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The Stories We Tell for the Narrative We Need

by
Ayana Bartholomew

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York
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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

The Stories We Tell for the Narrative We Need

by
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The collection of oral histories presented in this project explores the variety of ways that multiply marginalized people interpret their existence within larger systemic structures of oppression. Through of lens of intersectionality, resistance, and queerness, I argue that only through personal interpretation, how one chooses to explain themselves, can we genuinely understanding the experiences of the multiply marginalized. While traditional frameworks like anti-racism and feminism help us to understand single-identity politics, they fall short in capturing the totality of an individual who exists on multiple margins. With the help of the storytellers for this project, four self-identified queer youth of color, we begin to understand that a person is more than the sum of their parts: being queer means that sometimes you must chart your own path; connectedness to chosen family matters; and lastly, while your multiple marginalities may compound your challenges, you can draw strength from them.

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Introduction

In 2011, I was working for a social services organization in a transfer high school in South Brooklyn, New York. At the time the school was founded, about a decade before I started working there,¹ New York City had a 50%² high school graduation rate. Transfer high schools became one of the solutions to the graduation rate crisis. They were designed specifically to meet the academic and social-emotional needs of students who had dropped out of traditional high school but were choosing to re-engage to get their high school diploma.

The school I worked in, along with the other transfer high schools across the city, was founded with the understanding that you must meet students where they are. In this case, that meant an accelerated curriculum in a supportive learning environment. The school is small, every student has a counselor, and the expectation is that collectively the students and the staff work together towards graduation. A typical transfer student profile is that of a student who has high remedial needs, an abundance of school absences, and for many of these students, a life that sometimes got in the way. It should go without saying, however, that these students are resilient. Against stacked odds, not only do they return, but they take the necessary steps to leave in the right way—degree in hand.

Towards the end of my tenure at that school in South Brooklyn, I met a student that I will call Ricki. Ricki was smart. While he was popular, he often kept to himself, sitting alone at lunch, and not getting involved in any of the extra-curricular school programs that were offered.

¹ Inside Schools. (n.d.) *South Brooklyn Community High School*. <https://insideschools.org/school/15K698>

² Clark, Dan. (2018, January 17). *How much has the NYC Graduation rate increased since mayoral control began*. Politifact. <https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2018/jan/17/bill-de-blasio/how-much-has-graduation-rate-increased-nyc-start-m/>

Like every other student in the school, Ricki's goal was to graduate. One afternoon, while Ricki and I were sitting in the school cafeteria, he asked if I had read Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow*. I said I hadn't, but it was on my list to read, and asked him to describe it to me. Ricki responded with, "the reason I dropped out of my old school was because of what she's talking about. Sometimes you just know when people aren't there to support you, and you know that they do not want you to be successful. I left because I wasn't expected to learn there." That was Ricki's act of resistance. That was his response to a system not meant to support a young black man's education.

Shortly after this conversation, I left that school and started working for another network of public high schools in New York City. While at an event for one of my new schools, at LaGuardia Community College, I saw Ricki with books in hand on his way to class. We shared a few words, I wished him the best of luck, he did the same for me, and we went about our ways trying to figure out how to get what we needed from a system that does not benefit from supporting us.

I think that Ricki's story is an important one that is worth sharing. It is complex and complicated in the sense that it counters the narrative of what it means to be a good student. In Ricki's case, being a good student goes beyond staying in school and following traditional paths. For Ricki, a good student is one who critically examines the space that he is in, and who makes the conscious choice to remove himself from places and institutions that do not serve him.

So, why is it that so frequently young people like him are considered delinquent as opposed to informed critics of systemic oppression? Why is it that standards of success are still defined without consultation of those who need to meet those standards? Why is it that we still

evaluate the potential of a young person mostly on their academic attainment and their potential for future career success?

As an educator working in the k-12 public education system in New York City, I see firsthand how a student's potential is determined based on their grades, test scores, and attendance. If at any point one of these factors slips, for example by not meeting the proficiency standard on a state exam, the options for potential post-secondary pathways begin to decrease. If a critically minded student, like Ricki, receives less than a 75 on his English language Regents exam, he is deemed ineligible for taking a credit-bearing course once he enrolls at the City University of New York³ (CUNY) and instead is placed into remedial courses. While CUNY has options to support these students, we also know that only 28% of students who enter CUNY with remedial needs will earn a degree in eight years.⁴ Determining a student's potential based on traditional measures like test scores, not only stigmatizes the young person at the onset of their post-secondary career but also puts them in a position where the likelihood of attaining traditional markers of success, like a college degree, are minimal.

I am not going to argue that those markers do not have meaning. In a capitalist society, it is to one's benefit and survival to have access to the means to earn and spend money in traditional ways. But what I would like to argue is that perhaps we are limiting ourselves in our evaluation. Perhaps we do not see the whole story, and therefore, cannot fully assess a young person's potential.

³ *Admissions*. (n.d.) City University of New York. Retrieved February 2020, from <https://www.cuny.edu/admissions/>

⁴ Thompson, William and Rabinowitz, Vita (2018, November 30) *ICYMI: It's Time to Rethink Remedial Education*. City University of New York. <https://www1.cuny.edu/mu/forum/2018/11/30/icymi-its-time-to-rethink-remedial-education/>

The purpose of this oral history is to try and think about the actions of young people differently. I want to explore what we can learn from listening and trying to understand how young people interpret themselves, instead of assessing their potential and interpreting their actions against that of traditional pathways and markers of success. I want to paint a bigger picture of how young adults, specifically those who are multiply marginalized, see their actions in the context of a larger normative society. From this work, there are three main lessons that I have learned: being queer means that sometimes you must chart your own path; connectedness to chosen family matters; and lastly, while your multiple marginalities may compound your challenges, you can draw strength from them.

This project is about the deep bonds that such multiple marginalized young people form with one another, the development of their orientations, and the courage to persevere. I will focus on understanding the infra-politics, relationships, and tools of resilience utilized by young adults that allow them to maintain their identities as they evolve. It is not my intention to judge, define, or prescribe what thriving/success is or looks like. This project is a space to tell a counter-narrative.

I will begin this set of oral histories with a positionality statement to help the reader understand how I approach this project. I will share some information about my background and the collection of experiences in my life that have formed my perspectives. Then I will delve into methods so that the reader is aware of the process and care that I took to collect the stories of these young people. For this project, I intend to honor the vulnerability of the storytellers fully. Therefore, I will not over-interpret the words of the storytellers. Instead, I will provide language to help contextualize their words. From there, I will provide some high-level demographic data on the population of the storytellers. This will further contextualize where they are coming from

and give a better understanding of some of how their multiple marginalization impacts long term outcomes. I will then explore what the research says in a literature review that will focus on the areas of intersectionality, queerness, and infra-politics.

Much of this oral history will then focus on the experiences of the storytellers. I will organize the interviews in sections that align with the literature review and, also, include a section specifically focused on queer bonding. Lastly, I will write a brief conclusion outlining my experience of this project and sharing final thoughts on what I have learned.

Acknowledgment

I would like to thank the storytellers for their generosity and their vulnerability. I started this project knowing that the work would be profound for me, but I could not have anticipated how awestruck I would be by the everyday acts of resistance and resilience that these young people engaged in. Moreover, I am humbled by the bonds these young people have forged with their friends and communities, especially given the challenges that some have faced. I would like to thank my thesis advisor Celina Su for having patience when I would disappear, faith that I would finish, and, most importantly, for being critical and kind. Lastly, I would like to thank my Dad.

Positionality Statement

I was born in Trinidad and Tobago and moved to Montclair, New Jersey, at the age of three. While I have been in the United States for most of my life, I very much identify with my West Indian heritage. Being West Indian has influenced my cultural values, sense of ethics and morality, my struggles with my sexuality, as well as my perception of what is academically and socially available to me.

My mother and father raised me in a very liberal and uniquely diverse town. My k-12 school experience had abundant opportunities for academic and social growth against the backdrop of an equal distribution of students of color and white students, low-income students, and students of considerable means. Most students in the town attended the public schools, and since taxes were high, the schools were well-funded.

While my town was wealthy, my parents, brother, and I lived at or below the poverty level. My mother worked as a babysitter for a wealthy family while my father remained in school for far more years than necessary. However, with the generous support of my grandmother and the occasional help of my uncles, my needs were met. Also, at the age of 14, I started working, removing a slight financial burden from my parents, and gaining a relative amount of financial freedom.

After graduating from high school, I attended a small liberal arts women's college in Massachusetts. While the school was majority white, it was considered diverse for a school of its type, had many students receiving financial aid, and approximately 50% of students identified as queer. While there, I fell in love for the first time, majored in a STEM field, and began to believe that I could achieve anything if I had the tenacity to go after it.

While my family undoubtedly had members in our lineage who were victims of the Caribbean slave trade, we did not experience the intergenerational trauma of the American slave trade, nor did we have to endure the decades of institutionalized racism that ensued. The first close family member to emigrate to the United States did so in the 1970s, and my family did not arrive until the late 1980s. While the vestiges of Jim Crow era hate were present at the time (and are still), we were spared from the worst of it all.

All of this is to say, while on paper, I am a multiply marginalized person: black, queer, an immigrant, and historically socio-economically disadvantaged, my experiences of all these things were relatively easy. I came out as queer in a queer-accepting school. I was poor but never wanted for anything. I am an immigrant but gained my American citizenship before I graduated from high school. I am black, but never in my educational or work career have I ever believed that my blackness could be a barrier to whatever success I wanted to achieve. And possibly most importantly, I believe in my interpretation of my experience. Ask me how I experience my multiple marginalities, and what I will say to you is that, while I recognize my position in society, I am not certain that I have consciously internalized it. Know that I am not comfortable saying or believing this. It concerns me that there might be a blindness to myself that I ignorant of but have benefited from.

However, recognizing that the unconscious is just that, I also hold the truth that at some point in time, at many points in time, those were the narratives I needed to believe in to protect myself. I needed to believe that despite it all, I would be okay. As a multiply marginalized person, you can develop some highly functional coping mechanisms. Perhaps my interpreting myself in the way that I have, for all these years, is just that—a coping mechanism.

With that said, I consider myself to be lucky. I am not sure why I was granted this ease or blindness, but I am grateful for having it. This space has allowed me to have empathy, both as a member of a community and as an outsider, and the emotional reserve necessary to stay active in the fight against systemic oppression.

Methods

Using oral history interviews as the methodology, I interviewed four self-identified queer young adults of color. I chose oral history because I believe that it allows for a holistic understanding of one's lived experience. Through collecting their accounts in one-on-one interviews, I am gifted the opportunity to explore the everyday acts of resistance practiced by these young adults, without focusing on pre-defined modes of resistance more likely to arise via surveys or semi-structured interviews. As said by Renato Rosaldo, "Doing oral history involves telling stories about stories people tell you about themselves."⁵ It has been argued that oral history isn't reliable. But as Donald Ritchie explains, "Oral history is as reliable or unreliable as other research sources. No single piece of data of any sort should be trusted completely, and all sources need to be tested against other evidence."⁶ For this project, I intend to focus on how the storytellers interpret and internalize their experiences with their marginality. This is an exploration of not only what we tell each other about ourselves, but what we tell ourselves about ourselves. What we choose to emphasize and focus on, what it means to place our focus there, and how our meaning-making of those experiences help to support the narratives we need to hold to survive.

Interviews were approximately 60-90 minutes long and took place at a business office located in downtown Brooklyn. Narrators were recruited through the Ali Forney Center by word of mouth, through a flyer placed on the community board. In total, five interviews were conducted between April 2016 and June 2016. There were three group interviews and two one-on-one interviews. All interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy. Narrators were asked

⁵ Rosaldo, R. (1980). Doing Oral History. *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Anthropology*, (4), 89-99.

⁶ Ritchie, D. (2003). *Doing Oral History 2nd Edition*, Oxford University Press.

various questions about their life experiences with a particular focus on experiences of community, pride, and identity. The following questions were asked during the interview:

- Please tell me your name and who you are?
- Where do you feel safe?
- Describe your support system
- What would you like me to know about you?
- What are you proudest of in your life?
- Where were you born?
- How would your friends describe you?
- Describe how you grew up?
- Can you draw a map of your community?
- What special skills and knowledge have you acquired in your life?
- What's the best lesson you've ever learned?
- What does *surviving* look like to you?
- What does *thriving* look like to you?

I intended to stick to the list of questions as much as possible; however, space was given for narrators to tell their stories as they see fit. Thus, I asked follow-up questions to encourage specific anecdotes, stories, and reflections. When the interviews were complete, I explored them for themes relating to visibility, identity, community, survival, thriving, and freedom. All interviews were transcribed, and codes were developed to analyze emerging themes among the interviews.

The goal of my analysis is to expand our understanding of what resistance looks like, especially for those whose means to resist in traditional ways might be limited. In particular, I looked for evidence and emerging motifs on how queer young adults of color practice “politics,” given their multiply marginalized status.

All narrators' names were replaced with pseudonyms unless the narrator expressed that they would like to have their name included. Data is stored on an external thumb drive that is kept in a locked drawer in my home. Narrators were asked after their interviews if they would like to have

their histories shared publicly, and all narrators presented in this project have agreed to have their stories shared.

Population

For this project, I recruited young adults from the Ali Forney Center, located in New York City. Ali Forney is an organization that supports homeless, LGBTQ young adults with a mission to empower them to live independently. Residents at Ali Forney are provided with a safe space to sleep as well as a drop-in center that offers mental health services, job training, and academic support.

Research has shown that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender young people have a higher risk of homelessness than their straight counterparts, with 40% of young adults experiencing homelessness identifying somewhere on the LGTBQ spectrum.⁷ However, these young people only comprise 10.4% of the general population.⁸ Young adults generally make it to organizations like the Ali Forney Center because they've been kicked out of their homes for identifying as something different than what their parents had hoped them to be. As a result of having insecure housing, these young adults are at higher risk of sexual assault, domestic violence, trauma, HIV infection, mental health issues, and substance abuse.

The clients that the Ali Forney Center look similar to LGBTQ youth homelessness across the country. There is a disproportionate number of young adults of color who are seeking refuge at these youth-serving organizations. At the Ali Forney Center, 90 percent of clients identify as African-American or Latino, and 10% identify as white.⁹

⁷ Durso, L.E., & Gates, G.J. (2012). *Serving Our Youth: Findings from a National Survey of Service Providers Working with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth who are Homeless or At Risk of Becoming Homeless*. Los Angeles: The Williams Institute with True Colors Fund and The Palette Fund.

⁸ Kann, L., McManus, T., Harris, W. A., Shanklin, S. L., Flint, K. H., Queen, B., Lowry, R., Chyen, D., Whittle, L., Thornton, J., Lim, C., Bradford, D., Yamakawa, Y., Leon, M., Brener, N., Ethier, K. A. (2018). Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance — United States, 2017. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report Surveillance Summaries*, 67(8). 10-109.

⁹ *An Epidemic of Homelessness*. (n.d.) Ali Forney Center. Retrieved 2020, February. <https://www.aliforneycenter.org/>

Literature Review

What follows is the beginning of a literature review that attempts to understand the relationship between intersectionality, queerness, resistance, what it means to be counter, and how we create space to share narratives. I call on black feminist theorists like Kimberle Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins to understand intersectionality. I complicate resistance through the lens of Kevin Quashie's *Black Quiet*. I ask for support from James C. Scott and Robin D. G. Kelley to expand what is political and who gets to define it. And lastly, I pull from authors like Darnell L. Moore and Sara Ahmed to unpack what it means to be queer and to understand queer bonds.

It is through these lenses that I hope to get a better understanding of how being multiply marginalized helps to shape the way one exists in and resists narratives developed in systems that oppress at varying levels and to varying degrees, with an inconsistent push and pull. The theory of intersectionality assumes that we are more than the sum of our parts. That being a person of color, being queer, or being a young adult is very different than being a young, queer person of color.

I also hope to explore the parts of us that are unique and independent of our society-imposed marginality. I want to create space for the things that constitute our humanity, our quiet internal world, and how we foster these parts of us in ways that are authentic to ourselves and not just authentic to our circumstances. It is not always easy to identify and understand how we resist. For some, it looks like active participation at rallies and protests, and for others, it is the clothes that we wear, the way that we walk, and the choice not to participate because it is too burdensome to our already fragile emotional selves.

Taking a cue from ways to approach understanding intersectionality, I will deconstruct this literature review and individually unpack each focus area. At the end of each section, I will pose questions specific to that focus area. However, at the end of the literature review, I will bring broader concepts together to explore the complexity of the combination of the focus areas. My intention here is to create space for the individual, while also recognizing that when these focus areas are embodied, and it is not possible to disentangle them.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a theoretical approach coined by Kimberle Crenshaw, to acknowledge and make space for the complexity of the lives of multiply marginalized people. It rests on the assumption that to be black, queer, able-bodied, and male, for instance, collectively means something very different than being those things individually. Foundational to the existence of intersectionality is identity. As Crenshaw explains, our identities are not self-contained and are at best understood as a “relationship between people and history, people and communities, and people and institutions.”¹⁰ It argues that single-identity politics and approaches cannot grasp the experience of those who are in constant conversation with their multiple selves, simultaneously navigating both internal and external interpretations of who they are. And that the social justice advocacy structures and frameworks that we have available to us, such as anti-racism and feminism, do not allow for a complex understanding of those whose identities exist on multiple margins.

¹⁰ Crenshaw, K. [National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS)] (2018, June 22). *What is Intersectionality?* [Video]. Youtube.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ViDtnfQ9FHc&list=PLzUTMyBEL6Rb_rjISWjnjcZ5-VBcUYf9H&index=13&t=0s

I would like to dive a little deeper into the concept of community and how being in a community helps to shape our identity. Patricia Collins writes that “community is a symbol that people share in shaping social reality, yet it is a term that is versatile and malleable. These characteristics of versatility and malleability that make community easy to use also make it unexamined, taken for granted, and difficult to define” (Collins, 446).¹¹ Collins goes on to say that “because the idea of community is ubiquitous, versatile, multifaceted, and able to marshal emotions that move people to action, it is especially well suited for crafting diverse and often antithetical political projects” (Collins, 448). I am assuming that what Collins is alluding to is the even more complex understanding of identity as it relates to the various communities we belong to. Therefore, to have an intersectional understanding in one context might not be the same in another. For example, to be black and gay in the northeast, and how that group chooses to exercise their politics, is very different than being black and gay in the south.

The struggle with intersectionality, though, is that we do not have a framework or methodology to analyze its impact. We do not know how to think about which self we are currently in conversation with. How do we go about trying to understand what hurts and what hurts more? For example, as a queer black woman, it is often difficult for me to disentangle whether or not my race or my gender is the cause for the hostility I feel in predominately white male spaces. Furthermore, I do not know my blackness independent of being a woman and vice versa. If these are mutually constitutive, how do they manifest in specific ways, at the intersections of my positions along multiple social axes? How do they operate differently in different social spaces? As Dhamoon interprets Collins, “an analysis of interlocking oppressions reveals that there are few pure victims or oppressors, for each “individual derives varying

¹¹ Collins, P. H. (2012). Social Inequality, Power, and Politics: Intersectionality and American Pragmatism in Dialogue. *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 26(2), 442-457.

amounts of penalty and privilege from the multiple systems of oppression which frame everyone's lives" (Dhamoon, 235)¹². Dhamoon argues that instead of focusing on identity, which is the cornerstone of intersectionality, we should shift towards systems and processes. "The study of process and systems draws attention away from "different identities" and bodies per se to the specific process and conditions in which representations of difference are socially organized. In doing so, the analysis exposes the myth that identities naturally preexist and the fallacy that subjects have identities" (Dhamoon, 235).

To understand the complexity of the storytellers of this project, it was necessary to acknowledge their multiple selves through the prism of how they see themselves. For that reason, I needed to take an intersectional approach, in that it needed to be acknowledged that the storytellers were complex young people navigating the challenges and strengths that come along with being a queer person of color. Since this is an oral history project that aims to produce a counter-narrative as told and interpreted by the storytellers, it has not seemed necessary for me to find ways to measure just how marginalized or privileged an individual is.

Beyond that, with this work, I hoped to make space for the individual. While I understand the critique that Dhamoon poses, my concern with it is that in attempting to analyze how one relates to larger systems of oppression, it places the interpretation of the individual's experience in the context of the system, not the individual. To put it differently, Dhamoon's approach seems overly functionalistic. It would be short-sighted of me to think that we exist outside of systems. I do not believe that in the slightest. However, I am curious about the novel skills and coping mechanisms that people have developed to exist in these systems, ways there were developed at

¹² Dhamoon, R. K. (2011). Considerations on Mainstreaming Intersectionality. *Political Research Quarterly*, 64,(1). 230-243.

the intersection of their identities, and their own personal/familial/geographical histories. What I would like to argue is that our interpretation of our identities and how we engage them is unique to the individual. Even though there are systemic structures that have an outsized impact on how we exist in the world, what we do or do not have access to, and how we are superficially perceived, our interior selves influence how we experience it.

The theory of intersectionality, for me, is helpful in beginning to understand an individual's existence in society, but it is not sufficient. How do we then begin to create space for the internal interpretation of who we are? And how does that interpretation connect us, or disconnect us, from the larger identities that we ascribe to?

Resistance

Given these questions regarding intersectionality and identity, how do we begin to understand the political actions of marginalized and multiply- marginalized individuals? Piven and Cloward assert that their circumstances very much shape the political practices of the oppressed. From their perspective, “popular insurgency does not proceed by someone else’s rules or hopes; it has its logic and direction. It flows from historically specific circumstances: it is a reaction against those circumstances, and it is also limited by those circumstances” (Piven, xi).¹³ However, even if we know that actions are shaped by context, how do we know what is a political action, an act of resistance, and what isn’t?

Infrapolitics is a lens that gives us a context for understanding the “everyday acts of resistance” among oppressed people. It assumes that actions large and small, public and private, individual and collective, can be interpreted as acts of resistance given their intentionality.

¹³ Piven, F. F. & Cloward, R. (1978). *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail*. Vintage.

Kelley asserts that “too often politics is defined by how people participate rather than why; by traditional definition the question of what is political hinges on whether or not groups are involved in elections, political parties, or grassroots movements” (Kelley, 9). This is not to say that those practicing infrapolitics have done so as a result of an awareness of their oppression and political position. In fact, Scott argues that “consciousness is an effect of struggle rather than the cause of Struggle” (Holtzman).¹⁴

Any form of resistance assumes a hegemonic structure of oppression that is being opposed. Resistance asserts that I am reacting to/resisting against individuals and structures that will not let me be free. If we define freedom in terms of Levinas, then freedom is “the ability to maintain oneself against the other, despite every relation with the other to ensure the autarchy of an I.”¹⁵ In saying this, the assumption is that even though resistance is in conversation with oppression, the choice one makes in how to resist is very much unique to their experience. Therefore, the question becomes, are all marginalized people forced into resistance?

In his work on *Black Quiet*, Kevin Quashie asks us to critique our assumptions on black resistance. In his interpretation, “black culture is mostly over-identified with an idea of expressiveness that is geared toward a social audience, and that has political aim; such expressiveness is the essence of black resistance” (Quashie, 329).¹⁶ What this results in is the need for black resistance to taking on a very public persona. “This authority is founded on the legacy of public discourse as the crucial site of racial formation; that is, since the black subject is made, misnamed, and violated in the public sphere, it is through the public sphere that she can be

¹⁴ Holtzman, Benjamin and Hughes, Craig. Personal Interview. July 2010

¹⁵ Lévinas, E. & Alphonso, L. (1969). *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Duquesne University Press.

¹⁶ Quashie, K. E. (2009). The Trouble with Publicness: Toward a Theory of Black Quiet. *African American Review*, 43(2/3). 329-343.

liberated” (Quashie, 331). But with that said, Quashie also goes on to assert that “this idea of public selfhood is not available to everyone” (Quashie, 330). In Quashie’s perspective, the over-identification of black culture with resistance results in the public minimization of the black interior. “As a consequence of this historical significance of public expressiveness, resistance becomes the dominant idiom for reading and describing black culture” (Quashie, 331).

To counter this, Quashie proposes the concept of Quiet. “Quiet then, is the expressiveness of this interior, an inexpressible expressiveness that can appear publicly, have and affect the social and political mean, and challenge or counter social discourse, though none of this is its aim or essence” (Quashie, 334). In this, Quashie is saying that there are elements of the black interior that just exist on its own, and it is not in reaction to external aspects of oppression. That while resistance does exist, both in movement and in everyday acts, it is imperative that we also acknowledge that oppressed people should be given the privilege to just be.

Concepts like black quiet recognize that there is a humanity that exists beyond the systemic structures of the oppressions. One where the individual can experience the expansiveness of their being. While I believe that this is true, I also think that disentangling the self from the context that the self exists in is difficult. Along the lines of how we understand intersectionality, it is not easy to know where one begins and ends in the context of the society that helped to shape them. What I strongly value about black quiet, though, and how Levinas describes freedom is the radical imagination that one can engage with to resist systems of oppression. Imaginations that are unique to the individual because they are the only ones who can interpret their experience of the intersections of their identities.

Given how Piven and Cloward define resistance, how Levinas defines freedom, and how Quashie describes black quiet, what I am curious about is how one internalizes their actions and

develops their path. Recognizing that internal and external factors shape both our oppression and resistance, how do we come to terms with our actions? Beyond this, for those who are multiply marginalized, who as a result of their many intersections have limited role models, how do you determine what your acts of resistance are and what your version of black quiet is?

Queerness

I believe that queer theory is a framework that can be helpful when trying to understand the unique ways that marginalized and multiply marginalized individuals both resist systems of oppression and also engage in practices that are supportive of their interiority. As Sara Ahmed notes, “queer lives are about the potentiality of not following certain conventional scripts.”¹⁷ These conventional scripts support orientations that prioritize heteronormative futures, where, for example, conceptions of families are nuclear and genetically tied. However, to be queer sexually and to be queer politically tasks one with defining what their desires for their future could be without the burden of societal expectation. This is because being queer in itself puts one outside of societal norms, allows you to interrogate what your identity means to you, and how you will choose to exist with it. It is in this space that concepts of resistance and quiet become both novel and personal. Choosing to interpret your understanding of your identity means you can also choose to interpret the actions that have been influenced by that identity.

Harr notes that “queer politics aims less to normalize gay identities than to free all sexualities from normalizing regulation” (Harr, 287).¹⁸ Thus queerness is a construct that

¹⁷ Ahmed, S. (2006). Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology. *GLQ. A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 12(4). 534-574.

¹⁸ Harr, B. E. & Kane, E. W. (2008). Intersectionality and Queer Student for Queer Politics. *Race, Gender & Class*, 15(3/4). 283-299.

intentionally not only positions itself in opposition to heteronormativity but to all structures that require a definitive separation of sexualities. “Queerness implies a theoretical process of deconstruction or, rather, a move to interrogate and unknot rigid hegemonic sexual logics and representations perpetuated by and sustained through discourse and state regulation” (Moore, 258). Furthermore, “queerness is a political posture that ostensibly seeks to redress, if not wholly, resist, structures at the level of ideology as well as the level of material, that is human life” (Moore, 258).

The struggle with this, however, is that because queer still exists in a broader societal context of hegemonic heteronormativity, this deconstruction can invisibilize the varied ways, beyond sexuality, in which people experience their queerness. Therefore, Moore argues that for queers of color, “structures are necessary to protect against the tyranny of a type of structurelessness that seeks to do away with those modes of power that support the well-being for the lives of some queers” (Moore, 259).¹⁹ In this, Moore views structures as intentional space making for individuals whose multiple identities very much impact their public and private experience of the world. Here again, we see the need for the multiply marginalized to be acknowledged. Moore goes on to say that “if multiply marginalized queers are to list the types of discriminations they face within queer spaces- spaces wherein oppressions like heteronormativity tend to be named and contested even as some other types of marginalization like white racism are often invisibilized, and reinforced-structures are necessary to ensure accountability” (Moore, 259).

¹⁹ Moore, D. L. (2013). Structurelessness, Structure, and Queer Movements. *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, 41(3/4). 257-260.

What is evident is that we need to have frameworks that take into account one's perceived and external identity, as well as one's interiority. Recognizing that one's experience of their identity is equally influenced by external factors, like heteronormativity and racism, as well as internal factors, like one's familial history, how do we begin to interpret the actions of the multiply marginalized?

Oral History

What follows is an annotated oral history of the storytellers that I worked with for this project. As one could imagine, their lives are rich and complex, and several themes of note came up during the interviews. Recognizing that it would not be possible for this project to delve deeply into every theme that arose, I chose to limit the themes focused on in this project to concepts of community, visibility, and self-conception of identity. I will examine these themes through the lens of intersectionality, queerness, and resistance, as explored in the literature review.

My intention in this section of the project is to provide context and aid in readability. The majority of the text in this section will be that of the storytellers. In doing so, I hope to provide the reader with a firsthand, minimally interpreted account of the storytellers' conceptions of community, visibility, and identity. This section intends to provide a narrative and, in some cases, a counter-narrative of the lives of young queer people of color. These stories by no means capture the totality of the communities that the storytellers are from but, gives a look into the ways they have imagined and reimagined their lives given the complexity of their circumstances.

In Their Own Words

We started the interviews by having the narrators describe themselves in their own words. I also explained myself to them and what the intentions of the project were. In doing so, I wanted to make sure that throughout this process, both narrators and I were grounded who we are and, as an extension of that, how we wanted to be interpreted. Furthermore, I viewed these interviews as a collaborative exploration into their lives and experiences. In sharing parts of myself in the process, I wanted the storytellers to know that I also intend to bring into the space vulnerability

and curiosity. Captured below are the ways the storytellers chose to describe themselves. For context, I have also included how I introduced myself to the storytellers.

Picasso:

Born and raised in a little town called Oakwood, Georgia. And then moved here [New York City] like seven months ago. I am an artist. In the past, my art has been performative, but I've been doing more sculpture. But I am really getting into writing. I think it's because I've been reading different types of things. I am 18 and live in New York now, and I want to be a writer. I am reading a lot of books about intersectionality; I just finished this book called "Black Gay Genius. Answering Joseph Beams Call," and it's about a bunch of black queer artists and that environment. It's a series of essays about our community, about us as a people. That's the kind of stuff I find myself writing more. I've been reading less fiction and more essays and poetry. I just discovered this guy Chris Kid; he's really phenomenal. I find fiction...it seems indulgent now. I cannot really suspend reality like that. I am more interested in reading people's actual thoughts and experiences. Shit like that.

I am an artist. I, um, I've been writing recently. A lot of essays. About things that I've noticed. After things happen, I write. Arts supplies are expensive. I steal them sometime times, but I do not have like, canvases, so I cannot really paint or sketch stuff cause I do not have tools. So I write.

Zee:

I am a beginning activist. I guess I've always been into social justice, but I guess it's something that I am passionate enough to do for the rest of my life, and there are levels to this. And I am on the beginning level. I feel like I have a lot to learn, and I am still figuring out how to get my ideas out there and what it really means to be an activist. I go to a democratic free school--which means that the students have equal power to the teachers. We make the majority of the rules in the school as long as it doesn't have to do with health and safety. We are basically in control of our education. We have a social justice class, and our social justice teacher has been really life-changing for me. It's made me walk in the world differently. I like I cannot just be here and not express all the injustices that are happening, and not express the little things that are happening in conversations."

I like to do my hair. I think I would like to get into fashion. But mostly it's just hair right now. I've very passionate about hair and activism. And that's like...me.

Fane:

I have a very strong will, you can say stubborn, but I can push through anything like a football player. Whether it was a good plan or a bad plan, I already made the plan. I am already on this path I see it through. [I am resilient] because I had no choice. My mom was ex-military, so everything was about strength and success. I do not know what it's like

to be any other way. It could be a good thing or a bad thing. Another person might be more adaptable, but I just stick to what I am doing.

Angel:

I may be fem and all, but I still play handball and get down to business...I can play against the boys.

Ayana:

I was born in Trinidad and raised in the United States. It's funny, whenever someone asks me where I am from, that's how I say it. I moved here when I was 3, but definitely feel more Trinidadian than I feel American...I am also queer and identify as black, even though I am pretty mixed. I think being from Trinidad makes me think about being mixed differently. Everyone is mixed there, so I guess I just pick the thing that is the majority. Black."

Identity

I want to start this analysis by focusing on concepts of identity. Who we are, how we are perceived, how we want to be perceived, and how those perceptions shape our participation in society. Delving into the concept of identity, and the role that identity formation has played in the lives of the storytellers is foundational to this project. All our storytellers exist in intersectional spaces, with those intersections revealing themselves at different times throughout their lives. For most people of color in the United States, you become aware of your race at an early age. Sometimes that awareness comes through stories told by your family about their own experiences, and sometimes it comes through your own experiences. One of my earliest memories is of one such experience in grade school. I was told casually that my hair did not feel the same as my friend's hair did. Even though at that age, I did not know how to interpret the observation, I did know somehow that it set me apart, and that being set apart in this way was not ideal. This window into awareness of ourselves, and awareness of the other by extension, develops how we interpret our identity internally, as well as how we believe our identity is being interpreted externally. It is through these experiences that we construct ourselves.

The storytellers herein also had similar stories and experiences of slowly peeling away and adding layers of themselves, while examining the relationship between the interior and the exterior. For some, fractures in their familial bonds took place when aspects of their identity were not in line with parental expectations. Most notably, coming out as queer severed many of their relationships with their families, forcing them to make the tough decision between denying an essential part of themselves, or risk losing the only support system they had ever known. Having to make such choices at a young age is a heroic undertaking. Before coming into one's true self, the self that we first construct is formed mainly in relationship to one's family. Coming to terms with potentially jeopardizing these foundational relationships as the complexity of their identities were expanding, was not easy for most of the storytellers. As a result, many no longer had relationships with the family that raised them. This, in turn, for many resulted in the development of new family bonds with individuals who identified similarly to themselves.

For all of our storytellers, identifying as queer came with both tremendous sacrifice and tremendous liberation. While familial relationships were broken, the radical imagination of creating your own family, one centered around your queerness, was unleashed. For all, moving forward meant creating new ways of bonding with others, as well as making space for the multitude of ways that they exist in the world. While they all self-identify as queer young people of color, there are additional facets of their identity that complicate their experience of race, queerness, and age.

For example, it was important for Angel to acknowledge that though he is often perceived as effeminate, he still participates in activities that are culturally and stereotypically considered masculine.

Angel:

“I may be fem and all, but I still play handball and get down to business... I can play against the boys.”

Similar to Angel, Picasso’s identity takes into account the role that gender plays in how they perceive themselves, and by extension, how others see them. Here, Picasso explains that there are times where they feel like a gender that they were not assigned at birth. To further complicate this, though, Picasso recognizes that though they can embody the fluidity of gender because they were socialized as a man, there are experiences of being female, and being socialized as a female since birth, that are beyond their consciousness. We see the interplay of the interior and exterior experience of gender directly, forcing us to question the relationship between internalized gender conceptions and normative conceptions of gender.

Picasso:

“I identify as sometimes male sometimes female, but at the same time, I was socialized as a man, so there is shit that I am just not conscious to.”

Ultimately, Picasso is coming to terms with how one defines oneself against the backdrop of external societal programming and expectations. Coupled with the knowledge that with every additional deviation from the norm, you are stacking the deck against yourself, this conflict can result in a deep internalized sadness. *Picasso:*

“It’s like, if your whole life you were fed this formula, there’s the man, there’s the women, and then you deduct a certain amount of points because you’re not white and your nose doesn’t look like this, and your hair doesn’t grow like this, and you do not speak this way, and you do not dress this way or blah blah blah. And you want to fuck like this, and you want to dress like this, and you want to smell like this or whatever, and you’re deducting all of these points, and at the end you like, what do you have left. And I feel sad about it sometimes, and I just feel really, really sad.”

Angel goes on to describe how people living double lives, those who feel a need to present different versions of themselves at different times, often feel a need to prove themselves to others. In his experience, for these individuals, there is a disconnect between who they are internally and how they want others to perceive them. What is curious to me about this dual identity, one that you show the world and the one that you keep for yourself, is what purpose it is serving. For multiply marginalized people who experience harm as a result of this identity, it is

only reasonable to find ways to protect your interiority as best as possible. One such way of doing so is to develop a public persona that can mitigate some of the harm that could befall you as a result of merely being who you are. Angel points out, though, that this performance is not always sustainable.

Angel:

“Everyone has a different side to them that they do not really show. They show you this whole character, but in reality, they’ll turn, a whole different person at night. [Why do you think people switch it up?] So that they could feel comfortable. Cause it’s not for the other person. The other people could actually give two shits. Like two tears in a bucket fuck it, who is this person? It’s how they want to be perceived, how they want to secretly look, how they want to impress the crowd. They have something to prove, I guess. [Have you been in situations where somebody forgot to switch it up?] Eventually, it does come out. You just got to wait. [people switch it up] probably just to try it, to see which one they like. Some people do not actually care unless it’s beneficial to them.”

Unfortunately, for all our storytellers, being their authentic selves and displaying both their gender and sexuality in ways that aligned with their interior, has been met with physical and psychological violence. Specifically, for some of our storytellers, displaying traits that were perceived as effeminate for a person who was assigned male at birth, left them vulnerable to a particular type of misogyny. Where their attackers felt within their right to inflict harm because they could not reconcile that a person who appears to be cis-gendered could exist on the spectrum of gender presentation.

Zee goes further to say that being perceived as feminine at all, either as a cisgender or a transgender person, strips you of the respect and humanity afforded to male presenting and performing individuals. In her experience, women are viewed as less than human, and their bodies and psychological safety are always under threat.

Zee:

“If anyone connects femininity with you, to have traits that are associated with a woman is like, that’s the worst thing you could do. If someone is too comfortable with being

perceived as feminine, all hell breaks through. The rules change. Now you're less of a person. Now its "what did you do," "what were you wearing?," "now, I am entitled to you," "I do not have the same respect for you now." Women in our society are really viewed as lesser humans."

In one particular encounter with the police, Angel believed that the excessive nature of his physical assault was due to his effeminate nature. What is difficult to read in this passage, for me, is Angel processing and attempting to make sense of why he was assaulted. Recognizing that the way he carries himself can result in others believing they have carte blanche to exercise violence is difficult to come to terms with. Specifically, holding both realities – who he believes himself to be, versus against how he is perceived – creates a dissonance that required him to externalize his experience to rationalize why it happened.

Angel:

"I had a couple of bad experiences with the police, like oh my god. I'll admit I sold drugs at one point, and I sold a bag to someone I didn't know—wrong mistake. Next time stick to someone you know, and they caught me, they caught me good, my whole face was gone. They bruised me up so bad. Like when I was on the concrete, they mashed it. It was just so crazy. For two days straight, I was crying. It definitely changed my view on cops a little. I feel like if they saw a big dude, they wouldn't have been as tough. Maybe because I am small and portray myself a certain way...They felt it was okay? I do not carry myself like a dude, so they think I am incapable of certain things. I wish they knew that I could do anything that any other guy could do. I just have different ways of carrying myself."

Similar to Angel, Picasso also described an instance where being effeminate, or being perceived as effeminate, impacted how others treated them. In their case, Picasso's gender presentation, coupled with their sexuality, resulted in others downplaying the sexual violence they experienced and like many of the storytellers, being authentically Picasso came at a price.

Picasso:

"I was raped. I think straight people view gay people--especially if you're an effeminate person like you're super sexualized like you must have wanted it, cause obviously, you're hungry for cock all the time. That's just part of our culture. If you spoke and said this happened to me, people are just like...maybe people want to make sense out of something so horrible, so [they think] it couldn't be that this is just a horrible person so. Obviously, you could have done something [to deserve it], but then I also think that no, it's just a

fucked up rape culture. It's totally disproportionate for women, but I think that it's just for anybody."

For Picasso, this experience almost cost them the belief that regardless of how you identify or how you carry yourself, you do not deserve to be assaulted. And if you are assaulted, you deserve for others to believe the same: that how you simply exist and identify does not justify that harm be inflicted upon you.

What became evident throughout all the interviews was the role misogyny played in how the storytellers were perceived. In Fane's experience as a self-identified lesbian, having the dual identities of both female and gay makes you subject to both misogyny and homophobia from cisgender straight men who feel a need to prove their masculinity by overly asserting themselves, sometimes even violently. In some of Fane's recollections, harm was embodied by threats of physical and sexual violence, wherein her attacker's menace was inherently motivated by a desire to affirm their own identity.

Fane:

"The way I see it is that I am going to be exactly myself and dress the way I want to, and if they can deal with me, then I won't work there. It's too much work to do that. I think that if some people do not like same-sex anything, then they are equally judgmental of both [gay and lesbian couples]. And I also feel like for girls it's much harder because in our society everyone is supposed to think that women are sexy, but it's implied that they're supposed to be attractive to the men. So I feel like guys sometimes feel the need to state their claim more. They take it like a challenge "if you had a real man, they'd straighten up quick." Or they want to hit on you more to try and prove something, and it draws more attention. They'll decide, "oh, you're not a real woman, so I can just beat your ass." Who the hell are you? People cannot even look at you. You have to go punch them because they look at you? Why do you have to be so violent? You'll be surprised how big that closet is, though?"

Angel goes on to discuss how both he and other members of his community have to code switch to get by. However, he also acknowledges that even with the ability to code-switch, as a

gay man, there is still the constant threat that your sexuality, and the way that you perform your sexuality, will instigate unwanted attention from men that disapprove of gay men.

Angel:

"I am like a big ball of joy. I am pretty ecstatic about almost anything and everything that I do, even though it's not much. It's hard when you're looking for work, but you cannot even be yourself. I know gays who live a gay life, but at the workplace, they have to switch it up. They have to toughen up a little, but...it's more than I can handle. I think they're more accepting of lesbians, to begin with. If they see two girls kissing on the street, they be like "that's hot." If they see two boys, "oh, you fucking faggot." Men, in general, are sick. At the end of the day, they're just selfish. Some people look at you like they want to eat you. You know what you are at the end of the day, why not be out."

One thing that is evident with all the storytellers, however, is the need to be recognized as an individual. One who is more than how they are defined, and even more than how they choose to identify. As Levinas describes, the ability to be one's self-independent of one's status in society is true freedom. Manifestations of this idea took many forms throughout the interviews. For Fane, being categorized and receiving social services as a result of that categorization is problematic, because this approach could lead to some people in need not receiving help.

Fane describes the inherent flaw of programs that are designed only to support specific populations based on how they identify. For Fane, regardless of how you identify, individuals with limited resources all need support. By focusing on particular groups, as opposed to the system as a whole, we do not directly address the fact that the system itself is flawed. Fane:

"I am glad they have other stuff out there, like where I am staying now, for my population. It's a lot nicer there, and I am glad to have it, but at the same time, I just feel like you shouldn't have to be in a minority population or demographic just to be treated like a human being and get help. There is something wrong with the whole system. I am glad that a small portion of the population is getting help, but what about everyone else. It seems like unless you have a specific something or other, they're not going to help you. You cannot just be a regular person that doesn't have a lot of money. You have to be extra screwed up. I asked people why the people who run these things, and all they say is that it has to do with funding. It all goes back to funding."

The storytellers expressed that they often felt that as marginalized people, they were defined by their marginality. But it was imperative to them that people recognized that they were more than how they were perceived, because it is also essential to acknowledge the parts of

ourselves that are not always in conversation with the oppression that we face, based on marginalized status.

Picasso:

“I am an artist. I um...I’ve been writing recently. A lot of essays. About things that I’ve noticed. After things happen, I write. Art supplies are expensive. I steal them sometime times, but I do not have like, canvases, so I cannot really paint or sketch stuff ‘cause I do not have tools. So I write. “

Zee:

“I like to do my hair. I think I would like to get into fashion. But mostly it’s just hair right now. I’ve very passionate about hair and activism. And that’s like, me.”

Here, Angel describes the things about him that make him strong, but that perhaps other people do not notice because they are too focused on the sound of his voice and the swish of his hips. In particular, he wants people to know that his experiences, both good and bad, have allowed him to have complex perspectives on various situations.

Angel:

“That I am still able to smile and that I am still able to not be the person that I do not want to be. Another thing that I am proud of is my patience. I have high patience, and that’s a thing that people do not have. [I have high patience] because I am able to see the other side of things. I am not one-sided. I like to look at the other side of the book. Experience and what I’ve been through [allows me to see the multiple sides of things]. I do not watch TV, so it’s not a TV thing, it’s a me thing. I have morals, and I respect that I wouldn’t change my morals for nobody. Not everything is given, and you cannot always expect to be given...It’s hard out there. Even with work, they do not say it, but they do discriminate sometimes. [gesture that he bounces when he cleans a window]. It doesn’t matter how you do it, but you’re still doing your job [even if they do not like it]. I cannot be who I am not--it’s hard. I cannot even walk like a dude. My voice has always been high, I always got teased for that, but those bullies taught me how to talk to them. I realized at an early age that not everyone is the same, especially me.”

Angel went on to say that it was essential for him to that is sexuality not restrict him from doing what he wants to do.

Angel:

“Same thing as being gay or straight, you’re not supposed to look at me this way or that way. It shouldn’t hold me down; it shouldn’t restrain me from doing anything.”

For Fane, it was important for her to let people know how resilient they were. That despite difficult situations, she perseveres and sees things through to the end.

Fane:

“I have a very strong will, you can say stubborn, but I can push through anything like a football player. Whether it was a good plan or a bad plan, I already made the plan. I am already on this path I see it through. [I am resilient] because I had no choice. My mom was ex-military, so everything was about strength and success. I do not know what it's like to be any other way. It could be a good thing or a bad thing. Another person might be more adaptable, but I just stick to what I am doing.”

For all of the storytellers, the intersection of their identities added complexity to their lives that expanded and stretched the way they existed in the world. Although gender and sexual identities appeared to be dominant issues in their lives, they were also more than that—they influenced every aspect of these young people’s lives, as well as how they lived and perceived themselves as individuals. Being queer, young people of color allowed them to see the lenses of each of those respective categories, as well as the lenses of the combination of the three. To put it metaphorically, they are able to overlap the red and the blue, in order to see through the purple.

Existing as a multiply marginalized person has its challenges, and many of our storytellers expressed those in the experiences that they have had. However, many have also expressed the joy that comes from being fully seen. At one point in our interviews, when sharing what fun feels like, Zee said: “making jokes with someone who gets you is so relieving.” Some jokes can only be had amongst people who share similar identities. There are unspoken truths and rules of engagement that are only known by those who have walked similar paths. What was evident from our conversations, is that multiply marginalized people, people who exist in the intersection, are complex individuals, living in complex systems. How they experience their challenges, and their joys are a constant conversation between interior and exterior. This complexity, however, has challenged many of our storytellers to dig deep inside of themselves.

Requiring them to examine their place within these complex systems so that they can carve out a life that brings them joy through self-actualization and self-acceptance.

Visibility

Beyond identity, the storytellers discussed what it means to be visible, both inside and outside of their communities. To be visible is to be seen. The question then is, what is the external world seeing, and how does that interpretation relate to one's interpretation of oneself? Beyond this, what are the implications of the external interpretation? For many of the storytellers coming to terms with their own identity, defining who they were for themselves was a radical act. In many cases, doing so isolated them from those who were closest to them at the time: their families. However, not to have done so would have isolated them from themselves. So, through deep reflection, they came into themselves, taking on identities such as queer, and exploring their relationship to their race. While doing this came at a cost, it also had great reward. As fully realized individuals or individuals on the path of self-actualization, they began to stand firm in who they were and, in doing so, began to build relationships that were supportive of how they saw themselves. For many, this meant becoming members of communities that affirmed their identities, with the intention that the externally visible self would find solidarity with others who were also externally and internally identified similarly.

However, when one becomes visible, you give up a certain amount of control over how you are perceived. Becoming visible, even when you have declared your identity, does not mean that your internal and external interpretation will align. Many of the storytellers expressed frustration that even within their communities, spaces that they have chosen, factions are created that divide these spaces of solidarity. When we discussed the concept of intersectionality earlier

in this project, the identity buckets were large. There, we were talking about what it means, for example, to be a queer woman of color. As a person who embodies those identities, you are subject to the challenges of being each of those identity markers, as well as the sum of those markers. Within some of those larger identity markers, however, are subgroups. For example, as a black person, one's complexion can, and in most cases, will have an impact on your experience in the world.

As a mixed-race person, there are several privileges and challenges that I have experienced. Even though I have only identified as black, I recognize that my internal interpretation of myself that of a black person does not always align with how others externally perceive me. Both individuals who identify as black and those that do not, have their understanding of who I am because of how I present. And with those understandings come both challenges and benefits. The same can be said for the queer community. When I first moved to New York City, I volunteered at the feminist bookstore, Bluestockings. In that space, I came to know a variety of queer people, a good portion of who also identified as radical. To overly generalize, many of my friends there were staunch feminist, anti-capitalist, anarchist, punks. These were kids who recognized that the system was not designed for them, and who wanted to both exist outside of it and dismantle it. My politics were similar; however, my presentation was different. To summarize, in not so many words, I wore khakis and worked in insurance. I hated the way our institutions inflicted harm on the communities I belonged to, but I also needed a job and the one I had allowed me to pay my bills. I did not fit in with my friends. Although we were internally aligned, externally, I was different. The isolation of that was profound and harmful in ways that I did not expect from my community, from people that I identified with.

For Picasso, being visible was synonymous with being understood. To be understood meant that both their internal and external interpretations were aligned. It was only through being understood that he believed he could achieve a sense of safety. However, within his community, he felt as though the separations that people created to protect themselves created additional barriers to solidarity and inclusion.

Picasso:

“Safety is being understood, and I do not feel understood. We’ve had a lot of conversations about subculture. I mean for white people, it’s their world, and they do not accept you. And in your own community, there is a lot of hyper-masculinity and patriarchal paradigms in the black community, so if you’re a woman and you’re queer, you’re in your own subculture. But then within that, you have tops and bottoms, AGs, and fems, and all this other stuff that separates you. It’s hard to feel like there is really someone that understands you when your experience is broken down, and then you put extra stuff outside of being black, like queer-abuse and life experience on top of it. You need to feel understood to trust someone, and if you do not trust, you cannot really feel safe. Physically I feel as safe as I can, my living situation is temporary, but it’s not like a feel like I am going to get murdered when I go to sleep at night. So in that regard, I feel safe, but in the larger sense, I do, and I do not feel safe.”

Picasso goes on to discuss how he internalized these divisions within his community and how it ultimately resulted in him using alcohol as a way to cope with the struggle of not belonging. For many of us, the dissonance created by trying to reconcile our internal and external worlds is too much to bear. The confounding challenge is that that dissonance is only created when one truly comes to terms with themselves. In confirming who you are to yourself, you open yourself up to others to relate to that identity. In some cases, in many cases, if you are lucky, you will find ways to surround yourself with those who affirm you. However, as Picasso points out, in some cases, even in spaces of solidarity, there are those, who in their attempts to come to terms with themselves, create divisions to feel safe.

Picasso:

“I used to drink. Because it feels like, where do you turn to? You do not fit into straight white culture. Mainstream gay culture do not acknowledge you, or they fetishize you. I think it goes back to the question of where do you feel safe? It’s difficult to feel safe if you

do not feel understood. And you cannot feel understood if you feel like there are all of these divisions. You feel like you find your community, but once you're in your community--but because they're already marginalized, it breeds people wanting to make it hierarchical. It breeds assimilation."

Picasso also acknowledged that there are times when it is difficult even to see oneself and the difficulty with reconciling how one views themselves and how one perceives others view them.

Ultimately there is a desire to be seen as more than the sum of your parts.

Picasso:

"I feel like it's usually totally different [how I see myself and how other people see me] because I know what's in my head, and I am thinking, "I do not think anyone is picking up on this." They're like, "oh, you're this way," and I am like, yeah, I know I've done this this and this, but as a whole, fundamentally [I am not just the sum of the things you've seen me do.] And then I make it a mission. I am going to change your mind."

Concerning visibility, not only was there the struggle of not being seen by your community, but there was also the harm of feeling as though you have been erased from history. During the interview, Zee and Picasso spoke about what it feels like to have your community not be acknowledged in mainstream history. The opposite of visibility is invisibility. What does it mean to not be seen, and what does it mean to not see oneself in a historical context? As mentioned earlier, to be queer often means to create your own ways of existing in the world. With limited historical information, generations of queer people have had to reinvent their own wheel over and over again. While there is liberation in this act, not being able to reference the experience of those who came before you, has its own challenges—one of the main ones being examples of those who persevered and examples of those who thrived. By either erasing or sanitizing queerness out of history, many of the storytellers felt as though they were inconsequential.

Zee:

"I feel like a lot of people believe that the black queer culture just wasn't around in history ever. They make it seem like, "Oh, now you're doing this, and it's wrong, and it

was never like that.” But it was, we were just kind of erased. It makes me feel alienated and alone. But then when you realize that all these people were here, then it's oh they do not want us to be here.”

Picasso:

“One of the things I’ve learned is that Malcolm X was supposedly a bisexual. I’ve been learning a lot more about my history as a queer black person. It makes me super excited [to learn more], it makes me angry that I was never taught about gay culture, queer culture. All the [history we have, though] is all white. Look at the Outlist documentary. There is gay representation, but there is no GAY representation.”

By saying that there is no GAY culture, what I believe Picasso is saying that the gay culture that is now being made visible, does not include the full spectrum of gay people. The documentary that he is referring to is filled with predominantly white, middle to upper class, professional gays. What you do not see are working-class gay people, gay sex workers, transgender kids of color, gay people with disabilities, the types of gay people that are not always palatable to white heteronormative folks of means.

Picasso:

“There is a whole diverse community and levels of expression. But at the essence of being a homosexual or a bisexual or a pansexual or whatever you want to identify as is your sexuality. And there are no frank or overt non-sanitized dialog. If you’re doubly in a box, you black, and you're gay; there is just none of that. Queer people are eliminated from black history. I’ve been learning a lot more about black queer history, specifically in terms of art, and how we influence culture because the convergence of those two unique perspectives channeled through writers like James Baldwin. There is a lot that I didn't know, and I feel angry. It's not that we weren't even taught. I've heard parts of all of these different people [black queer artist], but certain parts were picked out and sanitized. I love Frida Kahlo's work. I didn't know until recently that she was bisexual.”

Another aspect of visibility that was discussed in the interviews was being visible to people in authority. In one example, Fane describes the situation in which police officers actively chose not to believe her based on how they perceived her. *Fane:*

“One time, I was staying at a friend’s, and he tricked me. He said I could stay there, but he really just wanted to be vindictive, and he called the cops while me and my partner were asleep. And we got woken up by the police saying that we had to leave. And I tried to tell them that he said we could come in here and sleep, we have all of our stuff here, and I had been at the hospital the night before, and I had been on painkillers, and I looked medicated, and I feel like it just changed their perception of me. They were just treating me like some random druggie. Even though I had paperwork from the hospital explaining why I was slow to respond, they didn’t even take my side of the story. When I

tried to insist on doing a report, they said: “:eep talking, and we’re going to take you to the station.””

Picasso describes a somewhat similar situation when he recounts the moment when he realized that his experience in his small Georgia high school as a person of color was very different than the experience of other students at his school.

Picasso:

“I went to school in a small town in Oakwood, Georgia. In middle school and high school, I just became more conscious of things other people were conscious of. We would do the same thing, but we were met with two different reactions. There was no platform for you to speak up, but it was never really necessary for you to speak up because you didn’t know that you could.”

Being visible, for our storytellers, was an act of resistance. Choosing to stand in one’s own identity, despite the pressures to conform, and with full knowledge that doing so will result in losing people you love, is a radical act. Many of our storytellers weren’t raised to have the confidence and resilience that they would need to face the challenges that would come their way was a result of being a queer person of color. As Picasso mentioned, he didn’t even know that he could speak up about the injustices that he was experiencing. In the process of leaving his small town in Georgia and coming to New York City, to be an out queer person of color, free from the prejudice of where he grew up, that Picasso gained strength in his platform to speak up. Sometimes, the most radical thing a person can do, the strongest showing of resistance a person can have, is to leave. Which is what he did.

It is not with an unwavering heart that our storytellers chose their paths. During our interviews, there were many times that both Zee and Picasso cried, sad about the family that they are no longer with, feeling disconnected from the life that they lived with him. Before coming out, Zee expressed having a wonderful relationship with her mother. For most of her life, her mother was her best friend. However, when Zee came out to her mother, that relationship was

severed. To summon the courage to build your own path is a revolutionary act. To open yourself up to the possibility that you will find others who will care for you, for who you are, is profound.

Community

What does it mean to be in community with others? How does this type of relation influence our identity formation? How does it hinder it? What does it mean to be a member of a community, and then to not be? All of our storytellers have traversed various communities throughout their lives. It is in these spaces that they have picked up and discarded pieces of themselves, as they attempt to come into their own. Community is the external force that has helped to shape who they are. It represents the externalization of themselves. In these spaces, both geographical and social, our storytellers have both accepted and rejected the outside interpretations and perceptions of their identities. These conscious and unconscious decisions have created both feelings of profound solidarity and profound isolation.

To begin, I want to clarify what community means in this project. Here we will discuss community primarily as a social construct, the ways and norms of groups that define what it means to be in community. As Chaskin notes, communities have a purpose, and that purpose is accomplished through a set of characteristics that individuals within that community engage with.²⁰ These characteristics include a commitment to other members of the community, a desire to solve problems that are endemic to that community, and how members access resources.

One of the primary communities that the storytellers associated themselves with is the queer community. A designation that encompasses a large swath of individuals, we are all bound

²⁰ Chaskin, R. (2001). Building community capacity: A definitional framework and case studies from a comprehensive community initiative. *Urban Affairs Review*, 36(3), 295-323.

together through identifying as queer. For our storytellers, being part of the community was revolutionary. Some left their homes in the deep south and others their families, to find refuge amongst others who identified similarly. To do so was not easy; however, not doing so was not an option. To be true to their identity and to be visible in an authentic way, meant to enter into this community.

As Chaskin mentioned, all communities have norms, and the queer community is no different. At a minimum, there is the bond shared by your location on the spectrum of sexuality. Beyond this, though, as described by Sara Ahmed earlier, to be queer is to chart your own path, being part of the queer community, then, is being in an amorphous space of continuous discovery and shifting lines. Unlike other communities that might have more rigid norms and characteristics, the evolving nature of the queer community is ever-expanding, giving members the flexibility and freedom to come into their own, under the umbrella of being in the queer community.

As Angel notes, there is joy in being around others. In spending time with friends, in casual ways. In going to places, such as Coney Island, where you can lose yourself, even if for a little bit, to let your mind wander to places beyond your day to day. It is in these spaces, I argue, that you are truly free and the confines of societal interpretation wash away. It is not to say that your identities, and what they mean to you and others, go away. But it is to say, for a few brief moments, you can be free from what they mean.

Angel:

“With friends, you have a lot of networking that goes on. I can come to this person with this and with that, and with that, you can do a lot. [Coney Island] we do not need to do much here, and we’re having a good time. By a pier, anything relaxing, where I can think about something else and do not have to think about anything that’s going on, including myself.”

Outside of these times, though, when you still exist in context, intersectionality plays a significant role in how you experience your community, and by extension, how your community experiences you. The flexible nature of the queer community is complicated by the multiple identities that members of the queer community hold. Our storytellers, for example, self-identify as queer people of color, but they are more than their queer identity, and with that are marginalized within an already marginalized community. Being a subgroup within a subgroup has its advantages and its challenges. One of the significant benefits is that sharing space with others who experience the world in ways similar to you means that your experiences can be normalized and understood. As Picasso mentioned earlier, to be truly seen, is to be understood, which in turn is to be safe.

Finding spaces that acknowledge our whole selves can be difficult. For Zee, however, social media has played a significant role in locating others beyond those who are geographically close, who both allow her to feel seen and also expand her awareness of the world around her. Social media can expand the scale and scope of our community, which can be vital for individuals who are already a small subset of a marginalized group.

Zee:

“I think social media is a big part of it. Any website you go on, you will always see the black community. And the black community is the activist community. You will always see pro-black this and pro-black that. And sometimes, yeah, there is a contradiction, and we go back a few steps, but at the end of the day, we are progressing more than we ever have. There are people who think alike, and I can find them on Facebook, on a page, and it’s like this is how I feel too. And it’s a bigger conversation because I can learn more. Why I didn’t know how to express myself, and there was a lot of stuff that I was confused about and did and said things I do not agree with now, but I didn’t know then, but if somebody came and expressed that stuff to me then I would know, and it would have been fine.”

Unfortunately, for some of our storytellers, even though they’ve found a queer community, or other communities, to belong to, they still find themselves walking through the world alone.

For many, it has become hard to depend on others. After years of hurt, coping mechanisms have evolved that have made it difficult to want to rely on others. As Picasso mentions, at a certain point, it becomes difficult to stay open. While the desire is there to connect, and to be part of, there is a stronger desire to make sure that you can take care of yourself. Many refer to this desire as survival, a way of being that forces you to center your experience to ensure that you are protecting yourself. To be in that space has taken tremendous courage and strength for the storytellers. However, the unfortunate outcome of survival is that it can be difficult to believe that your community is there to support you. Here Picasso describes the process in which they became a survivor.

Picasso:

“I’ve noticed in this environment a lot of people do not depend on people. They’ve had to depend on themselves for so long, all to different extents and for different reasons and circumstances, but you have to do things for yourself. I think that’s a common thread that we all have used [fellow interviewees]. I do not; it’s harder to depend on people or move on from things. I think it just becomes a habit. If that is just what you’re used to doing, if you’re walking down the street and people are always punching you in the face, that’s your every day. It’s not that it’s not hard to get punched in the face, but that’s just your every day, so it becomes a part of your routine. It doesn’t mean you want to get punched in the face. You just accept it, and you’re able to move on from things. I do not think it made that thing that you moved on from any less significant; it’s just your more practiced and being able to be like, okay, let me have a moment, plot on my next scheme, and move forward, to survive.”

Fane:

“That people lie. People are different when they’re in their home turf. When they’re in their own house, you’ll see a whole different side to them. They’re going to show you, in some way, this is my space. You do not really know someone until you see them truly angry. I am myself, and I have a hard time sometimes figuring out who that even is, so I do not have time to think about what other people think of me, it’s just so trivial. I am a survivor. I believe that if there is a mutual benefit to both of them [that’s fine], It’s how you do it. I believe everybody uses everybody; it’s how you do it. There is no harm in doing something completely selfless sometimes; it balances the karma.”

Similarly to Picasso, Fane has also dealt with several experiences within her community that have resulted in developing ways to protect herself. While she acknowledges the value of good friends, it is also true that some will present themselves as good at first, but at some point might perpetrate harm. What I find most interesting about Fane's musing on friendship is the belief that it can and should be mutually beneficial. As a disabled, queer person of color, having relationships that are supportive in ways that compensate for your challenges are necessary. As a result, Fane has become acutely aware of what characteristics to look for when identifying a friend.

Fane:

"Sometimes, you do not know someone that well. Good friends are definitely valuable. Sometimes you misread people, and they weren't good friends, but you learn what to look for".

What the experiences above highlight is the extent to which all of our storytellers have had to chart their path. For most, finding the broad queer community was a lifesaver. Being able to be around those that normalized their experiences, and also provided solace and joy, was profound. However, even these spaces had their challenges. The intersections of their gender expression and sexual presentation often divided them. As Picasso and Zee mentioned earlier, hierarchies were formed based on where one fell on the gender spectrum, leaving women and those with perceived qualities of a woman, vulnerable.

In many cases, our storytellers have had to turn inward, creating smaller and smaller groups within their communities, that they can rely on. Having to do this is not easy; but, it is in these spaces that many have formed their chosen family.

I would argue that the ability to form your own family, in this way, where you choose who the members are, is a queer superpower. It is in these family formations, like the ones formed between Zee and Picasso, and Fane and Angel, that queer people get to re-write the rules.

As Fane mentioned, she must be in community with those who can provide supports for her that she cannot provide for herself. It is also necessary that she be able to reciprocate that support. The rules of engagement between Fane and her friends were developed by her. She chose the essential characteristics, for her community, established her boundaries, and invited folks in. When her boundaries were trespassed on, she moved on, leaving behind whatever did not serve her.

These are some of the ways that queer people chart their own course. Being left to rely on yourself, and to build your world from the ground up, is daunting but it can also be very liberating. Choosing how you love and how you want to be loved is a radical act. For many of our storytellers, they learned to define what that meant for them through trial and error. As Picasso said, sometimes, in the process of figuring out what no longer serves you, you get punched in the face over and over again. However, through these experiences and self-reflection, they are finding their way.

Conclusion

I've spent all of my professional career developing programs to meet the needs of young people. From that work, I have read countless articles detailing statistics on how folks from particular populations fare in our society. Based on these articles, I have made several assumptions that have informed the types of supports I have provided for young people, all of which were developed so that they can have the opportunity to be successful in our society. Based on these articles, I also assumed what it meant to be successful. What was missing from those articles, though, are the young people themselves. Both their self-identified needs and gifts never made it in. What this project has highlighted for me the most, is the profound gap between how I interpret the experiences and needs of the young people I design programs for, and what they would say that they needed and wanted for their own lives.

When I began this project, I wanted to create a space to chronicle the lives of queer young people of color. My focus was on creating space for them to help me interpret their experiences. From these interviews, I intended to develop a novel approach on how to interpret the action of this particular population of young people. Through the lens of intersectionality, queerness, and resistance, I have been able to complicate how we explore the relationship between the interior and exterior. This approach has allowed me to see that central to interpretations of the actions of this population is just having them tell you. What has become clear to me is that even when you hold certain factors constant, being queer, being young, and being of color, there is no way to predict why a person makes the choices that they make.

I recognize that I am saying this at a time when Amazon's algorithms always seem to offer me the exact thing I do not think I need, but that I am more than willing to consider. That is to say, such algorithms appear to know us better than we know ourselves and can therefore

predict our wants. Such tidy predictions elude us, however, when it comes to personality and motivations; we can only truly understand a person's interior if they let us in. I know now that Angel bounces when he washes the windows because it brings him joy. I understand that Fane leaves full cups of coffee on the top of the trash can lid, as a silent indication to passersby that the beverage is available to them if they want it. I'm referring to the bonds formed by strangers, who quickly turn into family, because when we are feeling our most isolated, or rejected, there is no better feeling than knowing someone else is looking out for you. These are things that are only known when one tells you why they have chosen to act in particular ways.

I think Picasso put it best when they said: "I don't want my life to be an appeal to them to accept me. I want to succeed in this world where I'm in control." For all of the storytellers, so much of their time is spent considering the outside gaze—and that work is exhausting. Picasso goes on to say: "Do I want to dress that way [in extravagant outfits] because it is genuinely what I feel or do I want to dress that way because my whole life people told me I couldn't dress that way." Finding the balance between the interior and exterior is a challenge. As described in previous sections of this project, it is hard sometimes to know where the true self begins, especially when considered in against a backdrop of outside influence and expectations.

Before I started this project, I did not recognize just how nuanced the decisions were that these young people were making. Even though I had Ricki as an example of someone who deeply considered how systemic oppression was impacting his school experience, and who then consciously chose to remove himself, I found myself awestruck by the extent to which the storytellers displayed their everyday actions of resistance. I was blind to the intentionality of their actions because I believed that what I read in articles about their population was all I needed to know. I did not allow myself to engage in the curiosity needed to explore their intent.

What I learned through this project, though, is that each action was processed through the multiple lenses in their arsenal and analyzed within the context of the complex systems that they exist in. It should not be lost that having to do that, to constantly and carefully place yourself within larger systems while considering things like the clothes you wear or the way you walk, is exhausting. Which only really highlights just how triumphant their ability to persevere and be resilient is.

As part of the interview, I asked the storytellers to describe to me when they felt proudest of themselves. What has stuck with me the most is how Zee responded. When asked, she said: "I feel like I'm better than I should be. I feel like I'm handling things better than I expected of myself. My proudest moment is right now." At the point that she shared this with us, she was experiencing homelessness and had a fractured relationship with her best friend—her mother. However, even in these times, she has been able to not only survive, but to thrive on her own terms.

As I describe earlier, I have spent my professional life, so far, focused on helping young people be successful in our society, and for the most part that meant getting them into college so that they could have a family sustaining career. The goal has always been external, and I falsely trusted that if the external was addressed by the programming I designed, that the internal would follow. To put it differently, I believed that if students met the traditional markers of success, that the internal pride and validation would be there too. However, Zee's pride did not come when she reached societal markers of success, it came at the opposite of that. Zee was proud for choosing herself, for standing in who she is, even though doing so left her in a precarious position. The same could be said for Ricki who decided to leave school because it was not serving him, and then chart a path to reengage in a system on his own terms. If I had read about

Zee or Ricki in the articles that have previously helped me in my professional career, I would not have gotten a positive interpretation of their actions. I would not see Ricki or Zee as thriving. But I posit here that thriving can be more than degrees, careers, and traditional markers of success. Perhaps, thriving is making the conscious decision to resist systems that were designed to oppress you. Perhaps thriving is choosing to chart a life on your own terms, because the life you had before did not support you. Perhaps thriving is the ability to endure the hardships that come with these choices. Perhaps thriving is being free in the way Levinas describes—the ability to maintain oneself, against other selves, others’ systems.

There is still a lot of work to be done to not only support these young adults but to understand them better. What you just read was the lived experience of four queer young adults of color living in New York City. As you have seen, these young people have fought against the odds to find their place in the world and try to exist in it in a way that brings them joy and pride. That is not to say that their lives have not been difficult because they have. But it could be argued that it is because of this difficulty that they can have the perspectives that they have.

In this project, I examined the relationship between specific areas of multiple-marginality. We have looked at what it means to be black, queer, and a young adult. However, these are not the only areas of marginality that would benefit from additional examination. As Picasso mentioned in their interview, it is unsettling to think that we are living in the greatest time to be a historically marginalized person. Over the past few years, we have seen the lives of too many people of color cut short by police violence. Public outcry is still localized within those communities and does not seem to come strong enough from people outside of those communities. For a young person living in the United States today, it is hard to imagine when things will get better. With that said, people are fighting. They are fighting publicly, and they

are fighting privately, and it is the responsibility of those who have less of a societal burden to support those who bear the brunt of hatred and intolerance.

More research needs to be done on exactly how much of one's humanity is lost when it is in constant relationship to one's oppression. While there is solidarity, and knowing that we are not fighting alone, I can imagine it is also profoundly isolating, acknowledging that you are more than your oppression. It is not the intention to romanticize everyday acts of resistance; however, this project was meant to highlight how people react and resist in ways that could be hard to see from an external perspective.

I want to end this project with what Angel is most proud of. When asked he said: "That I'm still able to smile and that I'm still able to not be the person that I don't want to be. That is what I am most proud of." Even in some of the more trying times in his life, the ability to still smile and find joy, along with his ability to hold true to his interior, is what Angel is proudest of.

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