

Reality Shifts, the Absurd, and Power/lessness during a Pandemic

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In mid-March of 2020, my partner and I returned home from a weeklong beach vacation. It was such a beautiful trip, we joked that for our honeymoon we'd have to go to the moon to top the time we shared together then. Traveling back to Arizona wasn't as much of a dream. We were already leery of being around crowds during our flight, in the airport, and on the bus ride home, as COVID-19 cases were rapidly increasing worldwide. A lot of my fear related to not knowing if I might infect my high-risk family members and others in my community when I returned home; I could have unknowingly been the cause of someone's death. To avoid this, I commenced extreme social distancing measures including visiting the grocery store only twice per month and taking evening walks, avoiding any contact with those outside my household. The pandemic was upon us and what had been unimaginable became our norm.

The months have sped by in my memory, filled with so many lows. I have benefitted from my own privilege in many ways this year, and yet everything feels like a joke to me: after experiencing this huge shift in the reality of our everyday lives, I can't believe I thought anything in my world was so fixed before. Not that anything right now is funny—but it is laughable that I never imagined things could get this bad when all the indicators related to inequity and oppression were always there.

During the beginning of the COVID-19 social distancing measures, I began working from home for my full-time job along with preparing for my PhD comps exam. The dominant belief that working from home was less productive than working in an office with a supervisor measuring every minute of

our work turned out to be a joke, just another symptom of the white supremacist imperialist capitalist patriarchy, policing, and the surveillance culture (hooks 2013). Another joke was preparing for a year for a three-week-long exam required in order to advance to candidacy for my PhD program. The punchline to that joke is that I had to survive another mandatory exercise, participating in stress- and anxiety-inducing academic performances in order to leap another barrier. I am now a PhD candidate, but do not feel any different. If I had known most of my academic career would be a weird performative piece requiring me to act exactly as people wanted me to, pursuing stand-up comedy would have been more fulfilling. I guess the two aren't so different though; in both cases people would be laughing at what I say anyway. I do not state that for sympathy as if people see me as a clown, but because when I say things like the following people look at me like I'm a clown—

Academic institutions must work towards deconstructing and confronting power and domination. One crucial task is the deconstruction of "colorblindness," which Tomlinson (2019) discusses as "inevitably and constitutively infused with unacknowledged structures of power" which contribute to inequalities while ignoring race (p. 175). The harm caused by the structure of colorblindness is compounded by the way in which individuals view themselves as colorblind in a society that is not colorblind, a society "suffused with racist oppression and exploitation." And so, these individuals are "not so much evading color as evading acknowledgment of power" (Tomlinson 2019, p.175). Institutions will struggle to understand where these definitional dilemmas around intersectionality lie when "powerblindness" is scattered throughout the institutions themselves: "Powerblindness is even more insidious than colorblindness in that it is not even articulated as an ideological commitment, yet serves to structure social relations" (Tomlinson 2019, p. 175).

This understanding is silly to most people. I pulled that last piece from one of my comps written submissions. The four ten-page papers I produced during the three weeks I was allotted during my comps exams are astounding to look back on and reread. I was on the edge, fed up with having to continue with business as usual in all aspects of my life while the world was burning. And it still is. Figuratively and literally.

In rereading my comps papers, one quote I used by Gloria Anzaldúa precisely describes what I continue to feel during this shift in my reality-

The disease of powerlessness thrives in my body, not just out there in society. And just as the use of gloves, masks, and disinfectants fails to kill this disease, government grants, equal rights opportunity programs, welfare, and foodstamps fail to uproot racism, sexism, and homophobia. And tokenism is not the answer. Sharing the pie is not going to work. I had a bite of it once and it almost poisoned me. With mutations of the virus such as these, one cannot isolate the virus and treat it. The whole organism is poisoned. (Anzaldúa 1981, p. 231)

This quote really strikes me hard, providing me with a way to label what I feel—powerlessness. It's not that I crave power, but I do not wish to feel this powerlessness thriving in my body, powerlessness brought about when reinforcement of toxic structures is always the focus, never abolition or liberation.

I feel powerless due to the fact that I am often treated as an object and tokenized; no matter how many degrees I earn in higher education or how much experience I gain in professional ventures, the feeling of powerlessness remains the same. I feel diminished by the way others perceive me, the way

I look through their hegemonic eyes. This heightened during the pandemic. And, I guess, this is what is truly meant to be. A system working exactly as it is supposed to. A fixed reality that is extremely hard to shift. I do recognize my privilege as a light-skinned, racially ambiguous Latinx and Arab cisgender woman with a steady income, safe housing, and advanced degrees. Although, as a woman of color, I feel that power structures impose upon me a view of “self” I should accept willingly and without question. This is linked to the way I am expected to assimilate into dominant culture in the academy in order to be “effective” and “successful” for the greater good.

How do you use this privilege when a consciousness derived from this privileged identity pushes you to use your intellect to exploit and capitalize on your identity? I am not blind to my power and privilege, especially the power I could have if I'd adhere to the hegemonic structure laid out in front of me. Instead, I continue to choose the path of questioning and fighting the neoliberal dominant structures in academia exploiting and oppressing those that many claim to be “uplifting” and “protecting.” Holding those in power accountable is even more difficult now due to social distancing and working from home—hard to witness exactly what is going on when we are physically removed from a space.

My academic backgrounds are in cell and molecular biology, global public health, critical ethnic studies, and social justice education. Most of my public health work has been focused on infectious diseases, from Ebola to Zika and HPV. Using a critical lens to understand infectious diseases and health disparities had already become my academic focus pre-COVID-19 and most of the time explaining these connections and the urgency this posed to others was lost. Although, honestly, not much has changed.

These are unprecedented times under the current COVID-19 pandemic, although the consequences and impacts of the white supremacist imperialist capitalist patriarchy (hooks 2013) upon counterhegemonic identities remains the same—inhumane and inequitable structural violence resulting in disproportional suffering and death of racial minorities. From the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak in the U.S., it was becoming clear that Black and Latino individuals were being harmed by the virus at higher rates (Oppel et al. 2020). The racial disparities are even more stark at over a year since the first case of the virus entered into the country (CDC 2020) and barriers in transparency and data access cloud the full impact of COVID-19 related to race and ethnicity (Oppel et al. 2020). Now, we know that “Black, Latinx and Indigenous people have higher rates of hospitalization or death due to COVID-19 in comparison to white people” (Tsnmmd 2020). In Pima County, Hispanic or Latino individuals have been disproportionately impacted as they make up 37% of COVID-19 cases compared to non-Hispanic Whites who make up 30% (AZDHS 2020). This is with large data gaps around race and ethnicity unknown (AZDHS 2020), and even starker when considering that Pima County’s population demographics are 51.3% White compared to 23% Hispanic (Data USA 2020).

Though, who would have predicted things would be any different? That these disparities would turn out any other way? The trends match up with all the health, social, and economic disparities that existed before related to race and ethnicity. With this lingering powerlessness comes hopelessness with looming anxiety and depression. It’s resulted in me seeking more regular treatment from a mental health professional—and having health insurance is another privilege I benefit from, a privilege that should be a basic human right. That reality of accessing healthcare shifted as well, with virtual counseling sessions. But is there really even a treatment for hopelessness

due to structural violence that has hit its peak resulting in more death and suffering for those most marginalized in society?

We are living in the midst of a cultural transition of consciousness, on both sides of political polarities. On the left, we see city representatives like Lane Santa Cruz in Tucson standing on the right side of justice, listening to calls by activist organizations like Black Lives Matter to stand with the people and not the police. The concept of a “split consciousness” has been articulated by various critical scholars such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, Audre Lorde, and Gloria Anzaldúa.

These theorists see what they do as they do it from the dominant viewpoint as well as from their own, shuttling between realities, their identities reformatting out of another, third site. In this formulation, both the limits of insanity and the possibilities of emancipation are born out of the same horrors of subjugation. In both cases, movement — differential movement — is recognized as fundamental to advancing survival. (Sandoval 2000, p.84)

With this differential movement, the ever-flowing revolutionary river arrives at a peak (Alexander 2018). A space where this split in consciousness no longer needs to be split for the sake of respectability politics, as revolutionary and liberatory intersectional place-based activism is prominent and mainstream at this shift. We are at a point where a racial realist perspective is being revered: “her goal was defiance and its harassing effect was more potent precisely because she placed herself in confrontation with her oppressors with full knowledge of their power and willingness to use it” (Bell 1992, p. 379). A new reality is emerging, one step closer to an intersectional liberation for all oppressed people. This shift is the only thing moving me away from complete hopelessness and not feeling as if this reality is just one big bad joke.

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