

KNOW YOUR ROOTS

Know Your Roots looks at the connection for young black women between natural black hair, gender and identity. Natural black hair, in this context, refers to hair that has not been treated with chemicals to change the structure of the curl pattern and the hair's natural texture. The term identity refers to the factors that collectively shape a person's subjective experience of the world and the social, political and historical context in which that experience takes place (Gilroy, 1987).

Key terms used: intersectionality, identity, African Diaspora¹, racialized, self-agency, asset-based, reflective practice, lived experience.

Abstract

For many black girls and boys, young women and men their natural hair is a source of great pride. But, it can also cause feelings of shame and frustration because it is an arbitrary sign used to define racial difference and by inference inferiority (Gilroy, 1993 & Hall 1997). Within mainstream narratives of beauty, historically it is the hair type many have perceived to be the most reviled. Even today, the personification of 'bad hair' in mainstream definitions of beauty, is hair that is 'coarse', 'big' and 'frizzy'; which are adjectives also often used to describe afro hair. This can impact on how black people perceive themselves either consciously or subconsciously. In 2018, there is a growing presence of black people in public arenas such as TV and fashion wearing their hair naturally; which is most welcome. However, it is difficult to know if this is a liberal trend or a permanent shift in cultural practice. Whatever the case, the fact remains, natural, black hair continues to be a talking point and initiatives such as The Natural Hair Movement have a significant role to play in empowering people of African origin to feel positive about their hair. It provides a platform to share personal 'hair journeys', learn about hair maintenance and enjoy the versatility of 'going natural'. This also provides a useful antidote to the mainstream belief systems on beauty, by creating an opportunity to learn from people with similar hair types to their audiences - who are relatable. The Natural Hair Movement is led by women of the African Diaspora and it is the experiences of this demographic of women that Know Your Roots is primarily focused on. So irrespective of the current, positive, global re-awakening regarding representations of black hair, one could argue that it continues to be problematized in the twenty first century because this conversation has endured for so long, and black women in particular are still subject to discrimination, at times, if they do not conform to Western beauty standards.

Very little has been explored on this subject within the context of youth work. However, Partnership for Young London chose to deliver this multi-media project in partnership with London Metropolitan Archives, youth projects, schools, creative partners and the Heritage Lottery Fund because we believe it is a fundamental aspect of lived experience that should be examined to develop greater understanding of young black women's identities. Lived experience recognises that not everyone's experience is the same; in this case, that young black women are not one homogenous group. However, how skin colour and hair texture are perceived and subsequently represented have affected enough people of African origin to warrant discussing the subject as a common concern and, as a subject that should be

explored within the context of race. The premise we are working from therefore, is that societal pressures and discriminatory practices have shaped how the (black) body is represented (Shilling, 1997).

Two key outcomes of Know Your Roots were to provide the opportunity for participants to talk about their experiences, using hair as the catalyst for discussion and to deposit those stories at the London Metropolitan Archives thereby, contributing to knowledge on this demographic of Londoners. The other key outcome was to create an online exhibition; educating a wider audience about the connections for young black women between hair, heritage, race, gender and identity. This initiative was generously funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund.

A Practical Approach

During the initial planning stage of Know Your Roots we invited the tutors to reflect and share their personal feelings about the subject and to discuss their perceptions of hair within the context of race, gender and identity. We discovered that all the black women in the team had stories to tell of their afro hair being perceived as inferior to other hair types. They related to the issue from a personal point of view. The white British and European tutors understood the key issues being explored and were keen to engage in the project to broaden their understanding of the experiences of their peers and of the young women they work with. Everyone in the team recognised the importance of practitioners investing time in understanding their personal relationship to the material and held the basic principle that the values we hold will impact on how we engage with our work and influence the outcomes we achieve. Taking the time to understand our relationship to the material and what it means to us personally helps to improve our practice.

Know Your Roots had two key elements. The first involved using photography, film and visual art as the stimuli to create counter-narratives to belief systems that suggest that afro hair is inferior. Participants drew inspiration from artists such as Lina Iris Victor and Carol Rossetti to produce their own pieces celebrating the beauty of black hair. The second element involved young women working with staff at the London Metropolitan Archives (LMA) to interrogate a series of selected images to discern how people of the African Diaspora have been represented over different periods in London's history. Participants were invited to share what factors may have influenced the way the hair of the subjects was styled. Groups then created their own photographs reflecting how they wish to be represented in 2018. Mini peer-led interviews were also conducted where the young women discussed the links for them between their hair and heritage. The work was targeted at 11 to 25-year olds from over 8 schools and youth projects in North and West London. These included: Sion Manning Roman Catholic Girls' School, Epic CIC Flashpoint Centre Play, Youth Action Alliance/Unity Centre and Masbro Youth Centre. We also ran day events at Guildhall, City of London, UCL Academy and a short session at Little Wormwood Scrubs.

There was a specific focus on the experiences of young women of the African Diasporaⁱⁱ, who are also from the UK. This project is based on evidence that strongly

suggests that second to skin colour black hair has been racialised and therefore, become a marker of racial difference (Mercer, 1987). Black hair worn in its natural state; without any chemical treatment, has been problematised for centuries and many women still feel compelled to manipulate their natural hair from kinky to straight with products, or cover their own hair with wigs of extensions. Feeling that one must constantly 'correct' 'bad hair' impacts self-esteem, is challenging to sustain financially and using chemicals on the hair can carry significant health risks (Patton-Owens, 2006).

The project placed young black women's lived experience at the heart of the work to build confidence; reinforce a strong sense of racial identity, challenge dominant ideologies on the theme of beauty and raise awareness about the complex and sometimes nuanced ways that racial oppression presents itself. The intention of the work was not to convince a specific audience that afro hair is beautiful, and everyone must love it, but rather to highlight that a healthy sense of self-worth is dependent on how one sees one's self and how one is viewed by others. As human beings we generally seek our identities to be validated by the people around us (Bucholtz, 2002). Further to this, it is important to see one's self reflected in the world to engender a sense of rootedness and belonging. Know Your Roots was also about celebrating the virtues of an aspect of black identity, in this case, the unique characteristics of black hair. It was about illuminating messaging to all young people that they are entitled to take their place in society as their authentic selves, without shame or apology.

The Theory Behind the Practice

We know that identity is a fluid concept; how we define ourselves and are defined by others is constantly changing. Difference is not defined along one axis, it is transitory and fragmented and different aspects of an individual's identities often intersect (Crenshaw, 1993). This is true for everyone. However, there are additional factors regarding identity that young black people must negotiate, as well as navigating these universal concerns. For example, a common trope about young black women and men (young black men in particular) is that they are aggressive and violent and need to be controlled and restrained. There is a historical legacy to this way of thinking. It is still played out through everyday interactions with people today who may, for example, just employ additional caution if walking passed a group of young black men on the street due to a perceived threat, to extreme cases where institutions, like the police, use racial profiling to 'stop and search'. 'Black people are six times more likely to be stopped and searched than white people and black men are more than three and a half times more likely to be arrested than white men' (Cabinet Office, 2017).

Know Your Roots is located in the present day. However, it references key periods in history that have acutely impacted the personal and social outcomes for black people. These include the transatlantic slave trade of the 18th & 19th centuries, the subsequent colonising of swathes of Africa, The Caribbean and Asia and the period of immigration related to 'The Windrush Generation' following World War II (Hall, 1997). So, a key aspect of the project was to research how black people have been represented historically and how some of those representations have been constructed to introduce and reinforce ideas of difference between Europeans and Africans to justify

racist practices and ideologies. These have involved denigrating the physical appearance and intellect of people of African origin such as comparing physical features like 'flat noses', 'full lips', 'dark skin' and 'woolly hair' (Fryer, 1984, p.135).

We adopted an intersectional framework to research and deliver the project. We could not have explored black hair without looking at race, gender, and social class and how these factors overlap. Applying an intersectional lens also allowed us to explore how we can understand the social structures that uphold discriminatory practices and how we can use a 'turnaround narrative' to transform potentially negative experiences into positive outcomes through self-agency (Crenshaw, 1987, Wright, 2016).

How young black people present themselves in terms of their outward appearance, including hair clothing etc. and their behaviour are under constant surveillance, so space is also highly relevant to how they manage difference. A further example of this, which is particularly pertinent to young black women, is in relation to how they style their hair. Some of the young women that participated in the project told us that they wore wigs, extensions, straightened or tied their hair up or pinned it down in public spaces such as work or school as either they, or others, deemed natural afro hair worn loose in such spaces to be unwelcome. They said it looked 'wild', 'crazy' or 'unprofessional' and needed to be 'tamed' as it could present an intimidating look to others and potentially jeopardize opportunities available to them.

So, public spaces are hugely significant in how young black people maintain safety because they are underpinned by structural systems of power (Valentine & Sporton, 2009), and researching historical representations of black people was fundamental to understanding the project's current relevance.

The Method and Ethos of Delivery for the Project

Know Your Roots was open to any young person who wanted to participate, irrespective of their race or gender; however, putting young black women's experiences at the centre of the work was a fundamental premise. All participants were invited to explore the experiences of black girls and women initially to raise awareness, then draw parallels with their own stories thereby, using the key themes of Know Your Roots as a catalyst for broader discussions about the importance to *everyone* of knowing and honouring their own sense of identity.

Many of the groups that we worked with were ethnically diverse, others were exclusively comprised of members who were from African, African-Caribbean and mixed African/Caribbean and European heritage. This was an opportunity for young people to learn from their peers. As workers we know that young people's experiences are best understood from their perspectives. Research also suggests that children and young people who have peers in their own ethnic and racial friendship groups and form friendships with peers from other ethnic and racial groups as well, have a healthier sense of well-being (Cabinet Office, 2017). Further to this, we wanted to encourage all groups to start making connections between their behaviour and the messages they are exposed to from the media which peddle ideals that seek to exploit people's vulnerabilities by suggesting there is only one way to be;

in this case that beauty is determined by one standard and that if one falls short of it they are not worthy. We were clear that this project was not about making judgements about the choices that they made regarding hair (or other aspects of themselves); the intention was to enable those that engaged with the project and a wider audience viewing their work to question the messages they are fed through sources like the media so they could make informed decisions about how they chose to present themselves and not feel compelled to conform to agendas other than their own. In doing this we wanted to highlight how the media and other public platforms feed off the idea that our bodies should constantly be 'worked on' to improve them and social media is a major funnel for siphoning ideas about how to make us more popular, attractive, desirable etc (Bourdieu, 1997). We wanted young people to recognise how this aspect of the media operates and encourage them to be questioning of the all-pervasive messaging they are subjected to and to be more proactive in cultivating their own identities drawing on trusted networks of people for support and guidance such as family and friendship groups rather than relying on virtual communication platforms for affirmation.

We adopted an asset-based approach to this work, that is to say we looked for the strengths and positivity that also exist within narratives of black hair. Tutors facilitating sessions were not necessarily looking for young women that had a problem with their hair, it was important to work with young women who had a diverse range of experiences – we wanted to know what participants did to nurture a healthy attitude towards their hair and how that attitude was fostered and maintained. We also wanted to learn about what the impact of not liking black hair was and how that was managed. For example, one of the main reasons that Flashpoint Centre Play wanted to participate in Know Your Roots is because a growing trend developed amongst the girls and young women coming into the Centre where they were saying that they were displeased with their natural afro hair and wanted it to be 'different'; or that they loved their hair but still struggled to look after it. Steph Johnson, their tutor, started to talk through some of the feelings that they were experiencing and decided to work with the group to investigate positive representations of black hair. She used her arts background to create installations, collages and paintings of the group's findings. Steph also worked with group members to create self-portraits celebrating the diverse styles and hair textures of group members. One of the girls involved in the project was initially very resistant to engage. Despite saying that she did not like her hair, when asked to take part in a group discussion she said she had '...nothing to give' to the topic. However, as the conversations about challenging negative attitudes towards black hair continued she became more and more animated and vociferous on the issue. By the end of one of the initial sessions she tugged out the bands and hair grips fastening her hair up and requested that we take photographs of her with it down. This request implied a huge leap in confidence for her; it was a very welcome, and unexpected, turnaround from someone who had previously been adamant in her dislike of the look and feel of her natural hair.

What the Research from the Project Revealed

'Our hair is different, that's just the way it is!'

This quote came from another young woman who took part in research for Know Your Roots. It was important to unpack this comment in more depth to understand whose hair black hair is different to; how the difference is quantified and what the implications of difference are. The inference was 'it's not the same - therefore, it's not as good as...'. The idea that black hair is at best 'different' and at worse ugly, undesirable and unmanageable is commonplace. Whilst it may seem absurd that the dead matter growing from our heads could be the site of racial inequality and personal hatred, in extreme cases this does describe how some black people feel. Almost 100 young women were asked what words they used to describe black hair. In one group, where group members were clear they liked natural hair, over 90% still unwittingly used negative words such as 'Unmanageable', 'Rough', 'Tough', 'Nappy', 'Crispy', 'Mad', 'Bad', 'Frizzy', 'Coarse', 'Dry', 'Short', 'Wiry', 'Sticky', 'Wild' and 'Crazy' to describe it. In another group 70% also used terms that had a negative connotation to describe black hair. These words are so pervasive and normalised that it took the facilitator in the session to point out the volume of pejorative adjectives used before participants noticed that this is how they constantly describe a part of their bodies.

As well as using arts-based methodologies to explore the subject of black hair we facilitated structured discussions with groups. At UCL Academy and Guildhall group members told us that they required further guidance on styling and maintenance and wanted to learn more about the biology of black hair and the social issues that influenced how it is perceived and (mis)represented. Students from Sion Manning and UCL were introduced to a range of artists including Lina Iris Viktor and Carol Rossetti. Both artists use their work to explore, challenge and celebrate the experiences of women from around the world. We chose art as a vehicle for exploration because one of its many virtues is that it elicits a visceral as well as intellectual response to social, historical and political enquiry and research suggests that 'black youth inherit a tradition of weaving popular arts and street cultures into political statements' (Blair, 2009).

Tutors ran sessions where they learned about the artists and how art can be used as a vehicle to challenge attitudes and behaviour and raise awareness about social concerns. Once participants harnessed the basic tenets of these artist's work they used these influences to create their own pieces. Students from both schools produced collages and paintings as part of a campaign to profile the racializing of black hair by offering counter-statements. Members of Masbro Youth Centre produced self-portraits, videos and a timeline reflecting the history and traditions of African hair dating back to the 1400s. Members of The Unity Centre/Youth Action Alliance shared skills in hair plaiting and showcased them in photoshoots. Plaiting hair in cornrows or cane rows are protective styles that have been part of African hair tradition for centuries. Historically these styles have protected the hair from the elements; they have also protected an aspect of African tradition that has survived the most turbulent times, passed on with care by ancestors denied the right of being able to record their customs and practices through the conventional means of writing, as they were not afforded access to formal education.

As well as the tangible outcomes to Know Your Roots, participants told us that they felt more confident in their own identities because of being involved in the initiative. One young woman said,

“Overall I feel extremely happy about being involved in the project because it gave me the courage to fight for my rights as a black person and to know that it isn’t just me challenging stereotypes but others that care about these issues as much as I do. It was really good to be involved with the project because it shows me that I have the power to change things which I think are not right, and fight...”

We noted a general shift in the language that participants used to describe black hair before and after the sessions. Words like ‘wild’, ‘crazy’, ‘coarse’, ‘dry’ and ‘frizzy’, were replaced with ‘unique’, ‘peng’, ‘invincible’, ‘versatile’ and ‘beautiful’. Some of the participants of white, British heritage explained that they wanted to attend the sessions to learn more about their peer’s experiences – some told us that they didn’t realise that black hair was ‘a thing,’ i.e. that black women and men were ridiculed because of it and wanted to educate themselves. Another participant said she has grown up in a culturally diverse area and may have relatives in the future who are of dual heritage; so, wanted to know more about this aspect of identity. One of the male participants who attended the day event at Guildhall wrote a blog following attendance at the workshop there, where he said

Throughout the discussion-based workshop I began to gain a connection and passion for my hair that I’d never had before because I was able to learn about black culture from before slavery and how things were before we were forced into a westernised image and stripped of our identity. I now live with a proud outlook on the heritage of my roots and have made a decision to continue growing my hair, styling my hair and telling people about the roots of my hair and where the first styles all began many years ago.

As well as the knowledge and skills developed that related directly to the project, participants told us that they also gained experience and enjoyed working collaboratively. They learned to work effectively together, sharing different opinions. Participants told us that they learned how to use art to raise awareness about social issues and fight for change. They also learned about the importance of making connections with the past and the present and about the value and relevance of recording their own personal stories. They told us they appreciated the opportunity to reflect on how significantly things have changed to positive effect for people of African Diasporic communities but were also acutely aware of the persistence of racist belief systems.

Another key aspect of the project was to work alongside the London Metropolitan Archives. We chose this cultural institution and asked them to embrace the chance to include the stories of young women of London within the Archives to show a more accurate reflection of the diverse communities that live in and are part of the capital’s great history. There were three main activities to this strand of the programme. Firstly, participants were invited to use their research skills to interrogate a series of carefully selected images that showed black people with connections to London dating back to the Tudors. Participants were asked to comment on what they could surmise from

how the people they were investigating were represented; what they could glean from the way their hair was styled and what social, political, economic and personal factors influenced each look. They were then asked to interview each other to understand the significance of hair to the heritage of each interviewee and finally, they worked in groups with a photographer to create portraits that speak to what influences the look of young women in the 21st century and what they would want a group of young people interrogating their photographs in 2118 to learn about them.

It is essential to provide opportunities for young people to have their personal testimonies documented in cultural institutions like the LMA alongside artefacts by globally renowned figures (like Shakespeare!) so they appreciate they also have stories to tell that are highly significant in helping to broaden and enrich our understandings about the heritage of different cultural groups; particularly those whose stories have previously been hidden from historical records.

Conclusion

This project has provided an opportunity for young women to come together and reflect on their personal experiences, using perceptions of afro hair in western societies as the starting point for discussion and creative exploration. Young black women's stories documented from their standpoint are largely missing from cultural institutions. Know Your Roots provided a creative format to also look at representation in the media more broadly and encourage those who took part in the project to be critically curious about the strategies employed to uphold and influence value systems that undermine how young women and men of African origin and how girls and women are generally perceived. Participants adopted a multi-media approach to craft counter narratives to prevailing, discriminatory belief systems about black hair which denigrate one's sense of self. The young women and men who engaged in Know Your Roots produced work that reframes how they want to be represented and places it in a public forum with an invitation for a wider audience to raise their awareness of this aspect of identity.

The project was not exclusively for young people from African Diasporic communities, we wanted to educate a wider audience about the historical influences of African traditions in contemporary western cultures, how it is celebrated and how it can be maligned and the impact of this on perceptions of black people. Know Your Roots was delivered by an ethnically diverse group of tutors, to youth groups who were interested in the issue and wanted to reflect on their own lived experience and/or learn about the experiences of their peers. They wanted to further explore the currency of pervasive ideas on black hair and how those ideas can lead to ignorance and racist discrimination.

The project highlighted that racism can be systemic and dismantling systems of oppression requires us to firstly understand how they work (Hall,1997). We all have a part to play in challenging racial discrimination and something to gain from dismantling it, so acquiring greater knowledge about how racism functions and its corrosive impact on people's lives remains a matter of concern for us all (hooks,1992).

Know Your Roots was led on by Sandra Vacciana and undertaken between October 2017 – October 2018. The programme was supported by a range of tutors who provided advice and expertise. For more details please see this [link](#).

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By diaspora we are referring to people who experience a forced exit from their homeland due to acts of adversity and are subsequently displaced

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