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Reflexive Theory of Identity

When thinking of how my identity shapes my experience in the world, I define myself as a queer, Somali-American, Black woman. These identities and the ways in which they intersect have shaped my relationship with myself and my place in society significantly. What feels particularly pertinent to how my story has been shaped is the relationship between my womanhood and Blackness. The importance of this identity intersection came about when many people began to develop more of an awareness of how they are perceived: middle school.

Around the sixth grade, I noticed my body beginning to change. This abrupt entrance into puberty accompanied by also noticing the obvious differences between myself and other girls in my predominately white grade. While we all shared the common signs of this stage, however, I was the only one whose butt and thighs began to enlarge. Traits that signified my Blackness such as my hair and skin had been uncomfortably spotlighted throughout my childhood, but they had never been sexualized/adultified. After these changes presented themselves, I started to notice the eyes of young boys glancing up and down my body.

There was a period where many of my white peers would make jokes about male teachers looking at me inappropriately because I looked like a "grown up", inciting discomfort and embarrassment in me. Coupled with the boys in my grade making inappropriate/teasing comments about the nature of my body as a mere 11-year-old, I wanted to hide. As a child that was encouraged to take up space and shine, for the first time in my life, I wanted to be invisible. I had already dealt with unnecessary hair touching matched with perplexed looks, or remarks about if I was adopted because my dad was white. Now, these traits were becoming a chore to explain and exist under. Feeling as though the curriculum we were being taught either ignored or

poorly represented non-white perspectives and seeing ignorance and bias in some of my teachers, added to my dissatisfaction with school.

My pride in my Black womanhood began to dwindle as I saw the extent of which my peers perceived me; as other. It took an extensive amount of time and energy to heal these identity-related wounds, much of which when I attended a seemingly average sleepaway camp in upstate New York, called Odyssey Teen Camp. I experienced culture shock from the openness of the counselors about who they were and what they believed in. We had camp activities offered daily that discussed oppressive forces in our society such as racism and sexism, and how to combat them on individual and collective levels. There was ample room to discuss aspects of identity with curiosity and pride. It also validated for me that other people had experienced a sense of shame in the marginalized parts of who they were, and that we wanted to live in a world where no one had to feel that and undergo the deep unlearning that we were having to do.

Those two transformative summers instilled in me a desire to normalize these types of healing discussions for young people. School is the ideal environment to allow for these conversations; a place where youth are spending a substantial amount of their life in and are absorbing information about their social world both directly and indirectly. In addition, with a proper vetting of teachers and counselors, which would require our society to understand how powerful of an impact our educators can have on youth for better or for worse, this type of learning and unlearning could transpire in safe classroom settings.

Normalizing identity-based discussions for youth has the potential to not only heal them on a personal level but create larger change in society in relation to how we can combat injustice in our institutions. Looking at any social justice movement around the world, it is apparent that it

takes small scale change to ripple into major change. For me personally, it means that I promote,

engage in, and study the power that identity-based dialogues can hold for youth.