

To Just Be

Navigating the world whilst black comes with a particular set of challenges and rules, some spoken most unspoken but all of them fully understood. The conclusive perception is that black skin is a problem to someone somewhere and so it's best to stay where you are put to minimise the dissent your skin will naturally cause. Arriving en-masse to the UK in the 1940s, 50s and 60s prompted several organisations to suggest ways in which we could reduce ourselves so as not to upset the natives. This ideology of reductionism and self-minimisation was promoted as a way for black people to demonstrate their decency. But in effect it enabled us to further absorb the racist belief that we were frightening and so needed to be contained.

Acknowledgement of racism in the UK is like the greatest exercise in communal gaslighting there ever was. Mainstream culture and various comments on every news article and social media post will swear blind that racism doesn't exist whilst accusing those who feel it instinctively of "playing the race card". It's exhausting and it's hard to catch breath. Traversing this landscape is a constant exercise in questioning one's own sanity.

Racism's effect on me manifested in a myriad of ways. Most acutely through the realisation of what I could do and where I could go. I am a single parented council estate child, born of immigrant parents who knew education was important but didn't have the means or understanding to show me how to get it. Nevertheless, it was drilled into me that however it happened I was to reach the highest pinnacle I could. However, my institutions of learning and the opportunities that were afforded to me were not so assured of my upward trajectory and the rhetoric of reductionism continued to follow me throughout.

A little brown skin picky head gyal, from the estates is not supposed to do well at school, and so inevitably I didn't. White supremacy and classism formed a toxic mix that expected me to stay in the enclave I had been assigned. I was not to step out of line or get above myself, but my curiosity and inability to sit still got the better of me and off in the pursuit of adventure and an artistic education I went. Yet, the further I went the less and less black people I saw. I realised that I was becoming the token, the only black person in the room, in the building, in the institution! Racism, reductionism and self-minimisation had infected all of us.

Underrepresentation is so rife outside the places black people have been designated to occupy, our presence in places we do not usually frequent still elicits fear, sideways glances, open stares, awkward smiles and overly enthusiastic acknowledgements in an attempt at forced camaraderie. Underrepresentation has those who are underrepresented not trusting or believing the validity of our worth when we do reach the pinnacles of success or worse reducing or denying our blackness in a belief that doing so will help us to fit in. More reductionism.

It would be easy to say, just don't shrink yourself, go wherever and be whoever; be big and bold and loud and boasty, but that isn't always easy. Some of us have full confidence and sometimes the support to reach higher heights, but often this reveals other industry-based challenges and expectations that come with being from our designated places. I feel the weight of this perception and all perceptions that my skin encourages, and I'm left wondering, is there a place in the world where I can just be? Can I be black and creative and happy without having to be in defence of my skin or my culture and without having either be a source of exploitation, curiosity, derision or concern?

I long to throw off the mental shackles of perception and expectation and open my chest, take a big inhalation of breathe and let the air of that inhalation carry me away to far off lands where I can live

in full realisation of myself. In the sun, smiling, laughing, dancing. Not being told I'm too loud, or too sexual. Not being expected to have the best rhythm or know the latest moves. Not being expected to be cool or respectable. To just be, where I am free, to choose whoever I want to be and do whatever I want to do, allowing my natural effervescence to find its rightful place in the ether.

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