
FIELD GUIDE TO THE BLACK EXPERIENCE

Hi, I'm Kellee, and I'd like to talk about my thesis: The Field Guide to the Black Experience



I'd like you to try and imagine a time as a child when you had a serious conversation with your parents. Perhaps it was that a new sibling was on the way. your parent got a new job, and the family was moving, or perhaps it was as awkward as the dreaded birds and the bees conversation. Now imagine sitting down, as perhaps a 12 year old, with your parents. They're a little stilted, maybe nervous as you arrive, tipping you off to the fact that this isn't going to be a quick or easy conversation.



I'm investigating the experiences black children and young adults have as they learn to navigate their world. Specifically, building a narrative around 'the talk', police brutality, navigating environments, and situations dealing with authority figures.

The Talk, narrowly defined, is a conversation Black parents/parental figures have with their children to tell them how to act when dealing police/authority figures, in the hope that they come home alive at the end of the encounter. More broadly, the talk can encompass other situations that as Black people, we have to consider to navigate the world we live in. The conversations found in the field guide, often begin with the talk and continue into a broader range of conversation.

THESIS STATEMENT

- ▶ The Field Guide to the Black Experience is a sound walk through Harlem, that aims to give others an insight to the experiences that Black people have as they navigate their world. These experiences are told in the form of auditory conversations and narratives, told by the people I interviewed, in their own voices.

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WHY?



Demonstrators rally in protest of the police killing of Saheed Vassell in Brooklyn

Drew Angerer / Getty

This project grew out of a proposal assignment I did in Socially Engaged Art and Digital Practice. I'd been casting about for a project that I felt strongly about. Something that dealt with social justice, and art, allowing me to make something that meant something.

On October 12, 2018, I read that although a Chicago police officer had fatally shot an unarmed teenager in the back of the head in 2012, he'd recently been acquitted of any wrongdoing, and would be allowed to remain on the force. At the time, it seemed as if I couldn't turn around without hearing something in the newscycle about a police shooting. Black and brown people dying at the hands of the police seemed to happen with such a frequency that I almost felt numb when thinking about it.

When I spoke to some of my white friends, they didn't understand my concerns and fears about dealing with police officers as authority figures. Comments such as "not all police officers" or "if he'd only followed orders, he'd be alive now" felt as if they weren't even attempting to see things from outside of their limited, and privileged world views.

One of the things I've found as someone who's constantly engaging in social media, is that Black people, People of Color, and women, are often forced to justify our lived experiences. We're constantly fighting to have people hear our experiences, while at the same time, not trying to come across as (in my case), an "angry Black woman".

The conversations in the field guide, will be heard while a person walks through Harlem. By having the user listen to people telling their own stories, while walking through a neighborhood steeped in Black history, it is my hope to not only engage and immerse the user, but also to bring about a sense of empathy.

These conversations are honest, raw, and deal with sensitive topics that can be upsetting to some people. Still, I feel like these conversations are important to have in the hopes of starting conversations.

INITIAL IDEAS & PLANS

use process pictures, clips or images from the google cardboard



As with the best plans, things don't always work out the way we'd like. Initially, I'd planned to use VR, or 360 video to place the user into the view point of the child who was having these conversations with their parents.

I started working with a Ricoh Theta, and experimenting with using video, and time-lapse images, and even managed to get it packaged up and running on google cardboard.

And the tech would work. There wasn't any reason why I couldn't do it, and yet I struggled with making it compelling. I'd thought that using 360 video was the best way to make the experience immersive, and yet I was struggling.

So, I pivoted to using purely sound to tell the narrative. And Nancy was kind enough to not tell me "I told you so".

And while, I'd still like to see if I could do it properly in some sort of VR, it's something for the future.

FINAL PIVOT

swap out Khensu-Ra's name with friend

With a new direction in hand, I continued to conduct interviews with friends within itp. I narrowed down my questions, and found ways to have conversations that allowed me to pose questions, and then get out of the way.

Gradually, the narrative began to take shape, going from a vague idea, to a collections of stories that were told in the voices of those sharing their experiences.

What you're about to hear is a clip from one of the experiences that Khensu-Ra had growing up in Chicago.



As it stands now, the narrative is a collection of experiences that the listener hears as they walk through the streets of Harlem. They will start at the Schomburg Center for Black Culture, and make their way through the surrounding neighborhood, immersing themselves in a culture not their own.

It's available through a link on my website, that users can access on their phones.

As with every project, there's room to grow, and I hope to return to this project and continue to improve on it.

THANK YOU!