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# Infusing Black Music in Breathwork and Meditation

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*Our breath serves as our lifeline to consciousness and unconsciousness. In many circles, practices such as meditation, yoga, breathwork, and sound healing were seen as a “White” thing. The challenges of 2020 helped increasing numbers of Black people realize that what had been appropriated as a “White” thing was our thing. During the pandemics of Covid-19 and anti-Black violence, I created healing spaces and breathwork sessions designed for BIPOC communities. This paper is a reflection on my experiences, with advice for holistic practitioners seeking to offer connection and resonance with Black and Brown audiences, particularly through sharing music during healing sessions.*

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Our breath serves as our lifeline to consciousness and unconsciousness. In many circles meditation, yoga, breathwork, and sound healing is a “White” thing. 2020 for many of us informed us that the “White” thing is our thing. Pandemic life exposed the stress that Black lives in the United States and around the world experience daily. The world had to start dealing with its whitewashing and colonization of Black and Brown people.

Being a Black holistic practitioner facing imposter syndrome and deciding how to grow a wellness practice in a whitewashed industry, the practice had to stand out and be different to bring in what the Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) audience wanted. Creating a unique experience was like preparing a meal. The appetizer is the music, the breath is the entrée, and speaking love and truth into the soul is served as dessert.

“People are just like receivers,” he once said, and  
“they’re also like instruments because they got a heart

that beats and that's a drum. They've got eardrums, too, and they got some strings in there, so they actually got harps on each side of their head. If you play certain harmonies, these strings will vibrate in peoples' ears and touch different nerves in the body." Musicians had a special place in Ras cosmology, because they produced vibrations that could help people feel more "in tune" with themselves and their environment. (Wald, 2011, pp. 673-674)

Growing up in rural Virginia, history was painted with the brush that the "South would rise again." Yoga and meditation were something hippie White folks did. These ideas were not in conversations in the household; they came from many depictions in television and movies. Yoga was a different religion. It was not about the connection to the self, universe, or even the connection of a higher power. We went to God to deal with stress, and the Holy Spirit was always with you to guide and direct your path. It was easy not to connect to holistic practices; only one family seemed to practice it in our small town. As life moved and life journey's brought exposure and understanding, exploration with meditation and yoga increased. As the world protested George Floyd's murder, training for holistic modalities, as well as reiki and trauma and resilience trainings, started overflowing. The universe had made the soul's path clear. "The word soul conjures up a sense of deeply felt, authentic experience and has multiple interrelated meanings that generally fall within three domains: spiritual, psychological, and cultural" (Harrell, 2018, p. 10); "Soul is also deeply embedded in the worldviews of Native American and other Indigenous peoples around the world" (Duran, 2006, as cited in Harrell, 2018, p. 10).

Training provided a clear understanding that the connection to the soul was meaningful and explored in many ways. Starting with one singing bowl led to meditating daily. Joining a journaling group was next. Then breathwork. Life-changing breathwork. The combination is a perfect breeding ground for practice. The desire to help Black and Brown audiences gnawed at my ankles. Understanding contemplative practices and soul connections, music became the key.

Contemplative practices are inclusive of many strategies including prayer, journaling, art-making, labyrinth walking, playing and listening to music, communing with nature, vigils, and dialogue circles... however, meditation is the prototypical practice and is the most visible in both scholarly and popular writing. (Harrell, 2018, p. 12)

The temperature of the world was still high. The stress of friends and family was high. Grief was not only related to losing a loved one due to Covid-19; it was now tied to isolation, not going to that favorite restaurant, or not being around family and friends. With these tools at hand, it was time to create a master plan to reach lives.

"The mental stress that's on our community has come to a boiling point," said DeAngelo Mack, who advocates for better health in communities of color. "We're at a critical moment of change to begin these conversations through mental health" (Caiola, 2020, para. 8). Black, Indigenous, and other people of color construct their healing spaces that take on an extra level of care and "sauce" in the mix.

Race-related stress in particular influences health behaviors, health status, and disease risk (Williams & Mohammed, 2009; Woods-Giscombé & Lobel, 2008). Daily and chronic exposure to racism-related stressors and socioeconomic vulnerability are identified as affecting health in African Americans (Williams et al., 2010). Evidence highlights mechanisms of action between stress and adverse health outcomes (Braveman, Egerter, & Williams, 2011; Commission on Social Determinants of Health, 2008; Smedley et al., 2002), including associations among stress exposure (e.g., exposure to racial discrimination); stress appraisal, coping, and stress biomarkers (e.g., oxidative stress; Szanton, Rifkind, et al., 2011); cortisol (Merritt, McCallum, & Fritsch, 2011); and C-reactive protein (Lewis, Aiello, Leurgans, Kelly, & Barnes, 2010). (Woods-Giscombé & Gaylord, 2014, pp. 147-148)

We must build the table, cook the meal, invite others to the “foreign experience,” set the table, add a little music, and hope this feast turns out to be the best experience they have ever had in a self-care space. According to Woods-Giscombé and Gaylord (2014), “The importance of distinguishing ‘mindfulness’ from ‘meditation’ was also emphasized. One participant mentioned that some African Americans may associate the word meditation with something that is foreign and that they may be more accepting of the term mindfulness” (p. 156). The fear of interrupting the spiritual foundation is a big thing for some African-American families. Crafting the proper wording and instructions is vital to the acceptance of practices.

“Mindfulness is the capacity to be aware and attentive to the present moment, without judgment, attachment to thoughts, feelings, past events, or preoccupation for the future” (Kabat-Zinn, 2012, as cited in Hernandez-Ruiz & Dvorak, 2020, p. 1). As we work to bring mindfulness into the forefront for BIPOC communities, it is important to remind them that the practice does not take away from their faith but can add to their faith and improve their health.

As a secular health care intervention, research establishes mindfulness practice as a useful treatment for anxiety, depression, and substance abuse, to name a few applications (Barnhofer et al, 2009; Bowen, De Boer, & Bergman, 2017; Brown & Ryan, 2003; Williams et al., 2014). (Hernandez-Ruiz & Dvorak, 2020, p. 2)

According to Caiola (2020), Sacramento’s Black leaders started hosting events to help with the mental health of its Black community. Resources from the Black Emotional and Mental Health (BEAM) Collective, based in Los Angeles, were included in the report. Searching for communities of color and learning from them was necessary for understanding the needs of different cross sections of the country. With all the turmoil, we can no longer be hidden gems in our local community; we need to be at the forefront of all Black and Brown lives that need healing.

“For the most part, participants discussed congruence between mindfulness meditation and spirituality or religion, citing religious

hymns and text that promote meditation, quietness, and being still” (Woods-Giscombé & Gaylord, 2014, p. 157). Breathwork would be a way to connect music, meditation, inspirational messages, and quietness. In my experience leading groups now for a year, the key has been to incorporate multiple modalities throughout, practicing with repeat participants. Participants are encouraged to journal during and after sessions as thoughts and messages may arrive at any time.

The most requested part of each session is the playlist. A little Stevie Wonder here, gospel artist Travis Green there, the Hamilton Soundtrack, and even Prince music have all appeared during the breathwork sessions. These songs help to bring forth messages that lead to relaxation, contemplation, and movement. Breathwork also provides participants rest. “However, for Black folks, healing and rest require much more than taking occasional breaks. It’s also about locating opportunities to recover from chronic exposure to stress, which stands in the way of holistic wellness” (Meadows-Fernandez, 2020, para. 4).

The healer also needs an outlet to heal. Fortunately, the Association of Black Psychologists held healing circles to process what was happening in both the health pandemic and the pandemic killing of Black people.

“For personal and professional sustainability and [to] ensure that I do not burn out, I am using the month of August for resting as a form of resistance,” she says. Greene Brown is one of a growing number of Black Americans who seek to bring Black August—a month-long celebration to honor the Black revolutionaries of the past—into the mainstream dialogue so that Black activists and parents can learn from its legacy. To celebrate the occasion, her organization, Parenting For Liberation (P4L), provides virtual offerings to Black families to help aid in healing despite widespread racial trauma. Greene Brown believes this kind of healing is a form of resistance. “As our community is trying to process inescapable exposure to Black suffering on social and traditional media, P4L’s Black August is shifting the nar-

native towards our healing, joy, and resilience,” Greene Brown says. (Meadows-Fernandez, 2020, para. 1)

Music allowed the group to feel the innate meaning of rhythm and blues while breathing. Making sure the space is welcoming and safe, each participant works through their feelings, faces their truth, and works to find a resolution within the hour of practice. Visualization during the meditation can also bridge the conscious and the unconscious mind, whether connecting with ancestors or placing worries in a river to float away. The music can help set the tone for embracing a new day or holding on to regret. Music has played a role in healing the places participants dare not to touch.

The history of R&B and the breadth of what it encompasses—socially, commercially, and artistically—suggests that it is not monolithic. It tells a complex story of many strands and experiences. A distinctly African American music drawing from the deep tributaries of African American expressive culture, it is an amalgam of jump blues, big band swing, gospel, boogie, and blues that was initially developed during a thirty-year period that bridges the era of legally sanctioned racial segregation, international conflicts, and the struggle for civil rights. Its formal qualities, stylistic range, marketing and consumption trends, and worldwide currency today thus reflect the changing social and political landscapes of American race relations and urban life, culture, and popular entertainment in mainstream America. (Puryear, 2016, para. 2)

Music connects us as we breathe through, with messages that give hope, express our truth, and help us feel love.

The main course gives the most sustenance in a meal. It is full of nutrients and textures, and it is full of flavor and juiciness. Breathwork calls in hope, inspiration, and a release (belching happens in the process). When the meal is so good, forget the worrying; relaxation takes over at the moment. The euphoric moments that occur during breathwork and

meditation are magical. The conscious meets the dormant thoughts in our minds and bring an unexplainable awareness. As the mood shifts, the energy shifts, and visualizations connect the unconscious to our higher self and higher source, bringing us clarity. We are reclaiming the practices of our heritage, the heritage that was stripped from our lives. We are looking to be healthy and grounded. According to the *Healthline* article “What Is Breathwork?” the following are reasons people practice breathwork:

People have practiced breathwork to:

- aid positive self-development
- boost immunity
- process emotions, heal emotional pain and trauma
- develop life skills
- develop or increase self-awareness
- enrich creativity
- improve personal and professional relationships
- increase confidence, self-image, and self-esteem
- increase joy and happiness
- overcome addictions
- reduce stress and anxiety levels
- release negative thoughts

Breathwork is used to help to improve a wide range of issues, including:

- anger issues
  - anxiety
  - chronic pain
  - depression
  - emotional effects of illness
  - grief
  - trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- (Cronkleton, 2019, paras. 4-5)

We must continue to forge ahead and standardize BIPOC communities seeing Black, Indigenous, and people of color practicing mind-



fulness and meditation. We respond to holistic practices—this is what we do, too.

Merging African religious traditions, beliefs and practices with Christianity, a number of African Americans believed that through faith and prayer one could overcome adversity of all kinds, including sickness and illness. Faith healers, root doctors, and conjurers flourished in the slave community and could be found among free Blacks, especially in the rural South, but also in northern communities. (Collier-Thomas, 2002, para. 1)

Black skeptics of healing work would benefit from a Black practitioner that can connect to them. The starter is the music used during the practice. With that one song from their era of music, the breath and psyche of the participant eases. The main course is breathing patterns that ease them into a new practice and vigorous enough to feel the effects immediately. The dessert of the whole meal comes in the messaging of support, encouragement, and proclamations of clarity, love, and truth. Words are essential: Proverbs 18:21 states, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue, And those who love it will eat its fruit” (Bible Hub, n.d.). As the practitioner leading the sessions, participants must leave lifted, ready to face the world if they are not provided resources to help them cope with the stress, grief, or other trauma they are experiencing.

The community of healing is investing in Black and Brown-skinned people to do the work—work we may not have had access to due to financial constraints or just feeling like outsiders in a space. Social justice movements have created awareness among White or non-Black healers about their lack of understanding of the Black community, and insecurity in what they can say and how the space feels. Some genuinely understand that they can be an accomplice and not just an ally, recruiting more and more of the global majority, creating opportunities to heal the masses as we see fit. This is the time to act and create healing for communities of color in healing modalities stereotyped as “White.” Honor our ancestors, and create a cycle where the Black dollar stays

in a Black community or with a Black practitioner, and ultimately helps create Black wealth. It is as simple as putting a solid meal together: music, a solid practice, and words that can speak life into any situation. We can heal generational epigenetic effects from our chronic stress and the pandemic of racism with the right combinations.

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