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Raves and Close Shaves: An auto/biographical foray into the life of a young Black 90s rave queen

Peer reviewed article

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Abstract

In this article I reflect on my experiences in 1990s Rave culture as a young Black woman. This article incorporates Wright-Mills' (1959) 'Sociological Imagination' to explore how the socio-historical events of the time shaped my involvement in the rave scene. Further, it explores how raving served as a form of intergenerational resistance against familial and community expectations. I was often a minority in certain rave scenes, considered predominantly White spaces. At the same time, I was regarded as a 'misfit' among my Black peers for 'transgressing' what they perceived as norms of Blackness, such as engaging in popular culture and music genres like Hip Hop and R'n'B. Through my experience, I consider debates concerning relationships between popular culture consumption and the construction of our ethnic and racial identities. Specifically, I explore how these elements are used to determine our 'authenticity' and identities as Black people. I also suggest that our experiences reflect the importance of recognising and celebrating the differences within and between Black people, including our life choices, such as music preferences.

Keywords

Racial/ethnic identities, authenticity, Blackness, rave, music, resistance, expectations

Introduction

Our musical preferences are often regarded as 'key symbolic resources that [we] draw on to negotiate and express our identities and social positions' (Stewart et al 2019:3259). 'Social positions' might include our class, race, gender, sexuality, etc. Speaking about race and ethnicity, Stewart et al (2019: 3259) note that musical choices can also be seen as a way to 'preserve and reinforce ethnic boundaries'. Thus, they may be shaped by what is considered appropriate for our 'ethno-racial' categories. So, for instance, it is often the case that for Black people, it is expected that our preference would be for genres such as hip-hop, rap, and soul. Those of us, like myself, whose 'likes' do not reflect these music types are often regarded as 'transgressing' or 'misunderstanding which music is appropriate for [our] consumption' (Mahon 2009 in Schaap and Berkers 2020: 417). My love of 1990s rave and dance music meant that I was seen by friends and family as a 'transgressor' or 'misfit' and not conforming to what they thought it meant to be Black. Take, for example, a friend who questioned my Blackness as she was rifling through my impressive CD collection. She found my 'DJ Vibes' and 'Billy Bunter' Happy Hardcore and Prodigy CD mixes 'strange'. Later, my cousin stated how 'it's [was] university that's done that' – implying that my music tastes had been 'negatively' influenced by my leaving my hometown and going to university in London, where I mixed with different people. In actual fact, my tastes were very 'diverse' before I left. Recently, I have reflected on my experiences and comments made by friends and families, and in so doing, I recognised how they were illustrative of bell hooks' argument that, as Black people, we have 'had a narrow constricting view of Blackness' (bell hooks 1994:26). While she argues that this emerges from White Western societies, she also recognises how it is perpetuated amongst Black communities, with examples being responses to those of us who do not conform to perceptions of what it means to be Black.

To that end, *'Raves and Close Shaves'* is an auto/biographical reflection of my journey into and experiences of the rave culture during the 1990s as a young Black woman. Through my story, I engage with debates concerning ways that the type of popular culture we engage in may influence how we construct our ethnic/racial identities and how this may be responded to by others from similar backgrounds. I reflect on the following questions:

- How far are our music choices sometimes used to determine our 'authenticity' and identities as Black people?
- How are we perceived if we prefer different music genres (e.g. Happy Hardcore)?
- Was the negative feedback from family and friends concerning my engagement within the rave scene indicative of their views that I was somehow 'less authentically' Black?

To explore my experiences with these issues, I reference Schapp and Berkers (2020), who conducted research with 27 Black young people who, like me, were considered 'misfits' in terms of their musical tastes and whose interactions with other Black people resonated with my own, but also shaped their identities. I also explore the importance of recognising 'in group heterogeneity' (Celious and Oyserman 2001:149), that is the diversity that exists amongst Black people, which extends to our life choices, including popular culture/music preferences.

I also explore how I became further immersed in the scene, which meant attending more 'Happy Hardcore' and Breakbeat raves, predominantly White working-class male spaces. This was especially so at Midlands clubs and events. Therefore, I found myself having to navigate being the minority as a Black woman. While I often had positive experiences, on occasion, people's attitudes could be challenging, especially when my presence as a Black woman was questioned. I share how situations like this enhanced my hypervisibility and sometimes resulted in microaggressions. Finally, I share my thoughts on the current situation, which is the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and my continued engagement in the rave culture.

I also discuss my use of auto/biography as data for this account, with reference to Brennan and Letherby (2017), Kebede (2009) and an auto/biographical paper written previously (Owusu Kwarteng 2019). Auto/Biography is relevant here, as it facilitates understanding of connections between structural issues, socio-historical events, and influences on personal experiences in the UK. In this case, socio-historical events include overt societal/institutional racism faced by Black people during the 1970s and 80s, underscored by stop and search laws; Thatcherism and the rise of/engagement in Acid House/Rave Culture as a form of resistance against it. To explore this further, I incorporate Mills' 'Sociological Imagination' (1959) and Mannheim's (1952) 'Theory of Generation' to analyse this further.

Auto/Biographical Underpinnings

In a previous paper (see Owusu-Kwarteng 2019), I discussed how auto/biography, as a method, entailed the writing of our stories by ourselves, and in so doing, that reference can be made to past and present encounters. *'Raves and Close Shaves'* does exactly this. Regarding the past, I share aspects of how I navigated life as a British Ghanaian girl growing up amid a close-knit Ghanaian community that sought to maintain many of the norms and values they experienced during their childhoods 'back home'. This included 'particular' ideas and expectations as to how children should behave and relate to their parents. For instance, challenging parents in any way or questioning decisions was deemed unacceptable (Stapleton 1978).

I also recall experiences of 'growing up Black' in the wider British context during the 1970s and 80s, against the backdrop of Thatcherism, heightened surveillance of British Black youth through Stop and Search Laws, which permitted police to stop anyone they found to be suspicious and other forms of blatant institutional racism. Moreover, there is consideration of how this generation of British-born Black people attempted to establish their identities despite the aforementioned events. I also reflect on relationships with our parents who were born outside the UK (e.g., Africa or parts of the Caribbean) and who felt that we had lost touch with our heritage and, as a result, did not behave 'appropriately'. Furthermore, I describe my encounters with coming of age in the 1990s, when there was a backlash against the individualism of the 1980s, Thatcherism, and the role of Dance/Rave culture in propagating this. Remembering the past (in our case, societal events of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s) and their influences on our world views behaviour, including our engagement in popular culture, resonates closely with Mills's arguments surrounding the 'Sociological Imagination'. He encourages us to explore what was happening socially and historically, as this intersects with our personal stories/auto/biographies (Mills 1959 in Kebede 2020). In terms of the present, I share how I engage with the rave culture in different ways – for instance, through joining online communities and sharing my experiences with it through podcasts.

Although Auto/Biography often largely centres on our own lives, the impacts and roles of others must also be acknowledged because, as Kebede (2020:355) explains, our stories are 'inseparably related to [the stories] of others'. Brennan and Letherby further support this point and, so doing, highlight the 'slippage' between our stories and others:

> *When writing about others but recognising the subjectivity of the biographer auto/biography is more appropriate. Writing and working auto/biographically recognises the entanglement and slippage … between self and other: the fact that any auto/biography involves others (especially others whose lives impact on the life of the writer) and that any biography inevitably involves traces of the auto/biographical self of the biographer* (Brennan and Letherby 2017: 53)

Kebede (2009) also explains that auto/biography allows for further understanding of how behaviours are produced/reproduced according to our context and the people around us. To that end, this account explores the 'entanglement' and 'slippage' between mine and others'

experiences of growing up in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s Britain as Black British Ghanaians and those of the first-generation Nottingham-based Ghanaian migrants, more specifically, our responses to their expectations, and how this 'produced'/'reproduced' my/our behaviour. Furthermore, as noted above, family and peers questioned my choice of music and dress, which also influenced the 'production'/'reproduction' of my behaviour in that I did not adapt to what they deemed to be 'acceptable' for someone of my ethnicity.

The development of our auto/biographical stories often entails drawing on various sources, including family stories, past and present conversations and life experiences (Indira 2020) to provide a 'thick description' (Ellis et al 2011:6). Many of the issues mentioned above (e.g., growing up Black in Britain, and specifically in a Midlands Ghanaian community) are predicated on family stories and personal memories, and discussions I have had with my siblings, wider family members and friends about their recollections of the past. In so doing, there is recognition of the meaning we attached to the situations we found ourselves in during those times and in those spaces and how we navigated them. Writing on these issues also entails analysing my experiences through the lens of being part of a particular culture, more specifically as an 'insider' (e.g. being British-Ghanaian), but also as an 'outsider' (e.g., having 'different' 'likes' in terms of popular culture and style). To enhance the auto/biography and the thick descriptions within it, it is necessary to 'frame' it around relevant theory and wider (relevant) literature (Allan 2006 in Ellis et al 2011:5). Thus, as noted above, I have incorporated a diverse body of work, including Mills (1959) and Mannheim (1952), to explore our generational experiences, Schaap and Berkers (2020), as they consider experiences of people, like me, who are seen as 'transgressors' due to their music choices. I also include bell hooks and others to challenge ideas of homogenised Black identities.

Dressing for Dancing and Dissent – my clothes, music and individuality

As noted elsewhere (see Owusu-Kwarteng, 2020), I was raised in a very close-knit Ghanaian community in Nottingham. In some ways, the community reflected Tonnies (1923) concept of 'gemeinschaft' as there was an emphasis on kinship and community, which, to an extent, was a continuation of life the migrant generation had in Ghana. There were benefits to this, as in times of difficulty, there was always support, and they provided us with a connection to our roots. However, there were challenges. For instance, exhibiting any form of difference brought about disapproval. 'Difference' might include not sharing the same opinions as our elders. This was, arguably, to be expected since our life experiences were not the same due to being born and raised in different contexts. As a result, opposing views sometimes descend into arguments. In extreme cases, this could mean being lured to Ghana under the guise of a summer 'holiday', which lasted for a couple of years, if not lifetimes, as some of my British-born Ghanaian friends found out.

'Difference' also included 'alternative' styles of dress and music choice, which did not necessarily reflect the status quo (e.g., Gospel or Highlife). I will return to a discussion of the latter shortly. With regard to clothing styles, I was always a little different, as I refused to repress my individuality. This was particularly evident when I was 16, in 1991, and neatly dovetailed with my foray into the Rave culture. Jaimangal-Jones et al (2014:603) explain that 'dance culture provides a range of aesthetics where participants can experiment with and perform multiple identities', which resonates closely with what I was doing. My 'everyday' clothing style veered towards the late 1960s and early 1970s, with the 1990s thrown in. A typical outfit might have included hot pants, a large flower pendant, a roll-neck top/body stocking and chunky 1990s Rave trainers. This met much condemnation from the Ghanaian community, but I was beginning to care less about what they thought. Interestingly, despite their disapproval, my style was not so different to what my mother and her friends wore in the 1960s. Since she still had several of her outfits, including the mini-skirts and hot pants, I borrowed them permanently.

I have always liked different forms of what is considered 'Black' music, which has been produced and created by people of African origin. My tastes include Highlife, Afro Beats, Jazz and some 1990s Hip Hop. However, my preference is for fast-paced music, including House, Breakbeat Happy Hardcore, and Jungle. However, it is often forgotten that these genres are influenced by 'Black' music. House, for instance, emerged from Disco, which was made for and by Black LGBTQ people in Chicago but became a worldwide phenomenon during the 1970s. Moreover, many other genres have emerged from it (edm.identity.com). Breakbeat and Hardcore are example, and their origins were in House music. Jungle also originated from Breakbeats and Reggae sound systems (Colin 2010).

North and Hargreaves (2008 in Miranda 2013) argue that music tastes and clothing can be used as a reflection of our personalities and characters, which speaks to my experience, then and to an extent, now. As implied above, my style in these areas was always highly individualistic and eclectic, but, as also suggested, I was regarded as being 'weird and off-key' by friends and family as a result. This, together with my choice of clothing style, was (and still is) 'subtly' frowned upon because they are not considered 'Black' enough. Arguably, these views reflected beliefs about monolithic ways of being Black, more specifically, that as Black people, we [should be] culturally homogenous (Daley 1998). Celious and Oyserman (2001:151) also describe this as assumptions of 'in group homogeneity', that is, beliefs that we are all the same in terms of features and 'traits'. Frith (Frith 1996:109) explains how these notions can extend to perceptions that if we belong to certain social groups, we should be engaging in certain/prescribed types of 'musical expression and appreciation', which reflect 'new assertions of cultural essentialism', 'linked to social identity'. Yet, as writers such as bell hooks, Celious and Oyserman explain, it is important to recognise the heterogeneity and 'multidimensionality' that exists within us as Black people, which may be based on class, ethnicity, gender, and taste, as this facilitates a better understanding of our diverse experiences.

While I agree with what bell hooks, Celious and Oyserman, and others mentioned above have said, I am also mindful of cultural dimensions, which partly underpinned the way in which my style was viewed, especially amongst older generations within my community. As noted above, the Ghanaian community in Nottingham was and remains close-knit and as Coe (2013:152) explains in reference to Ghanaian migrants, certain types of behaviour such as respect, discipline, and hard work were 'labelled as Ghanaian [cultural values]'. Anything beyond this is disapproved of. Furthermore, as with many migrant communities, there is pressure to maintain a positive reputation amongst ourselves because 'they [reputations] are monitored[and] gossip within the Ghanaian community evaluates their parenting' (Coe 2013:151). Any negative gossip would not be easy for them to contend with, and this was compounded by the fact any unfavourable views about their approaches to parenting could easily reach our families back in Ghana.

Musical Dissent, Raves and Close Shaves

My initial exposure to Rave music was purely accidental. One day, in April 1991, when I should have been revising for my GCSE examinations, I turned on the radio. Interestingly, it was not tuned to any of the local stations we usually listened to, mainly for the local news. My brother had clearly been fiddling with it as one of his 'experiments', which usually involved trying to 'fix' household appliances, though they were not broken. Yet, perhaps without realising, he had shifted the dial to one of the many illegal /underground Rave radio stations. The music emanating from it was loud, fast-paced, and probably quite 'bassy', but given the tinny sound quality of my radio, the bass was harder to hear. Nevertheless, I really loved it. I knew, however, that listening to Rave music overtly would result in deep trouble for me for several reasons, one of which was the belief that listening to anything besides Highlife and Gospel would 'corrupt' us. Interestingly,

according to some members of the older generation of the Ghanaian community, listening to 'different' music resulted in the 'rebellion' of my elder siblings and many of their peers. Seemingly, there was not enough recognition of the fact that the first generation of Black people, born and raised in Britain and coming of age in the 1980s, were trying to establish their identities in the midst of institutional racism and a refusal by society to acknowledge that they too were British. Music played a key role in helping them to navigate these difficult times.

My brother was heavily into Rock, including Jimi Hendrix, Hawkwind and Black Sabbath. My sister liked this too, but preferred Lovers Rock, a 'genre of 'Black British' reggae music that emerged in London during the 1970s through Caribbean nightclubs and 'pirate radio' stations. Lovers' rock was an integral part of the reggae music scene of that period' (Palmer 2011:178). Many other British Ghanaians in Nottingham at the time liked similar music, although their tastes often extended to Disco, Soul and Funk. One cousin had a very impressive vinyl collection of Funk. In all cases, their music choices were disapproved of because their 'music preferences [did not] relate to [their] ethno-racial categories. (Roy and Dowd 2010 in Schapp and Berkers 2020:416). Effectively, they were seen as 'transgressing' their Ghanaian heritage. However, being born and raised in Britain inevitably meant exposure to and influences from a variety of cultures and communities. Moreover, space and time differences meant that living the same lives as previous generations had in Ghana was impossible. This, however, did not mean disassociation from our heritage, as many of us were extremely proud of it.

Nonetheless, the quest to develop our sense of selfhood, especially through experimentation with different popular culture/music types, was regarded unfavourably. This, coupled with the fact that my siblings began to resist the strict regime of my parents and engaged more deeply in their chosen forms of popular culture, resulted in 'grave concerns' about their behaviour and 'interventions' from the Ghanaian community. As already inferred, there was a ban on any other forms of music in our house besides Highlife and Gospel, which was further propagated by the fact that our community had bought into societal moral panics about 'links' between 'alternative' music choice and 'dissenting' behaviour. For instance, Reggae music, which my sister liked, was often associated with the 'spirit of rebellion…… street fights….. music, drugs (above all marijuana called ganja in Jamaican Patois) and so on' (Kroubo Dagnini 2011: unpaginated).

Mannheim's Theory of Generations (1952) is a useful approach to understanding the 'issues' we experienced. While his work initially focused on relationships between class and location, this expanded to include age and generation, and for the purpose of this auto/biographical account, I am extending it to ethnicity. Mannheim suggests that our experiences of social consciousness result from the generation we are born into, and experiences reflected within it. To that end, he coined the term 'generational location', which is 'definite modes of behaviour, feeling and thought' (1952:291). Therefore, what we feel and experience at a certain point in time shapes the formation of generations. Our geographical and social locations also play a role. Thus, in our case, this might apply to our geographical and social locations as British-Ghanaians, born and raised in the Nottingham-Ghanaian community during the 1960s—1990s, and how these factors impacted us.

Generation is also shaped by our engagement in 'social and intellectual currents' (Pilcher 1994:483). As noted above, for my siblings and their peers, 'social currents' included over-surveillance and overt institutional racism within the education and criminal justice systems. These issues resulted in tensions between the police and Black young people, and latterly, uprisings in Brixton and other parts of the country, including Nottingham. These factors and experiences would have arguably shaped the 'feelings and thoughts' of this particular generation of Black British people. For them, music was seen as a response to these circumstances and as a coping mechanism. The 'mode of behaviours' that might apply here is going to spaces with others who were experiencing similar issues. Speaking specifically in relation to Lover's Rock, Palmer (2011:179) explains that the music and venues they were played in provided 'safe' 'spaces of

sanctuary where Black urban music was central to easing as well as expressing the tensions of urban inner city life'.

Thatcherism also underpinned the 'social currents' of my generation and those slightly older than us, and a key facet of this was the growth of 'individualism and competitiveness between people [which] was encouraged in the race to the top' (John 2015:164). John also observes that an outcome of this was 'people turning against each other' (John 2015:164). That said, the growth of the Rave culture in the 1980s and 1990s and the 'mode of behaviour' associated with it, specifically the 'ethos of communalism [and] unity….' (John 2015:165) emphasised embracing people of all social backgrounds which served as a challenge to individualism and competition. Yet, as with other genres, such as Rock, Punk, Reggae, Rave and Acid House, culture was demonised for 'challenging societal interests and values' (Cohen 1972:1). Subsequently (and arguably, as to be expected), moral panics arose as the Rave culture expanded, alongside a 'litany of public condemnation' (John 2015:166), much of which came from older generations. Moral panics were further propagated by the association of drugs, specifically ecstasy, within the Rave culture. To that end, I recall any news concerning these events that resulted in clucks of disapproval from the older generation, alongside loud and lengthy discussions about the failings of 'unruly' British-born children, which obviously included us. [I must add here that I never took any drugs or drank alcohol when I later attended raves, as the music was enough for me]

Back to that day in April, I found myself becoming entranced by the music, and after that, I listened to that radio station as much as possible. At school, a new speaker had been installed in the common room, and amongst the mix of Blur, Happy Mondays and The Farm, and James (Indie), there would be some Rave tracks, such as 'Charlie' by The Prodigy, or SL2's 'On a Ragga Tip', which further fuelled my enjoyment of Rave music. My friends also started talking about raves they had supposedly been to. Interestingly, at times, their descriptions were more vivid than the ones I had seen on television, which made me wonder whether they had really been. Nevertheless, I became more curious as to what raves were actually like. I also knew that listening to Rave music on a portable radio at home, which had the bass levels of a tin can, and being unable to dance properly could not be enough for me anymore. So, I had to find a way of going to an event.

In July 1991, an opportunity presented itself. One day, two of my fellow British-Ghanaian friends and I sat in my room bemoaning our 'terrible' lives. Our woes centred around our strict and repressive upbringing and frustrations at attempts to put restrictions on developing our sense of selfhood. During the 'moanathon', the youngest one, who I will refer to as Adjoa, and who was perhaps the most daring and rebellious of us all, presented a flyer decorated in the requisite dayglo colours associated with the Rave culture. It contained information about a festival on our local recreational ground. She then started talking about how we should go. I recall the horrified look that our eldest friend, Abena (also a pseudonym), gave us and how, in her typically blunt way, she brought us back down to earth about what would happen if we went and got caught. After some heavy persuasion from Adjoa and a little from me, she agreed to go, and we devised a clandestine plan, which involved telling our parents that we were studying for GCSE exams at each other's houses. Incidentally, I had just finished my own exams a month before. Adjoa was just about to start her exams, and Abena was in the last year of her fashion design HND. Therefore, 'studying for GCSES' was somewhat suspect. However, we figured that we would not be questioned because our parents were so invested in our education. The next part of the plan was to decide where and when we would meet, and we decided that Adjoa's house would be the safest bet since her parents were working. We also decided to wear 'sensible' clothes over our raving outfits to further 'reduce' suspicion.

On the day of the event, I felt a mixture of excitement and big pangs of fear in case my parents suspected anything. I was a bit shaky as I put my raving clothes (plaid hotpants, obligatory large daisy pendant and black body con top) on underneath a baggy jumper and long skirt. On reflection, this must have looked quite strange because it was a very hot day, but I could not think too much, as I had to leave the house as soon as possible without anyone noticing. I quickly said

goodbye to everyone and left immediately for Adjoa's house. This was at the top of a steep hill, so trying to walk quickly up it, together with the heat of the day and the fear of running into a relative, was not a great combination. I made it, however, and Abena arrived shortly after, wearing a flammable shell suit over her catsuit. We quickly divested of the 'sensible' clothes and into our raving gear and set out for the festival.

The festival included a range of stalls, which sold a variety of knickknacks, and many tents which catered to different music tastes, ranging from R&B, Dub, House, Rave, Ragga and Dancehall. Abena enjoyed R&B, so she went into that tent, whereas Adjoa went off to the Jamaican Ragga and Dancehall section. I naturally gravitated to the Rave area. Before going in, however, we agreed that we would meet every 45 minutes at a spot between the three tents. It was 1991, and none of us had mobile phones, so this was the only way to touch base. We did this a few times, but the third time around, trouble met us because as we were going back into our respective areas, Adjoa saw my mother and her two friends strolling through the recreational ground! This was not something we could have dreamt of, and it felt like a living nightmare at that moment.

For a minute, we could not move, but when the situation fully hit us, we all shot off in different directions. I ran to the far end of the park, and Abena went towards a coppice of trees and hid. There were graves at the top of the park, where Adjoa headed. Later, she jokingly commented that we might have ended up in them if we had been caught. Effectively, it could have been raves, close shaves and encounters with graves. When we eventually found each other, we decided that that 'little' incident spelt the end of our day out, and we left the park feeling very scared. Yet, despite that 'close shave' and how we felt at the time, we still believed we were invincible because we were not caught and would never be. We continued to go to daytime raves and make what we considered to be 'foolproof' plans in preparation, though, in reality, they were marginally less dangerous than the first one. In 1994, I moved to London to study at a university. While I took my studies seriously, I still went to raves on campus or Central London clubs up to 5 times a week. Interestingly, each Friday night at the same time (9 pm), I would receive a call from my father to ensure that I was studying. I assured him I was and embellished what I was learning, so he had no reason to think I was doing the opposite. However, because he always rang at the same time, I knew not to leave my halls before or too soon after in case another call followed so as not to arouse suspicion.

In many ways, my experiences described above are illustrative of how secrecy operates within families. As Smart (2007 in Letherby 2015) explains, familial secrets can be about attempts to keep certain information to present and/or preserve a certain image. Further to this, she points out that some familial secrets are considered shameful, for instance, abuse. Thus, if information such as this is exposed, familial reputations could be severely undermined. Smart's argument also resonates with Goffman's work around the 'Presentation of Self', whereby there is the need to show ourselves in a way that is acceptable to others, or more specifically, 'mobilis[ing] behaviour, so it conveys an impression to others in which it is their interests to convey' (Goffman 1959:3). To that end, I was very mindful of 'interventions' from the Ghanaian community, for anyone who transgressed the behavioural expectations, which included being studious and obedient, and not doing anything perceived as 'rejecting' our heritage. Moreover, having experienced 'interventions' myself during my teenage years, I was keen to avoid more. I was not always considered obedient, but I did try to 'preserve' my image as 'studious'. Though I was attending raves, it was in my interest to 'mobilise my behaviour' and 'convey the impression' that I was studying in my room, the library or at a friend's house. This was rarely questioned, given the value attached to education. Yet, at the same time, my approach to secrecy was somewhat complex and contradictory because while my parents were not aware of where I was going, the raves (especially in Nottingham) were often in open spaces (e.g. parks), so I could easily have been seen by a member of the community, as was the case during our 'close shave at the rave' in July 1991.

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‘Are you in the wrong place, love?’: Hypervisibility and the ‘Black girl inna the dance’

During my university years (and for a while after), I went to many Jungle, Hardcore and Techno raves, and while my main focus was to dance, enjoy the music and meet new people, I liked to observe how people interacted with each other. I also reflected upon the diversity of those spaces and my own positioning within them. Jungle raves were very diverse, but I often noted that at most of the happy hardcore raves, which I attended in the late 1990s, I was often in the minority in terms of my gender and race, but less so with regards to class, as many fellow ravers were from working-class backgrounds London and the Midlands.

In a paper entitled ‘Educated and Educating as a Black woman’ – *An Auto/Biographical Reflection of My Grandmother’s Influence on My Academic and Professional Outcomes* (2019), which explored my experiences as a Black female in Higher Education, I highlighted the fact that I was one of the few British Black academics. More specifically, I referred to data (see Runneymede Trust 2015, in Owusu-Kwarteng 2019), which suggested that we represented 1%, and there were even fewer females, so I referred to myself as being ‘the one in one’. Though I was unable to find any statistics detailing the number of Black British people who went to Happy Hardcore raves, reflecting anecdotally, I was also often the ‘one in one’ in these spaces. This did not bother me, as I was there for the music and the positive atmosphere. In the main, the people were very friendly because we all had one thing in common: a love of Hardcore/Rave music. Raves were also a good opportunity to exchange the latest tunes, tapes and CDs that were prevalent back then, and information about upcoming events.

On some occasions, however, the situation was different. During the mid-1990s, the Rave scene split into different genres and became more racially divided. Jungle, for instance, became predominantly Black: ‘Jungle was a multicultural thing, it [was] also about a Black identity, Black attitude, style and outlook’. (‘Two Fingers’ and James ‘T.Kirk Junglist’ 1995 cited in Colin 1998:252). In contrast, the Happy Hardcore events were largely White (often working class) males. My experiences in these spaces were often ‘interesting’. I recall going to clubs on Friday nights with African and African-Caribbean friends. As with the festival mentioned above, the music in the club was diverse and catered to a variety of tastes, so I usually went into the Rave, Techno or House rooms. This was often met with strange looks and comments/questions, such as ‘You’re sure you’re one of us?’ (i.e.Black). My experience here, in many ways, echoes participants in a study entitled, *‘You’re Not Supposed to Be into Rock Music”: Authenticity Maneuvering in a White Configuration’* (Schaap and Berkers 2020). Schaap and Berkers interviewed 27 Black people who listened predominantly to Rock music, and in so doing, they explored responses to this. Jennifer, a participant, recalled how her family and friends were ‘surprised’ that she liked Rock music. She recalled: ‘*When I was growing up, people were always so surprised that I was into rock music. Like, ‘You’re a Black girl, you’re not supposed to be into rock music’* (Schaap and Berkers 2020: 416). This response was not dissimilar to those I received. To my friends, it was like I was ‘abandoning Black culture by investing in what is seen as a White music form’ (Schapp and Bergers 2020:416)

At some Happy Hardcore raves, I recall blatantly being asked questions about what I was doing in those spaces. Effectively, it was implied that I should be *elsewhere* (e.g. in places which played ‘Black’ music such as R’N’B, Bashment, or Reggae, none of which I could stand). During one rave in the Midlands, a man approached me under the guise of friendliness and asked, ‘Are you in the wrong place, love?’ to which I responded huffily that I was not. Nevertheless, these experiences did not prevent me from going to the raves because I was there purely for the music, and in the main, people were positive. However, what I experienced in the Happy Hardcore venues resonates with a point made by Aichison (1999, in Mowatt et al, 2013:646), which is that in leisure spaces (which includes clubs, raves etc.), Black women are hypervisible, and not always in a

favourable way, because *'leisure establishes sites where power is both erected and exercised in various ways that reinforce the gender-based and racially oppressive relations that are features of other societal institutions* (Aichison 1999 in Mowatt et al 2013:646). With that said as Sobande et al (2020) note, all of us regardless of our backgrounds, are within our rights to be visible and that we should be recognised [positively] in all parts of society. I would argue that this also extends to leisure spaces, including raves. Yet, Sobande et al (2020) add that our visibility may render us targets of abuse and harassment, especially if we are in spaces that dominant groups feel that we should not be. The questions and comments mentioned earlier suggested to me that it was felt that I did not have any right to be in those spaces, and on reflection, their responses felt like microaggressions and subtle forms of harassment. Mowatt et al (2013: 646) also explain that as a result of these situations, as Black women, we may also need to '*resist and express ourselves in different ways to gain access and fully experience leisure*'. I certainly did and continue to resist because, despite these attitudes, I knew I had as much right as anyone else to be in those spaces and to be *myself* within them.

Pandemics, Raves and the Present

Very recently, I was reflecting on the Rave culture and my experiences within it, especially as it related to how easy or difficult it was for me to occupy spaces of my choice as a Black woman. I was considering how things are currently. Given that we experienced a global pandemic (COVID-19) and the fact that there were several lockdowns until 'Freedom Day' on July 19th 2021, there were fewer official raves. However, some unlicensed raves did take place. In my local area, the police shut down two of these raves in May and October, respectively. However, I did not go to any of these in view of the lockdown rules, plus I have some medical conditions that placed me in the clinically vulnerable category. Raves are highly enclosed spaces where COVID-19 could easily spread. However, I joined several Happy Hardcore and Rave groups online, including 'My Hardcore Life' and 'Hardcore to the Bone', both of which are great platforms to exchange tunes. In these online arenas, again, I am aware that I am the only Black woman in these groups, and though the group mediators are aware of this, I do not experience any of the issues that I did at earlier raves. Interestingly, I had a conversation with one of the group organisers about my previous experiences, and he was shocked, albeit not surprised. He was critical of those questioning me and reminded me of United Dance and the rave manifesto, which was about peace, love, unity and respect. The conversation was a positive experience and reinforced my beliefs about one of the underlying purposes of the rave culture.

Virtual conversations with fellow Happy Hardcore lovers in 'Hardcore to the Bone' and 'My Hardcore Life' also gave me the confidence to share my experiences with wider audiences. For instance, in 2020, I participated in two podcast interviews, one of which I created for the University of Greenwich, entitled '*Black British and Kickin' it*', and focuses on stories of success amongst Black British people. I also discussed these issues on '*The Sociology Show'*. At the time, this was rated the most popular podcast, with over 800 listens (The Sociology Show 2020). In November 2022, I also shared my story on the *African Dawn* podcast. (The latter two can be found on Spotify) Further to this, I presented my story at the BSA Auto/biography group in November 2021. In all cases, the aim was to further challenge the 'narrow constricting views of Blackness' (bell hooks 1990:26), especially as it relates to the type of popular culture we consume. Moreover, I hope what I said will inspire others labelled as 'transgressors' to share their stories and, more importantly, be themselves.

Conclusion

Music informs how we 'construct [our life] experience' (Frith 1996:109). To understand it, we must also understand the quality of the experience, and this will vary according to the genre of music. For me, rave and techno music often led to uplifting experiences and attending events

facilitated my self-expression and enabled me to 'construct our [my] sense of self-identity through the direct experiences it offers [ed] the body, [and] time sociability experiences….' (Chukwuma et al n.d digitmagazine.com). Chukwuma et al. also explain that developing our identity is an experiential process that music can vividly grasp. Engaging in the rave culture effectively enabled me to understand my identity's fluid and/or 'mobile' nature – and the process of becoming who [I am]'. When I first discovered rave music, I was a young woman identifying who and what I wanted. Drawing on Frith's words (1996:119), this can be understood as [my self] in process',

Aside from giving us a sense of who we are, music allows us to identify others who share our tastes and those who do not, but we can still interact with them. To that end, my attendance at rave events was enhanced by opportunities to meet other 'misfits' who shared my music tastes. Meeting them also meant that my CD and tape collection grew exponentially, as did my knowledge of radio stations that were, shall we say, not mainstream! With regards to family and friends, despite some continued references to me as a 'misfit', we have become respectful of our mutual 'quirks'. There was a mutual understanding that we should 'decide playing and hear what sounds right' (Frith 1996:110) to us.

My reflections on engaging in the Rave culture, and latterly joining online groups and sharing my stories through podcasts and other means, in many ways, reinforce my belief in embracing and celebrating the diversity of our life experiences and choices (including our popular culture preferences). It is important to recognise that these are often informed by several factors, including our socio-historical contexts and generational locations, and that together, they shape how we construct our identities as Black people. My story also speaks to bell hooks' argument that we should resist notions of universality and assumptions that we are all/must be the same so we can oppose colonial and imperialist ideas of who we are or what we 'should' be. Challenging 'universality' is also essential to constructing our sense of selfhood.

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