

What Happens When Academics Self-Organise?

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This reflective piece is based on my attendance at the University of the West Indies and the University of Leicester International Summer School held from the 5th to 10th of June 2023 at the Leicester Institute for Advanced Studies (LIAS), under the theme 'Crime, (In)Justice, and Human Rights'. My research interest includes women, violence, well-being and the criminal justice system, so I was eager to participate in what was happening. I experienced apprehension and uncertainty because my background is more rooted in practice than academia, so the questions of belonging and ability flooded my mind. However, the week provided the tools I needed to bring confirmation, reassurance, and motivation to continue my journey.

Diversity and Inclusion Matters

I appreciated the difference present in the room and the atmosphere created. When I arrived at the location, that was my first observation. The participants at the Summer School represented a melting pot of unique experiences. The different cultures, backgrounds, genders and, importantly, lived experiences contributed to the unique perspectives and made the interactions and learnings rich, organic, and relatable. The focus area for my postgraduate studies, working with incarcerated women, was the main reason for attending Summer School. It turned out to be one of the best decisions I have made. Representation matters even in academic spaces, and it was encouraging to meet people with Guyanese and Caribbean heritage who are doing good work. Having discussions about colonialism, patriarchy, racial polarisation and other forms of oppression was both therapeutic and empowering because these are issues that I am passionate about, and they align with my research interest. So, listening to my colleagues from Guyana, Trinidad and Jamaica sharing their knowledge and experiences helped to reassure me that there is a place for me in academia and also signals the importance of creating safe spaces where these discussions can occur. I was able to make the connections because of the locality so I became ignited and more determined to continue my pursuits. For those reasons discussed above, I conclude that attending the Summer School was a good investment in my future development. Also, it was difficult for me to identify the Summer School organisers from the participants because of their humility, warmth and welcoming vibes. Importantly, I believe there was a balance of power, tolerance, acceptance, respect for differences in opinion and opportunities for re-learning in a safe space.



Figure 1. Attendees at the Summer School. Images © Coya Halley.

Purposeful Presentations and Engagement

The range of topics and issues explored brought a deeper understanding of our society's realities and challenges. The topics covered include understanding the gendered dimensions of violence in the Caribbean, reproductive health in disasters, experiences of women and girls, criminal intimacies and the pleasures of power, mental health and incarceration, reparatory justice, and analysis of prison systems. Some of the emerging themes in this discourse included social [in]justice, the consequential impact of patriarchal ideologies in our society, structural barriers that reinforce inequality and the subjugation of people and fundamentally, the indelible impact that the colonial legacy continues to have on the Caribbean region.

I felt a sense of reverence for the experiences and sacrifices of my ancestors during the presentations. Professor Michael Bucknor's presentation 'Criminal Intimacies and the Pleasure of Intimacy' resonated deeply with me as my work is tied to women who have experienced trauma. I have never considered the intricacies and power of literature to tell the stories so we can truly understand the complex experience of a once oppressed people, and it has truly made it difficult to forget.

Even as I engaged with this session, I began reflecting on the experiences of women in my country, particularly incarcerated women's experiences of violence. Statistically, one in two women are affected, and it is interesting to know the degree to which their voices are heard as part of the intervention process as well as a safe space for them to make sense of these experiences and potentially understand how those experiences have impact on their pathways to criminality is important. As such, I have decided to make this a key element in future research.

Moreover, all the themes and subjects covered during the summer school resonated profoundly with me. They provided many opportunities for reflection. The questions that lingered in my mind after such a packed week were: What is next? What do I do to ensure the work continues? Am I doing enough to ensure my existence counts?

Additionally, several professional workshop sessions were held to provide us with the requisite knowledge and skills about matters ranging from grant writing to publishing academic papers.

The trip to Kedleston Hall was a revolutionary moment for me, and I was perplexed. I began to think about the value of some of these artefacts and their connections. How many will get to experience and understand the work and sacrifices of their ancestors? I could not conclude if they were in the right place. After learning about history, several questions stormed my mind about the cost of the affluence and magnificence of what I witnessed that day. The artefacts transcended the present day and reflected a history of the stories I am interested in discovering as there are many unanswered questions. However, the culminating event was the student conference held on the final day. The presentations were diverse, and some of the research projects were quite fascinating and piqued my interest to the degree that I wish it were possible for that research to be conducted in my country.

The sharing of the narratives and experiences of different groups of people is powerful in understanding the nuances and complexities present. However, while identifying the existing challenges concretises the importance of the work of academics and researchers, presenting more evidence of positive stories would have been useful, and who is telling the story is also essential. There were a few instances when I felt like all we have in certain parts of the world are problems and challenges; I needed to hear more positive stories.

Importance of Connections

The room was constantly buzzing and filled with conversation. I observed the room over the four days and thought I needed to capture these moments. I have seen this happen in some spaces, but there was something different about this space I felt like a warm and welcoming atmosphere was created that called out to me, saying- come, sit, have fellowship and engage. I describe this figuratively because the energy in the room was so positive, and I want to attribute this to good leadership and organisation. The people in the room are at different stages in their academic journeys. From the organisers' perspective, I commend them for managing the use of their power and authority in the room. Often, when I enter academic gatherings, it is easy for me to identify the persons in charge. While being able to identify the organisers does not always bear negative connotations, I felt that the leadership skills displayed contributed to what I considered inclusivity and shared power. Also, I applaud participants who are more advanced in this journey for their demonstration of patience, thoughtfulness and for giving of their time to share knowledge and encouragement. Also, I never observed anyone rushing to leave, even on the final day, which confirms the sessions' quality and effectiveness. The discussions appeared rich and engaging, which blessed me to see. As the days progressed, and I continued to observe the interactions, the building of networks and learning about each other's work and even culture. It was like I got an epiphany, the spirit of community and understanding was felt quite powerfully in the room, and I thought, this is what is possible when academics come together. Hence, my title for reflection 'What happens when academic self-organise?' The possibilities are endless when academics see beyond difference but allow the desire for change to propel us to work in unison. The title of this reflection envisions an academic community that promotes collective engagement instead of individualistic practice.

Notably, despite how diverse our research backgrounds were, the glue that held the community together was the need to create a more equal and just society by dismantling those barriers that continue to infuse division. I am humbled by the respect and appreciation given to each other, and I saw a genuine effort in getting to know each other, not just from an academic standpoint but as individuals. My excitement mounted when I met academics with Caribbean backgrounds, but specifically with Guyanese heritage. Discussing our shared roots, academic aspirations, and hope for Guyana encouraged and inspired me.



Figures 2. Attendees at the Summer School. Images © Coya Halley.

Next Steps

I began the summer school with much uncertainty about the relevance of my research interest. I was also hesitant about presenting it to my colleagues. Nonetheless, the feedback I received encouraged me to keep going. Thus far, this Summer School is the benchmark that I would use to measure other gatherings of a similar nature. Even as I continue to develop as a researcher, I must constantly remind myself that working in silo will not produce the best outcomes. Likewise, I encourage academics and researchers to engage in more interdisciplinary work because there will be a more significant impact on our society.

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