



Perspectives in Anthropology: Radical Authenticity and Self Care in Public Scholarship – with Alyssa A.L. James & Brendane A. Tynes

“Exactly. And that’s actually what pushed us to create Zora’s Daughters: a space where we can combat the erasure and silencing of Black women’s voices and experiences within and outside of the academy – through discussion and upliftment of each other.”

“That’s right! So following our forebear Zora Neale Hurston, the pioneering writer and anthropologist who moved seamlessly between literature and ethnography to chronicle Black life, we’ll be digging deep into social worlds and social issues through the lens of anthropology (Black feminist anthropology!). That’s right! And we’ll be doing it in a way that is compelling and accessible.”

“This is a space for deep conversations, continued learning, and modelling how to act as a critical participant observer of the world. Hopefully, at the end of every episode, you’ll say “Ooh, I never thought of it like that.”

[\(James & Tynes, 2020\)](#)

Brendane Tynes, a Black first-generation college graduate from South Carolina, went to Duke University with every intention of becoming a pediatrician until she enrolled in the Anthropology of Race, taught by Lee Baker. For the first time, Brendane realized that things in this world aren’t the way they are just because, but instead that someone had to make it that way. And her love for anthropology began with the assumption that the world could be made another way. Alyssa James, a Toronto-born, first generation college graduate and daughter of Jamaican immigrants, was originally in psychology and equity studies, an interdisciplinary program. Through Caribbean history courses, she came in contact with ethnographies of Martinique. When it was time to decide on a graduate program, she rediscovered the potential of the anthropological toolkit to create rich cultural analyses and insight. Alyssa and Brendane, now doctoral candidates in cultural anthropology at Columbia University, host the brilliantly authentic and timely podcast, Zora’s Daughters. From annotating Black feminist literature to unpacking pop culture, current events, and their everyday experiences, Alyssa and Brendane bring Black feminist anthropologies to the public in an innovative and accessible way. Speaking briefly over Zoom, they shared with me how they model authenticity and self-care through their work with Zora’s Daughters and beyond.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Isis: A major theme throughout these interviews has been that great public education or science communication is always intentional. So, tell me about how



Zora's Daughters began. Was there a lightning rod moment for you both? When did you realize you had to pivot towards sharing your work in an accessible way?

Alyssa: One thing I'll say is we don't really talk about our individual research on the podcast at all. I make this joke all the time, nobody really knows that I do agricultural heritage studies in the Caribbean islands. Everyone always says, "Oh yeah she's in Black Studies or Black feminist anthropology", but I have this whole other life. But yes, absolutely I think there was a lightning rod moment for us. There were really two main reasons. One was that we just thought it would be a really fun idea and really fun to do, but also at the time it was just after the uprisings in 2020, the Movement for Black Lives, and on top of that #BlackintheIvory had just happened on Twitter. So, I think at that time, people were quite hungry for the kind of information and knowledge that we were...about to share.

Brendane: Yeah, I think for me, on a personal level, my research is not necessarily something I particularly parade around or say like "Oh yes, you are going to definitely read this or listen to this." I think what I do well is look at what's already going on, with things that I think people are not really paying attention to and ask, "What's the subtext to this?", or "What's the other texts that going on?", or "Who is being marginalized in the situation?" and "What viewpoint is being marginalized here?" and uplifting that. I think that's always been a thing that I've done even as a child. I would be like "Oh! Everybody thinks this situation is all cool... I'm going to instigate because there's actually something else happening here!" as another way to read what's going on in the world. We do get questions sometimes about what we study, or how we study, and how we bring that as a form of public scholarship. And I think for Alyssa and me, it's like our work is our work, and we want to keep that separate from the podcast. It's like the podcast is a sacred space to me. This is where we talked about s*** that we care about, but we can't necessarily talk about through our work. And I think as academics it's really important for us to have that separation, like everything in our lives can't be an extension of the s*** that we study. Because then our lives revolve around this ivory tower that's not for us, really and truly.

Isis: Building on this idea of #BlackInTheIvory, as Black women we often are not allowed to bring our full selves into academic spaces and instead may fall back on these crafted academic personas. How did you both get to this place where you're comfortable sharing your authentic selves through the podcast?

Alyssa: I do not have a hyper-crafted academic persona. I wish I did, but I do not. So, how I am on the podcast is probably a little bit more of a polished version of myself, because we do get to write things in advance. But for the most part, I think one of the things that is special about our podcast is that we were having these conversations already. Brendane and I were actually friends, talking on WhatsApp and hanging out. So,



we basically just took these conversations that we were having, utilizing the things that we read and our life experiences to understand and discuss other things that were happening in the world and put it on a podcast, so I think that's one of the things that really helped. We've also had discussions about how "real" we wanted to be on the podcast. So, that includes cursing. We do say n**** and that was something where we didn't know at first. Because we do know that our professors and other professors and students who are not Black are listening to the podcast. And, in the end we just said, this is how we speak, and nothing about the way that we speak, the way that we communicate makes it less academic or less legitimate, and we wanted to be able to demonstrate that.

Brendane: The only thing I'll add to your wonderful answer Alyssa is that for me, when I am not living in integrity, when I'm not living authentically as myself, that brings on anxiety. That brings on deeper levels of depression. Now that I'm in my Saturn return right, I've come to this place where I'm like "Don't agree to do s*** you don't want to do" but also bring the best pieces of yourself that you can to certain things. And there are certain things that don't deserve the best pieces of us. There are some places where you need that crafted identity, because that is how you protect your true self. I never want to present myself as someone that I'm not. When I feel anxieties, it's because I am like trying to live a life that's not true to me. So, I'm trying to avoid that now at all costs. And we had no idea, not a single clue that things would take off in the way that they did. But of course, Alyssa is a genius, so why wouldn't they! Even people who would probably be off put by the occasional n**** still listen! Which I think is hilarious.

Isis: Thank you for setting up another smooth transition! Thinking with protecting your true self, how do you both model self-care in this space? Your public scholarship includes critique of current events as well as the work of others. How do you decide when and with whom to engage, and how do you maintain healthy boundaries and care for yourself in the process?

Brendane: I think a lot of what we choose to address is values based. First of all, we say "Okay, do we have the range to talk about this issue?" Then it's "Can we build the range if we don't already have the range?" If the answer is no to either those questions, then it's like "Okay! We're going to uplift someone who has expertise in this." Or say nothing. Just because something is on Internet, doesn't mean you gotta have a comment. As someone who does activism and organizing, I am very wary of the sources that people get their information from to base their political lens. So, if I see something that's a little off, or if I see something that's very anti-Black, and then I see Black people sharing it and endorsing it and I'm like "Okay, maybe you don't see how this is anti-Black." And we're right back to little Brendane instigating. Even in instances where we have critiqued anti-Blackness in the work of others, we have never received hate or anything. The most that we've received is people trying to make us mules or bulldogs for them. And so, we had to have conversations about how we're going to set those boundaries. Because we're not people's



mules or their bulldogs. We are not here to call attention to every single act of anti-Blackness or misogynoir on Earth because that's exhausting. So, we're trying to figure out how to make our boundaries public knowledge, because right now we kind of privately practice them.

But, on a personal level, as far as self-care goes, I really just like to watch HGTV. I like to watch things that require very little thought. Just show me the pretty house, show me the decorations. Every once in a while, I turn my brain off, so I don't get all anthro and Black Studies with it, and be like "Okay, so why is this couple able to buy a house in this neighborhood and –" I just let it go! I love to dance, I sing, I do makeup, I talk to my friends. I think that's the best way to take care of myself now. And I'm trying to do it more and more because I'm realizing that I work too much, and I work too hard.

Alyssa: One of the things that I wanted to draw attention to from what Brendane said is that the reason that we responded was not because of who was sharing that [graphic](#). It was because it was being shared among people that we care about, and people in our community. We knew we could not let this slide because this is harmful to people in our community, in our lives, who are important to us. So, it has nothing to do with like clapping back. I feel like she [the influencer that created the graphic in question] tends to get centered so much in that conversation, and so much anytime it comes up that I really want to make it clear that it really didn't have anything to do with her at all. I think this goes back to authenticity. And we're not going to problematize that right now (even though we could!) But it really goes back to us being true to ourselves and the origins of the podcast. Just us being ourselves and doing what we felt was important for us to do.

But in terms of self-care, I watch a lot of TV as well but I'm more about TLC. I realized I like relationship things, so I like relationship shows, and I like reading about relationships. And not just romantic ones, but all kinds of relationships and I'm low key trying to decide how I can turn my research into something more related to that. Therapy as well. We all got to do it, and it helps. If you are in grad school, and you are insured and able to have a therapist, I strongly recommend. I also just try to stay off of social media. Academics are kind of like "Oh yeah social media, it's a vehicle for my sharing projects" and things like that, but our non-specialist every day listeners have a lot of expectations about our engagement with them.

So, we just take time away. We're not making money off of our social media stuff and don't need to be on Instagram posting twenty stories a day. We want to engage with the people who enjoy listening to our work, but even with your closest friends you still take time away and disconnect. So, it's okay.

Brendane: And it runs the gamut. We've been contacted by students who say, "Oh I'm reading this from my class, can you do an episode on it?" and it's like no we're not going to read this for you. We get requests asking us to do film, or book reviews and things like that. And I think one of the other modes of engagement, besides being mules and bulldogs, people mistake us for therapists or mental health professionals. So, I think we've



gotten better about kind of like again privately practicing boundaries. When we've got some trauma dumping in a message, we have our canned responses, or we don't respond, and we keep it pushing. But yeah, we get a lot of "ZD Fix My Life", which you know could be a segment in the future!

Isis: ZD Fix My Life™ coming soon! To wrap things up on a positive note, what has been your favorite and/or most fulfilling experience through Zora's Daughters or your public scholarship in general?

Alyssa: The most fulfilling thing is the other graduate students and Black women who listened to the podcast and they'll either be tweeting quotes from the show, or they'll be saying they're taking notes on things or say, "I've had several classes where we've talked about Hortense Spillers and I've never understood it this well." Explaining things makes me really nervous, speaking publicly makes me really nervous and I tend to mumble and get off track. So, the fact that I can explain something, and people understand it, and they enjoy listening is just something that feels really good for me. One of the nicest compliments that we've gotten is that someone said, "Listening to you guys is like a seminar class I never had in graduate school." I remember sitting in these seminar classes at Columbia as a first-generation college graduate, first generation Ph.D. so sitting in these classes, listening to people speak so fluidly about discourse or ontology and all these things was incredibly intimidating. So, to show people that there's a different way to communicate information, to communicate intelligence, to communicate scholarly texts, is one of the most fulfilling parts for me. In terms of my favorite part, it's just getting up and chatting s*** with Brendane.

Brendane: The most fulfilling thing is the fact that my aunt, who went to college for two weeks and said "Nah, actually I'm good", pursued a different career path and is now home retired, still tunes in every two weeks to hear me. She was one of our first patrons, with her \$20 a month. And she's a Capricorn, so you know it's serious. The fact that she listens, and is learning about me and what I do, and even talks to my family about it. So much so that my brother, who for all intents and purposes is not trying to learn about Black feminist anthropologies, was like "I heard you have a broadcast, and I'm tuning in!". I always felt a little misunderstood as a little queer child and so to know that I can like share this piece of myself with my family means a lot. My favorite thing though, is meeting Black people who listen. It's really humbling when people reach out and are excited to talk or excited to like to do anything with us. Because that means that I'm doing something that actually matters and that really means a lot to me.

To stay tuned to all things [Zora's Daughters](#) and the exceptional scholarship of Alyssa James and Brendane Tynes, be sure to follow them on [Twitter](#), and [Instagram](#), and subscribe to Zora's Daughters wherever you listen to your podcasts!



References:

- James, Alyssa A.L. and Tynes, Brendane A. "The World Simultaneously Is and Is Not Ready for Us" *Zora's Daughters*. July 15, 2020. Podcast, MP3 audio, 01:07.
<https://zorasdaughters.com/episodes/the-world-simultaneously-is-and-is-not-ready-for-us/>