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How it feels to be forced into Nonexistence

Over the course of my life, as I discovered more and more about my identity, I could feel myself disappearing with each part that I delved into. My blackness was only visible if I appealed to whiteness or the use of blackness as a party favor and entertainment. Combined with being trans and gay in a society that enforces heteronormativity, my identity slowly started to fade out of privileged consciousness. These systems of injustice target and attack identities that don't fit into ideas of power in order to make sure that marginalized people stay nonexistent. Which of course leads to death without restitution, violence without justice, and the physical and mental erasure of groups of people. A sanctioned American genocide would be a fitting title for historical injustice against trans people, women, people of color and all intersections in between and outside of these categories in the past few centuries. Control over my identities and how I presented them was the only viable way to stay alive, and the only way I could develop this control was through my own reactions, whether it be internal or external, to what was presented to me as the truth. Personal agency is a result of deep lived knowledge and experience based in both location and identity and is a necessity for existing and living in America. Obtaining personal agency is the choice of visibility, power, and self-control to fight social injustice at the cost of violence and death through existing in an unjust system that rejects and erases identities.

It is difficult to reach personal agency in a society that tries to instill false senses of agency and choice through internalizing harmful and stifling ideas. Personal agency, the awareness and control a person gains over their actions after realizing how their actions affect society and how society affects a person's actions, works against what American society tries to instill in its education system. We see it very early in public schools, where impressionable young children go to learn how to function and about basic knowledge of the world. However, American society makes sure that teachers for young children, intentionally or not, set up their students to be contributors in a larger system of systematic injustice in order to keep America's current oppressive cycle in place. This takes effect as internalized oppression, stifling self worth in children immediately so that children know they exist as only controllable pieces with no sense of agency over their actions or lives. As Regina Langhout talks about in her article about visibility and control in schools, *Acts of Resistance*, interviewing one of the students about how she's controlled in school, "Yolanda is able to tell me exactly why she must cross her arms when walking in the halls. She is not allowed to touch anyone or move her hands around. Even the way that she walks is controlled in this setting." (Langhout, 137) Marginalized children learn and conform to a way of existence that centers on removing themselves physically from bothering and rupturing the imposed order.

As Horace R. Hall specifies about young boys of color in *Mentoring Young Men of Color: Meeting the Needs of African American and Latino Students*, "In part, males of colors suffer failure in schools and classrooms because of the way they look, behave, speak, and learn is seen as divergent from what is deemed as 'normal'. Boys

then internalize these outward perceptions and perpetuate self-defeating behaviors both in and out of school” (Hall, 21). When boys of color who are told to be pawns in school refuse to do so, they are then told to stop existing and then dismissed from class because it’s harmful to the system in action, effectively causing a reaction that makes them internalize volatility due to racism leaving them out of the classroom. Volatility makes schools view the boys of color as explosive, unpredictable, and wild, which further perpetuates stereotypes that young boys of color are inherently violently. This reaction eventually causes boys of color to remove themselves from educational institutions, because they aren’t of use to furthering racism in the classroom; they’re ejected from spaces where they could potentially learn about ways in which they can end racism. Although Hall focuses on young boys of color, it’s not just young boys of color that are victims of this, since racism isn’t the only system that America profits off. Through stifling gender and promoting heteronormativity in schools as well, girls and children that are questioning the heteronormativity and cisnormativity within schools are made aware of their worth in America immediately. Personal agency, being a result of lived experiences manifesting as the ability to control one action’s in a society that attempts to internalize murderous limitations to control people, is almost non-existent until the reactions of children become more and more rebellious against the systems that are in place.

Personal agency, as a result of experience and fighting against internalizations, is obtainable through reacting to injustice and projecting one’s voice in ways that eventually manifest enough of a social consciousness to have

control over one's own unlearning of social injustice and prejudices. Agency comes from reactions and the control over one's presentation, and the knowledge of controlling one's own reactions and presentations comes from personal experiences. America purposefully denies oppressed experiences and institutionalizes this tactic of invalidation in order to strip people of their personal agency, and as a result, people of color, women, trans people, and all intersections between and outside of these categories end up internalizing self-invalidation of their own experiences. This institutionalized invalidation and oppression are evident in the American education where children are taught obedience and silence, as well as the American legal system where inmates are often unjustly stripped of any personal agency that they had over their lives as citizens of the United States. These invalidations fighting agency manifest in more than just inmates and children. As Hooks explains with black activists that are higher in class, "Their repression (if and when they feel it) and their silencing of the rage of other black people are the sacrificial offering they make to gain the ear of white listeners" (Hooks, 13) Richer black activists sacrifice the ability and wash over the intersecting experiences of class and race in order to be seen by white people, showing a sense of personal agency that isn't completely developed, because it still contributes to social injustice. Personal agency cannot come about without the realization of the system of racism and other injustices that one exists or cannot exist in, so with the "silencing of the rage of other black people", these activists automatically remove the sense of agency that they previously thought they had gained through reacting and breaking free of racism. When someone, even an activist, has been forced to suppress their reactions,

which include rage, they end up losing the sense of personal agency that they built up, resulting in the exclusion of those who are already being erased and ultimately a sense of agency that remains complacent with systems of injustice.

Personal agency is a tool of the nonexistent in order to exist. The nonexistent, those who have no place to physically exist in America that isn't an eventual early coffin nor a place that comes with decades of injustice and mental suffering, require agency in order to end the systems that erase them. So how does being forced into nonexistence in America feel? It feels like being constantly robbed of chances that I could have easily acquired. It feels like choosing nonexistence even after gaining and learning of personal agency, in order to stay alive. It feels like the fear of death at every turn because one's presentation doesn't fit within a binary that was only constructed as a tool for colonization, something that I had to wait 17 years to learn. I had to wait 17 years until I got a very unexpected chance to learn the construction of the sexual binary was really only used to more easily categorize and colonize cultures that had more than two genders, I waited 17 years to learn of some of the history that caused my current suffering. My cultural history as a black trans person does not even get a side note within the elective of a history course that is African American history. Nonexistence feels like enduring one's race, culture, and sexuality as entertainment and just a fun way to party. To have your existence refuted since birth is an especially American version of torture, and it feels like reveling in anger and not trusting people in order to stay alive for just a little longer than I'm supposed to when everyone else with similar identities is dying. Personal agency is

control over myself, and control is one of my weapons against the systems and people that want me dead.

Work Cited

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