#BlackGirlsTalking

Not too far down in the deep crevices of the internet, a community of black women has begun to burgeon – and from time to time spill over into mainstream media. In a world of diverse virtual channels and platforms of communication, video has become the mode of choice, delivering raw truths about marginalisation based on sex and race in modern cities, a struggle to belong, and invisibility, all within the backdrop of the silent march of gentrification. **Wilhelmina Maboja** explores.

The web series *Strolling* by UK-based filmmaker Cecile Emeke, is just one of many that have brought to the fore experiences that tended previously to only exist in books. In episode one of Emeke's series, Bekke, a young London-born woman with Nigerian roots, wraps up in an instant the vast crevice of identity that African diasporans struggle with while living in Western cities.

"My mother always told me, at a very young age, that 'you are a black British child, but you are also Nigerian'," says Bekke, who continues to explain that growing up in this day and age harbours a sense of displacement, especially living in London. All the time speaking to the camera, she takes the viewer on a stroll around various points in Hackney, which is often referred to as one of the most violent and unsafe of the London boroughs.

As Bekke details her views and assertions, she becomes even more poignant when she talks about invisibility. The more you watch, the more you're swiftly confronted with the issues of publically policing black women's bodies, while at the same time being totally invisible in society. The invisibility could be by virtue of being black, or being an immigrant, or the child of one.

"Sometimes I feel like, non-existent?" she says. "We are here, but I don't think we're noticed."

According to the late Theophilus Okere, a Nigerian priest and academic, in his paper *African Culture: The Past and Present as an Invisible Whole*, invisibility and a sense of belonging stems from culture. However, when it comes to the shared culture between Africans in particular, it is not as easy to tie down.

"[Today's] African culture is neither the romanticised, pre-colonial, Neanderthal museum piece arrested in its development and fossilised in its authentic purity; nor is it yet the much vaunted one-dimensional culture which the West relentlessly has continued to foist upon the rest of the world," says Okere. "Any African culture surviving today, as indeed any flesh and blood African, is a complex mix of old and new."

While referring to "African culture" is in itself problematic – as the continent is home to thousands of cultures – his statement still runs deep. Most importantly, it speaks to a collective of people struggling to cling to what they know as their culture, and at the same time fitting so seamlessly into a monoculture.

So much so that "being black" can be an insult, or specifically distinguishing yourself from other existing races. "Being black" is being one thing, and at the same time so many things all at once. Trying to define it simultaneously compartmentalises, yet explains a uniqueness of culture, feelings and ways of being. "Blackness", when being referred to as a behaviour, has levels of contrast. This is as one can either be "too black" or "not black enough", despite the fact that "being black", to many, has no definition or a set of rules.

Owethu Makhathini, a 22-year-old living in Johannesburg, has found spaces on the internet that acknowledges the complexities of being an African, being black and a being woman, all at the same time and separately.

The internet for her is also a space where being black is beautiful beyond colour, country and physical appearance. *Strolling* has been one of many series that she avidly follows.

"Being able to relate to a French girl and being able to relate to a Caribbean girl, Brixton, a Venda girl, as South Africans we don't even have exposure to each other's cultures," Owethu explains. "Vendas are given a bad rap, and Tsongas are invisible. [I feel that] every single structure in society exists so that black people are divided."

Apart from a past and continued presence of institutionalised race, one can't equally deny the scales of comparisons black women give to themselves. In *Yellow Fever*, a short mixed media film by Kenyan filmmaker and artist N'gendo Mukii, skin colour, skin lightening creams and the pursuit of being light is portrayed in a series of musings, soliloquies and conversations.

At the start of the film, when Mukii and her sister are at a hair salon, she refers to the woman braiding her hair as *mkorogo*, which, when directly translated from Swahili, means "a mixture". Mukii is not however referring to the hairdresser as mixed race. The hairdresser's mixture is of skin tones because of the obvious lightness of her face and hands, which are in direct contrast to the rest of her body, which is darker. This is because the hairdresser has been using skin-lightening creams, but may have not been able to afford more to bleach the rest of her body.

Even the politics of hair is touched upon as Mukii narrates the frenzied ways in which African women view themselves and the relationships they have with their skin tone. Favouring lightness of skin, however, extends beyond Africa and goes as far as Asia and the Americas, and is rooted in decades of history. Today, "yellowbone" is the term more frequently used in popular culture, which excludes and demotes just as quickly as it praises. What Mukii's series suggests is that the "fever" will then pass; not to disappear, but to move on to the next generation of women.

For Owethu, despite being black, her light skin has been seen an issue and a privilege, especially when it comes to men.

"When the guys in the [townships] have made it, they look to get a [light-skinned] girl like me, which is problematic because it fetishizes me. To the guys, I'm difficult. [They say] 'Why wouldn't you want anybody to want you?' and then to [some of] the girls it's 'don't patronise us. We know what your colourism can do; we know that it comes with a certain level of privilege. Don't try to act like you know what we're going through,' which creates a barrier, because I do understand," she explains.

When being black is not being pulled apart, compartmentalised and rejected, the flipside of black girls and the internet shows its normalcy and delight. Recent online series such as *Pap Culture* and *Y Dowedoit*, are

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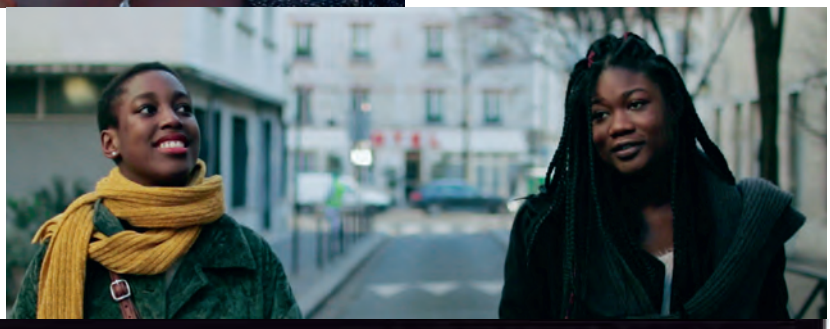

showing the facets of happiness in being young and black in the 21st century.

In *Y Dowedoit*, the video series zooms in on young Kenyan women and men navigating adulthood, sex, love and the various relationships between both sexes. Between the fun, banter and occasionally awkward question, there's a sense of acceptance and a comfortability.

Pap Culture, hosted by Thembe Mahlaba and Nwabisa Mda, is a no-holds-barred YouTube series filmed mostly in the car. Here, anything goes – trying to pick up a boy by picking him up in your car filled with friends, the candidness of being in a film while not wearing make-up, and the tricky terrain of paying for drinks when in the club. If anything, the #CarefreeBlackGirl movement, which this series exudes, has begun to permeate even the most difficult of spaces, such as mainstream media. More carefree black girls can be found in the London duo in the *Ackee and Saltfish* YouTube series, as well as in *An African City.*

Awkward Black Girl, another YouTube series created by and starring American filmmaker Issa Rae, has garnered enough attention in the past few years to warrant a fully-fledged movement, T-shirts and book included.

Rae's quirkiness about dating, work and being comfortable with liking ratchet music is part of the social misdirection that have episodes of the series, although wrapped up, sitting at 100,000 views and climbing.

The sense of invisibility and poor representation of black women in mainstream media is not the same on the internet, where much of the battle to be seen, heard and acknowledged on mainstream platforms is happening. Black girls and women are talking, and are reaping insurmountably.

The choice of video as a platform is therefore deliberate, as it also happens to be the primary mode of content delivery in today's age of information on demand.

"That's why I love the internet. It's so comforting to have that sense of community where I can relate to someone from France," says Owethu.

"You think of France, the first thing you think of is the Eiffel tower, a baguette and white people. France has millions of black people [but] you don't hear [about] that, and that's a problem. Isn't that insane?"