

Summary of The Channel 4 Documentary Hair Power: Me and My Afro Hair

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For our first session of the Race and Education Film Club on the 11th May 2023, we were joined by Malcolm Richards (Senior Lecturer in Education at UWE) and film club member, Alexandra Brown (Philosophy, Ethics and Religious Studies teacher).

The inspiration behind choosing this particular documentary was a current news item. An applicant for the job of 'dining reservations supervisor' at a top London hotel, who had made it to the final round of interviews, was sent the company's 2021 uniform policy stating "unusual hairstyles such as 'spiky hair, Afro style" were not allowed. The hotel claimed he received an out-of-date uniform policy banning 'unusual' hairstyles, and later apologised.

We began the session discussing our initial reactions to the documentary, first the speakers then other participants. Malcolm stated that they were no surprises in what he watched, reflecting on common first impressions people have of someone with dreadlocks; he described the way he feels looked at, and gave specific examples of the way he has been treated. How terrifying, in this day and age, that this prejudice exists!

"Curls, kinks, locs and dreads. Black hair is so much more than hair that grows on our head. It's freedom, it's activism, it's making a statement. When hair doesn't conform with the Eurocentric view, a conflict unfolds."

Quote taken from the documentary.

Alexandra spoke about the feelings of violation and a sense of erosion of humanity when people identifying as black experience the kinds of treatment described in the film. This just shows how harmful and destructive the nature of racism can be.

The discussion then focused on the issue of how some white people see nothing wrong with touching the hair of someone identifying as Black and without their consent. This act of 'invasion' of another someone's body, the imposition of someone's presumed authority over someone else's, is unacceptable and must be flagged for awareness to the greater community.

Alexandra's words "In order to protect myself, I have to diminish myself" were emotive and hit me hard. Yet sadly, the incidents raised during the film and the session are everyday occurrences to many Black people, hence the need to raise awareness that this is not ok.

The related issue of locs being tied back in order to fit in with the Eurocentric view of what hair should look like, and to detract from negative attention was raised. Why should someone conform to tying their hair back in order to be left alone? The issue of white people then making comments (sometimes derogatory) about the hair when it was 'open' and allowed to breathe was also spoken about.

Language terms which were used in the documentary were discussed such as 'nappy' hair, 'good' hair, and 'picky' hair. It was evident that these terms needed some unpacking for

those (usually white) people who found the language strange and difficult to understand. Establishing definitions wasn't as easy as we thought. The context in which the language is used, who is saying it, and why they're saying it, all make easy understanding problematic.

The conversation soon moved on to the sections of the film where our guests spoke about their relationships with their barbers/hairdressers/locticians (a hairdresser who specializes in locs), comparing this close relationship to one with a therapist. Interestingly, this resonated with Alexandra and Malcolm who then spoke about the loctician's salon/barbers as a place of being a place of sanctuary, a refuge but also a sacred place where trauma could be witnessed and soothed. Malcolm reiterated this message when he recounted his childhood experiences of being with the same barber for many years. 'A space of love and joy' was how Malcolm described this sacred relationship and space of the barbershop.

As we neared the end of the session, Alexandra and Malcolm gave some great advice for teachers for dealing with these sensitivities in the classrooms. Alexandra stressed 'lived experiences' as being a top priority so pupils could see reflections of their natural selves reflected in positions of authority, whilst internalising the belief that their natural features are not abnormal and something to be hidden, but rather, something beautiful and to be cherished with pride.

Malcolm reiterated this message, saying that school policies should be investigated to see how many cases of uniform breaches there have been in relation to black pupils who have got into trouble for having their hair in a certain way. "Requests/ demands should be made that this isn't acceptable. Enact a change- make a change!" is the message that Malcolm left us with.

To conclude, resources to help support teachers/ educators in relation to this theme can all be accessed on our website.

Many thanks to both Malcolm and Alexandra for their powerful contributions!