

Theories of Understanding

It's no secret that I'm Black; I know, shocker. I am not hiding that I am Latinx, Queer, First Generation, an eldest sister, an activist, a full-time college student, a part-time worker, and really fucking tired. These are some of the many identities that shape the way I walk through the world. I am a lower class, Afro-Latinx, gender-fluid person from Boston Massachusetts. The intersectionality of the life I lead was made very apparent very early in my life, as many people always told me that I would have to work twice as hard and be twice as good as everyone else to get anywhere in life. This is how I understood the world; a cruel sick joke that revels in my discomfort and confusion.

Throughout middle and high school my understanding of myself was a constant tennis match. I was “too white washed” for my Black friends, but “cared too much about race” for my white peers; I am gay which somehow makes me white again, but poor which makes me Black? I found myself refusing to talk about identity at all. If I don't see race, then it doesn't exist, right? It felt like one big secret that was written on my forehead, but no one was kind enough to let me know that they'd seen it too. Now, I probably believe that we make sense of the world based on the privileges, disadvantages we are assigned through the framework of our larger societal context. We make sense of the world based on who we are told holds power in this world, and where we fall in that ranking; more often than not it is white cisgender heterosexual men versus the world. But I think we also make sense of the world based on the way we make sense of the identities we hold and the way they interact with our communities.

As a college student who hopes to study community psychology, I find myself centering the relationship between identity and community consciousness in my work quite often; how does our understanding of ourselves influence our understanding of oppression, discrimination,

etc. My love of community based work stems from experience; an awareness of the way in which my own communities influence my current beliefs and philosophies. Community is education; the root of our values and how we process trauma, joy, hardship, grief. How we view inequality is greatly based on what we value as equal. As a collectivistic community, we believed that the well-being of the group is the well-being of the individual. Meanwhile in an individualistic one, the individual has no obligation to the well-being of the group. Based on that value alone, community shapes so much of the way we define inequality! One's sense of community is such a crucial aspect of how we perceive the world's inequities and I find myself being reminded of this fact consistently while engaging in community work.

The way that we speak about marginalized communities in educational spaces is very black and white; "the have and the have nots." It erases the reality that intersectional identities exist and that some people are extremely privileged in some aspects of life and not so much in others. For example, I have been enrolled in private education for the past decade. I have also been at or below the poverty line for all of those 10 years. Being lower class does not negate the fact that I am privileged to have received the education that I have. It just feels dangerous to assume the narrative that one can ignore their privilege due to the presence of other oppressions and vice versa. It also assumes that all people within a marginalized identity experience said identity in the same way. The way that people with privilege address inequality often is a one-size fits all approach, assuming the needs of marginalized communities based on their perceived deficits due to the oppressions they face. When I was a participant in youth programs, it was very clearly a curriculum built by white people based on what they thought the Black community lacked and therefore failed to teach their children. Throughout my own praxis, I

intend to take the perspective of working *with* communities based on their wants, rather than the needs I've perceived on their behalf.

Do you ever have an argument with yourself? Preparing yourself for both sides of an entirely hypothetical conversation that may or may not ever happen? As a chronic over thinker, I've become a master in the art of made up conversations.

"I'm really fucking tired..."

"Tired of what?"

"Of this! The back and forth, the need to explain my Blackness, Latinness, queerness, poorness, and otherness to people who just want to feel like they just "really love love and togetherness."

I'm really fucking tired of feeling the need to explain my story before someone tries to explain it for me, or to take advantage of white people's morbid fascination with ethnic pain. I'm tired of the air of white guilt that fills the room when I finally speak up; the mutual sudden fear of saying the wrong thing fills the lungs of my peers and myself alike. I'm tired of the anxiety I feel when I raise my hand to talk about race in a class about race, where no one really wants to talk about race, but rather flaunt their shiny new anti-racist rhetoric with no real world action. I'm just tired, and scared, but mostly really tired..."

"Well that feels... Dramatic..."

"Doesn't it?"

This cynical mini monologue is a clearly dramatized but semi-faithful depiction of the mental chaos that ensues when I'm asked CYES' favorite question "what makes you, you?" On the one hand, it's just a question; "who are you, and why?" But while it's normal to have a

positionality paper in the humanities, marginalized students are expected to share this story in all levels of their educational experience, be it in a paper like this, or in classes where they are there to learn rather than teach. I find myself anxious to raise my hand in class because I don't want to be *that* student who just can't stop talking, or "the angry Black girl" for acknowledging the harm that is being done in spaces. I found myself defaulting to identity based work as a career because isn't that the clearest path for an educated Black woman? As a mentor of mine told me recently, "once you are critically aware of yourself and those around you, it feels like you can't stop doing the work." Once I began to develop the vocabulary to put words behind my experiences, I felt a sense of responsibility to continue doing the work; like if I stopped, then I was then complicit in the systems I claim to condemn. This feeling is not unique. This feeling is one of many that have prompted activists and academics to throw up their hands and say "just do your own fucking research." Although I would never claim to have the level of criticality that is comparable to game changing activists, it's strangely comforting to know that I'm not the only one that finds this work exhausting.

The "vignette" I wrote isn't really a vignette, I am aware. However, because of the many intersectional identities I hold, it didn't feel like I had just one experience that could encapsulate all of them neatly. To pick one or two felt like it would be dishonest. To be me is to be Black, *and* Latinx, *and* Queer, *and* woman presenting person, and, and, and. Separating these truths feels like an impossible task. A part of understanding myself that I am most proud of is the realization that I can't pick and choose a part of myself to analyze without at the very least acknowledging the impact one identity has on the others. My relationship with being Afro-Latinx is an example of this. Both of my parents are Black, and both of my parents are Latinx. However, to be *really* Latino means to be light skinned or at the very least a spanish native; neither of

which are relevant to me. On the other hand, I am not African-American; an identity that somehow has become synonymous with Blackness in America. Regardless, it felt impossible to be one or the other as they were so culturally different individually, but I didn't see any representation of both existing outside of my parents. The Afro-Latinx experience was the first of my many intersectional identities that I was truly aware of. But this does not consider the role that gender played in my understanding my racial identity as both Black and Latinx homes are often matriarchies, and the role that class plays in race home structures and so on. The beautiful yet overwhelming part of identity as a whole is the fact that there is always something to unpack, even if it hurts.

It feels really redundant to continuously say "I am a Black, Latinx, Queer, Low Class, private school educated, Female presenting person." But in order to be transparent and honest about a few of the experiences that have brought me to where I am today, these feel like some of the script things that have shaped the trajectory of my life. When I am asked to introduce myself, half of these pieces of me are a part of my mental script, but all of these things are equally important. In the pursuit of my praxis project as well as a career in identity-based research, I should prepare for this redundancy as the identities we hold paint our worlds in entirely different colors.

Growing up in Boston, my understanding of inequity has always been very systemic; what are barriers to high paying jobs, why can't people afford homes, why are the police so much more visible in my neighborhood than my friends, what role does education play in the futures of Black and Brown kids ? Boston as a major city is one of the most racist cities in the nation as a result of our use of systems and structures like education and healthcare to uphold white supremacy in our city. So when it comes to being critical of the world around me, I am still

working on what it means to be critical differently in different spaces. How do we continue to be critical of spaces we love? I love my home because it is such a diverse and ethnically rich place. But how do we continue to love and be compassionate to be critical in spaces we want to change? Throughout praxis I've learned to honor critically as a natural part of the process of loving something or someone. This also requires me to remind myself that I and the community around me have agency in how we respond to calls for change. I think the two (criticality and agency) are two necessary components to create change on any level. Change happens when we interrogate the systems around us and consider what we as individuals and as a community can do to move forward. Whether this change is progress or regression, this is the basis of change. When we add love, intention, or community, this change becomes something that begins to resemble justice and healing. I think change and healing are inherently linked for me