

WHAT I TALK ABOUT



WHEN I TALK ABOUT BLACK MAN

A short collection of photos, and snippets from essays and blog posts.

1.

This is my friend, Uche.

He's a software engineer.

And, as you might've guessed, he's a "gym bro".

But he's also a singer-songwriter with an incredible falsetto. You should hear him sing Ed Sheeran's *Supermarket Flowers*.

And every time Uche walks past a dog, he drops whatever conversation he's having (it's quite frustrating) and gives the dog his undivided attention.

Uche's got layers. A complex and inspirational guy.

But, respectfully, there are loads of other black men just like him...

Black men with vibrant personalities, interesting hobbies, and parts to them you would've never imagined.



But black men are the most oversimplified group I know.

You think you have 'em all figured out – how they talk, the corners they hang out on, the vices they concede to on weekends – then, the floodgate of surprises opens.

2.



I cried 3 times during the last Black Panther movie, all within a 15-minute window.

Don't get me wrong, that movie has its flaws.

But sitting in that theater, I'd never felt prouder to be black.

In one of the opening scenes, Queen Ramonda walks into a UN meeting and delivers a chilling monologue. She tells the leaders of the West that her people will not “fall for their bullshit.”

Meanwhile, one of her guards drags in a group of French soldiers, tells them to kneel, then turns to the French president and says “je vous en prie”, you’re welcome.

If I was watching this back in Zambia where cinemas have an “anything goes” policy, I would’ve thrown my popcorn in the air and shouted “Lesssgooooo!”

It was heartwarming to see a strong black woman command a room with such swagger.

Throughout the movie, Queen Ramonda reminded me of my mum. From her high cheek bones to the way she put everything on the line for her kids.

The poncho that Uche’s wearing used to be hers.

Uche may not have a kingdom to rule over or precious vibranium, but he can certainly command a room with swagger and grace. I’ve been privileged enough to see him do it.

3.

As a black man, I fear looking scary.

Durag sounds a whole lot like “drug”, so I understand how some white people may confuse the two.

But that complicates things for me.

Sometimes I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror when I’m heading out, and I think:

Some color? Earrings?

Maybe a scarf? I know it’s summer, but hey... it’s impossible to look violent while worrying about neck insulation.



“I gotta add something wholesome to this outfit.”

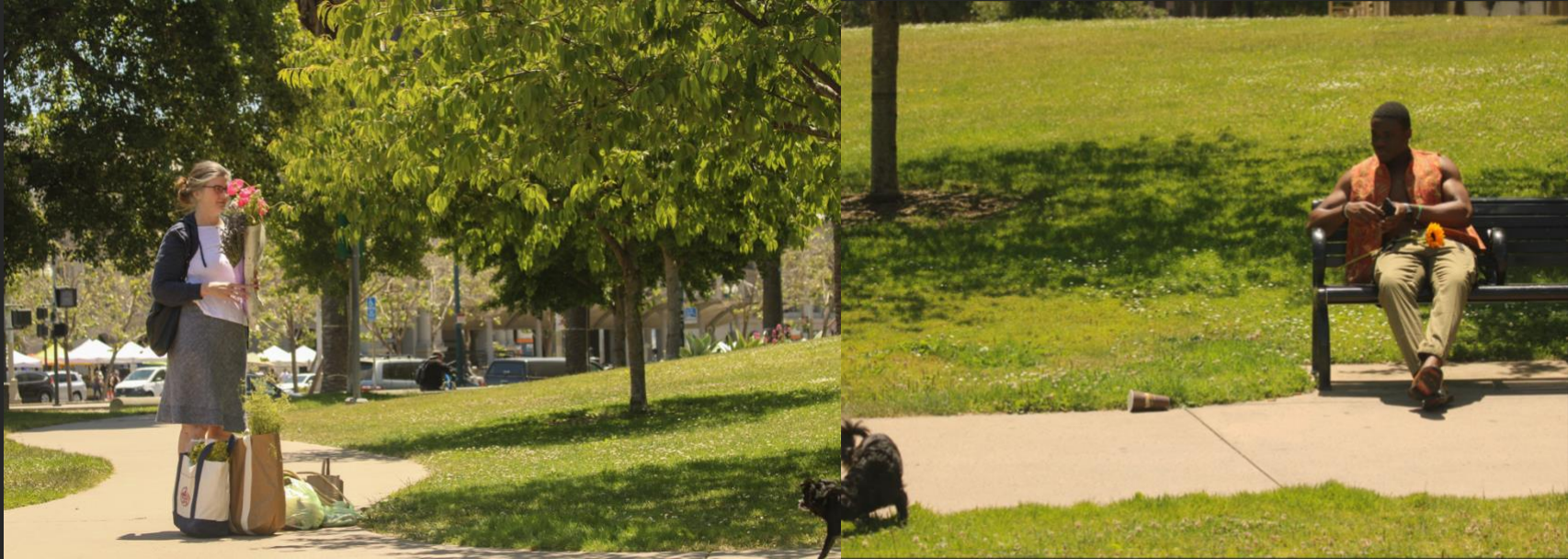
I know some of it's in my head, but it can't *all* be.

There's a clear difference in how people interact with me in public from one outfit and hairstyle to the other.

I imagine that when a group of girls get ready for a night out, one of them might ask, "Guys, be honest, is this outfit too slutty?"

If you substitute the girls for black men, perhaps one of them would say, "Guys, be honest, is this outfit too scary?"

4.



Louis Vuitton just had their SS24 show.

The creative director and 99% of his guest list were rappers, wearing their most prim and proper grills and chains.

I can't help but imagine Louis Vuitton himself attending the show. He'd faint in bewilderment, then march right up to the French parliament building, demanding an intervention.

It's a beautiful thought.

At the end of the show, Jay-Z performed his classic *Niggas in Paris* (just a few blocks down from the Louvre) which made the song feel so prophetic.

Black men don't only have a seat at the table, but as Jay-Z says in the song, "You are now watching **the throne.**"

Of course, you could argue that the real man on the throne is Bernard Arnault, the French billionaire that owns LVMH. But the fact of the matter is: black people have been pushing pop culture forward for decades.

Jay-Z's performance made my eyes light up because I love how music can symbolize social phenomena. It gives us insight into who's influencing who.

For example, when Stormzy headlined Glastonbury in 2019 (the first Black British solo artist to do so), he was wearing a bulletproof vest, made just for him by Banksy.

For a long time, Banksy and the idea of "Britishness" were synonymous. Even as a kid growing up in sub-Saharan Africa, I imagined that all of London's street corners had Banksy paintings on them.

So now, seeing Stormzy perform on the biggest national stage with a Banksy vest on, it felt like a passing on of the baton.

Black men are not only considered British, they're redefining Britishness.

5.



Besides middle-aged, gay white men, nobody gives better compliments than African Americans.

When I first arrived in San Francisco, I had one foot out of the Uber when I heard someone saying, “Nigga, you beautifuuul...”

I looked around to see where it was coming from, and this woman said with a smirk, “Yeah, I’m talkin bout you.”

A couple weeks later, I was walking down the street in my skirt, and a massive security guard gestured up and down at my outfit, then said in a deep voice:

“You rockin’ that shit.”

He said it solemnly, looked back down at his phone.

I think it’s a combination of confidence, rhythm, and straightforwardness that makes the AAC (African American Compliment) so flattering.

It shocked me though. Growing up, I learned from movies that African American men are cold and unaffectionate.

I knew better than to believe it entirely, but those prejudices still seep into you.

6.

As a child, when I'd watch game shows with my family, I always wanted the participants to lose.

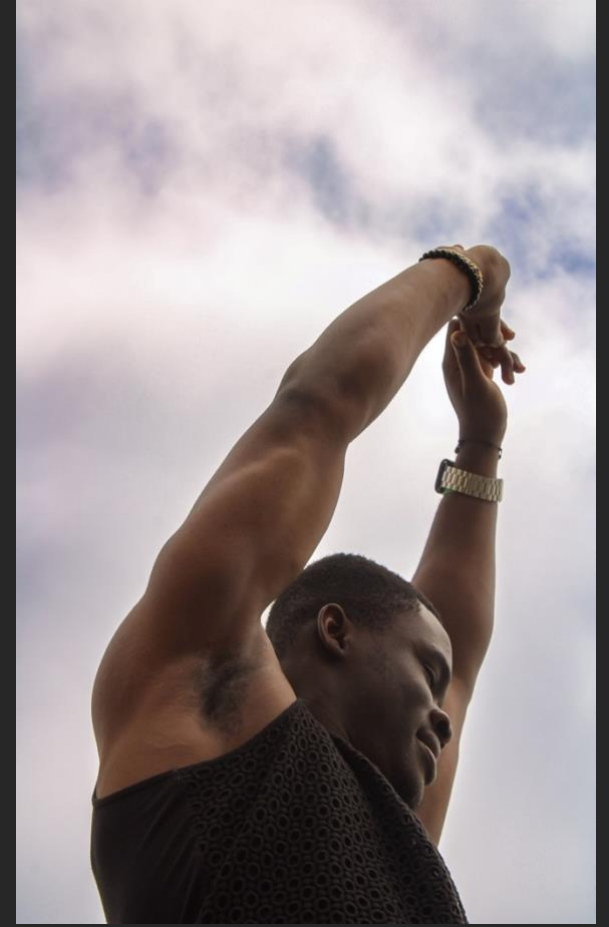
It sounds horrible, but as far as I was concerned, they were gonna win a boatload of money that I wouldn't even get a dime of.

But nowadays, when I watch any sort of competition (game shows, reality TV, the Olympics), I default to supporting the black guy.

I just can't help it.

Whether he's from the Serengeti in Tanzania or South Carolina in the US, nothing brings me greater joy than seeing a black man win it all on the big stage.

Their victories feel as sweet as mine.



My dad used to tell the story of his first swimming session at boarding school.

8 boys stepped onto the platform, and they all chuckled when they saw him there. His afro was creeping out the sides of his swimming cap.

I'm sure some of them were convinced he'd jump in and sink right to the bottom.

But merely a split second after the whistle went, he was halfway across the pool. That day, he beat all those white guys by two body-lengths, and he'd cook them in races for years to come.

That was back in the 70s, and things are quite different now. We all know better than to underestimate a black man's athleticism.

But even today, when I see a black man running the 200m, or even speaking to a girl on Love Island, I can't help but root for them.

I know that if they haven't been doubted consistently throughout their life, their fathers definitely have.

7.



Some of my friends think I spend hours in front of the mirror every morning, piecing together an outfit.

But really, and my roommates can testify to this, I'm usually showered, dressed and out the door in under 10 minutes. Very little thought goes into it.

However, I *am* very intentional about one thing:

Contrast.

Not necessarily contrasting colors, but contrasting perceptions.

We think we can learn a lot about a person from the clothes they wear, so I like to mess with people's heads.

When I wear my skirt, I wear it with a durag or my Harley Davidson jacket. It's a jarring image.

Skirts are distinctly *feminine*, but durags and leather jackets have connotations of *masculine* things: rap music and gang culture to motorcycles and rock bands.

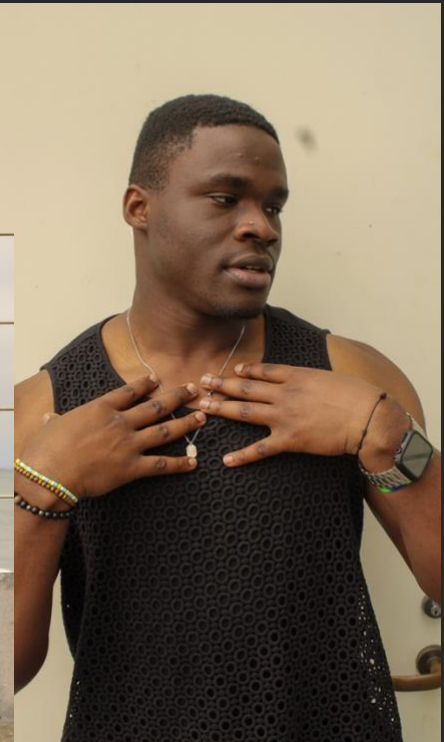
Just when someone thinks they've got me figured out, they lift their eyes a smidge and they're lost for words.

I live for the moments when I'm wearing my skirt in a club, and there's a guy side-eyeing me or shamelessly laughing. Then five minutes later, he sees me kissing the girl he was dancing with.

It's a sour taste.

8.

The dark side of babysitting as a black man.



Letting someone take care of your child is a massive decision.

I spent a year in France as an au pair and things went great. But the following au pair cursed at the kids and tore down their precious Lego buildings.

So, I understand why some parents go hard on the “screening” process.

But that doesn't bode well for a black man. I'm typically held to much higher scrutiny.

I was recently speaking to a mother, and she asked me if I had any references. I sent her five of them.

Then she asked me if I could send a copy of my passport and visa. Frustrated, I sent them to her.

“Sorry... Do you have a notarized or stamped copy?”

I mailed her my actual passport to avoid the squabble.

“And lastly... could you send me your colonoscopy results?”

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The worst part is, as much as I want to be angry at them, I can't.

In fact, I'd probably do the same. When the safety of your kids is on the line, maybe it's best you dial down your open-mindedness, and tap into some stereotypes.

In situations like this, I think of a joke from Neil Brennan's recent special. He proposed a game show called “How liberal are you?”

The first contestant walks in, and they show live footage of his neighborhood. The host says, “We’ll be constructing a new homeless shelter across from your house...” a construction team shows up in the video. The host looks to the main camera, and shouts:

“HOW... LIBERAL... ARE YOU?

So yeah, I get it.

Another reason I don’t get angry is that I get a devious kick out of defying expectations.

Sometimes I’ll go above and beyond to prove I’m the best babysitter since Nanny McPhee. The right at the last second, I turn them down.

I’m not proud, but I can’t help it.

As a child, there were only three things I knew for sure:

1. The sun will rise again tomorrow.
2. Making milk bubbles with my straw is a breathtaking experience.
3. Nigerians are the biggest hustlers.

I'd never been to Nigeria, nor had I met many Nigerians, but it was one of those legends that echoed through the hallways.

My mum told me about her first trip to Lagos. She was standing on a bridge in the city center, overlooking a marketplace. But she couldn't even see an inch of the ground.

There were rows of umbrellas to protect the vendors from the sun, and barrels of produce beside them.



But everything in between was a sea of black.

Thousands pushed their way through the market -- commuting, buying, or selling.

Motorbikes forced their way through gaps that to the naked eye did not exist. And even from way up on the bridge, you could hear a constantly rumbling -- people negotiating, laughing, and fighting.

They were all hustling.

It's no surprise that Africa's most prolific entrepreneurs, authors, and sportsmen are Nigerian. There's a callous and almost sadistic work culture baked into the society.

They have a well-oiled philosophy that produces superstars like a seasoned baker produces bread.

And I've confirmed it at university!

When it comes to finding career opportunities and going after them, the Nigerian students are ten steps ahead of the rest of us.

In the past week alone, my friend Wisdom has introduced me to a mentorship program, a private slack channel, and a job board. And when Uche brings me along to the Uber HQ (where he's interning), every intern he introduces me to has a West-African accent that needs no introduction.

I sometimes like to imagine the Wolf of Wall Street with a full Nigerian cast.

10.



The other night, Uche and I sat by the piano for a few hours.

There was a 20-minute period where we freestyled non-stop, coming up with melodies and rhyme-schemes – only pausing to laugh when I came up with a ridiculous lyric.

It was a lovely moment.

In Caleb Azuma Nelson's book "Open Water", he says:

"When the anxieties visit in the night, you like to watch rappers freestyling because there's something wonderful about watching a black man asked to express himself on the spot and flourishing.

11.

I recently watched “All the Colors of the World Are Between Black and White” at the Frameline Film Festival.

It didn’t make me cry as hard as Black Panther did, but I was definitely digging in my bag for tissues.

Nigerian director, Babatunde Apalowo, set out to make a love letter to Lagos.

While writing the script, he reached out to his roommate from university, and found out he’d been murdered in a homophobic attack. Some boys tricked him into thinking he was going on a date, then killed him.

Although Babatunde loves Lagos, his film couldn’t neglect the city’s violence and homophobia. So, he pivoted, and created a story of two black men falling in love.

Although neither Uche nor I are gay, while we were taking all these photos last week, I couldn't help but think about the film.

In the film, the protagonist is a delivery driver, and his lover's a photographer. They go around the city on his delivery bike taking photos of things.

Just two black men making art together.

And every few minutes, as if they realized at once how serious they were being, they'd break into synchronous laughter.

