these initiatives used racial performance to assert marginalities and confront the spaces that continue to oppress them (Elam, Jr. and Jackson, 2005; 224). However, even within these initiatives, we saw how social and economic status played a role in assimilating these initiatives into oppressive white-dominated societies. In the same way, *Peppah Co.* and *Supafrik* operate within the wider fabric of Canadian entrepreneurial and social spaces, *The Grapevine TV Show*, *ByBlacks*, and *Blackness is*, operate within the wider white-dominated fabric of US entertainment, Canadian news and Canadian economy. Therefore, while these initiatives could antagonise the status quo given the liberties of their creative industries, they could not do so in a way radical enough, that risked ostracization from the white-dominated middle-class spaces they operate in. As such, they also had to a degree of assimilation, which ultimately stifled influencing any significant change for racial equality.

Of the Afro-diasporic initiatives that sought to interrogate racial inequalities across race and other marginalised identities, through an intersectional analysis, we saw how unlike the above initiatives that sought to create spaces of belonging, initiatives in which individuals possessed other marginalised identities outside of blackness, also participated in creating spaces of resistance. We established that communities that experienced two-dimensional marginalisation, such as being black and queer (*Limitless Africans*) or black and female (*Academia is...*), were more likely to experience increased discrimination and social ostracisation, than those who experienced one-dimensional marginalisation by virtue of their blackness. As a result, these communities were also more likely to reject assimilation into the societies that marginalised them and instead engaged in creating spaces of resistance that worked to liberate them. That is why it comes as no surprise that the two communities experiencing two-dimensional marginalisation in this project sought to use racial performance to create spaces of resistance as opposed to spaces of belonging.

As we can see, whether intended or not, all Afro-diasporic initiatives in this project used racial performance to create some kind of counterculture in opposition to the white-dominated spaces they inhabit. These countercultures manifested in spaces that either created belonging for Afro-diasporic communities or asserted their resistance to racial inequalities. Of the initiatives that sought to create belonging, we saw how their employment of civility as a form of assimilation was influenced by their need to maintain social and economic stability in white-dominated industries. Of the initiatives that sought to create spaces of resistance, we saw how their rejection of assimilation manifested into initiatives that interrogated the prevalent racial inequalities in society. However, we noted that even within these resistance-based initiatives, the maintenance of social and economic stability in the white-dominated industries they operated played a significant role in influencing some degree of assimilation. Additionally, we saw how individuals who experienced marginalisation across multiple dimensions, were more likely to align with initiatives resisting assimilation into white-dominated environments that heavily oppressed them. In each of these cases, it's evident that both the degree of

marginality and social and economic stability played important roles in influencing the assimilation of Afro-diasporic individuals.

Collectively, this project highlights how oftentimes, the spaces that Afro-diasporic communities inhabit are traditionally not made for them. As such, these communities are forced to create two types of spaces for themselves; one where they can feel belonging or one where they congregate to assert their marginalities and resist the oppressive environments they inhabit. However, even within these ethnically exclusive enclaves, the social and economic advancement of Afro-diasporic communities is dependent on white-dominant institutions. As a consequence, even in their resistance, Afro-diasporic communities still have to assess whether or not their actions risk upsetting the overarching white-dominated systems they inhabit, which could risk further marginalisation.

Thus, in their journey towards finding belonging in diaspora, Afro-diasporic communities are often entrapped in a space where they are constantly having to calibrate how to perform their identities. Specifically, whether or not to use their racial performance to create spaces of belonging or to asserting their marginalities and confront oppressive systems, and within this calibration, they still have to consider the extent to which these racial performances could risk socially and economically disenfranchising them.

The importance of mediating projects like this using a creative platform is twofold. Firstly, it re-centers the narratives of marginalised communities, whose narratives have been traditionally excluded from mainstream media spaces. Secondly, it memorialises traditionally marginalised narratives in a creative interrogation of identity, race and belonging as a means of better understanding the subjectivities affecting our increasingly globalising communities.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, this creative project has only just begun to unpack the nuanced experiences of Afro-diasporic identity.

In combining a series of feature articles that interviewed Afro-diasporic community members, with photography projects that visually interrogated various aspects of Afro-diasporic life, this project has only just begun to unveil how Afro-diasporic communities navigate aspects of identity and race in their journey towards 'finding belonging in diaspora'.

Throughout the project, we observed how Afro-diasporic communities used racial performance to either create spaces that fostered belonging or create spaces that asserted marginality and resisted assimilation into oppressive white-dominated systems.

The Afro-diasporic communities in this project that used racial performance to specifically foster spaces of belonging, did so as a means of assimilating into the white-dominated industries that determined their social and economic stability. Of the Afro-diasporic communities in this project that used racial performance to specifically foster spaces of resistance, did

so because either their industries were less rigid and allowed for creative expressions of identity or their identities included more marginalised dimensions that situated them in more marginalising circumstances. However, we saw that even these resistant initiatives still operated within the wider fabric of white-dominated institutions and as such had to still employ some kind of assimilation, in order to maintain general social and economic stability.

Collectively, these observations implied two things. Firstly, Afro-diasporic communities consistently rely on racial performance to create spaces for themselves in white-dominated spaces. Secondly, they indicate that the type of space Afro-diasporic communities create is heavily reliant on the risk of further social and/or economic disenfranchisement, these communities might face. As such, social and economic status and by extension class, play a significant role in influencing the assimilation of Afro-diasporic communities into white-dominated spaces.

Through a mixed-media production, this creative project has effectively activated conversation on how Afro-diasporic communities in the West are using racial performance to navigate belonging as marginalised communities in oppressive white-dominated host-countries. Further, this project has also begun to unveil how within this navigation toward finding belonging in the diaspora, the risk of social and economic stability massively informs whether these communities assimilate or resist oppressive spaces in society. As such, assimilation emerges as a tool that Afro-diasporic communities have to use intermittently to culturally, socially and economically survive and/or advance in white-dominated industries in the West.

Creative projects like this, which dissect identity, race, and diaspora concurrently, are important because the world is increasingly globalising. People are constantly emigrating, and identities are becoming progressively multifaceted. Therefore, as new and diverse communities form, it becomes important for us to start finding creative ways to interrogate nuances within these new diasporic communities, that might be hindering these communities from feeling belonging, accessing equality and successfully contributing to the overall good of their societies.

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