

People's Test

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For my People's Test I focused on my family. I wanted to talk about the death of my brother, and touch on the complexities of "inner city violence" that tend to get glossed over and also using this project to explore the notion of complex personhood that is lost in these narratives, and furthermore how this has taken a physical and mental toll on my mother and trying to find ways for healing through spirituality.

Laying in bed one sunny January afternoon five years ago, I has just gotten out of work and was resting a bit. Working construction kind of had that effect on me, even on a Monday. The phone rings, the caller ID tells me it's my mom- she lives in the house 10 feet away from the converted garage I lived in. I scoff and ignore it. "If it's serious she'll come out and yell it" I think to myself. The phone rings again and I ignore it again. One more time... resentment builds, I get flashbacks to when my two older brothers and I were all kids: all 1 year apart, before Pancho was born 7 years after me, I remember when my mom would yell and yell from the other end of the house so one of us could come and turn up the volume on the TV or change the channel to the other Spanish language station- her own personal little remote controls. Back then when TV's had dials. I don't answer.

In Spanish I finally hear, "Jesus! JESUS!

It's my 8 year old niece, I think she was that old- or maybe I always see her as that old?

"Jesus!" she yells one more time my middle name that belonged to my oldest brother who I knew all of a single day that I don't remember. He died of leukemia on Christmas Eve when he was four- a day after I was born.

From the back porch of her Grandma's, Emily's voice is trembling- with anger, fear, and desperation. I look out my window after finally getting off my ass, "Whaaaat?" the resentment lashes out.

"They shot Alex! He's dead!"

I convinced myself right on the spot that she's exaggerating, Alex had been shot before and this was just like that, so everything's ok. Yet, after going over and seeing my mom beside herself in tears on her bed clutching the phone, I got that sinking feeling. She looked at me and in Spanish managed to cry out, "They shot Alex! He's dead!"

I felt an unimaginable force of pain, a devastating tsunami crushing and inundating every fiber of my being. As much as I tried to deny it, to zone out, to hope it wasn't real; I couldn't. I drowned in sorrow and tears.

In 2011, there were 103 reported homicides in Oakland. Most of the victims were young males of color who were killed with guns in East and West Oakland. My brother Alex was the sixth that year, murdered on January 10, 2011 leaving behind 3 kids. As the oldest child in a single parent household, Alex had a lot of responsibility to bear- as well as the burden to have endured the abuse of our father the longest before he bailed on us with his settlement money from a workplace injury, himself probably playing out a cycle of abuse and trauma from his own upbringing. Similarly to others facing the economic and social realities of marginalized people living in the city's marginalized areas, Alex managed and played out his trauma by joining a street gang, which many of his childhood friends were also part of. He also had a penchant for self-medicating on alcohol, enough so that he earned the moniker "Wino". I believe that at as a teenager he found a sense of community and belonging in a gang because we live in a world where hetero-patriarchy and white supremacy perpetuates and conveys, through a multitude of ways, to people of color that they don't belong and that they don't matter and that men can only acceptably express anger, aggression and apathy. On the surface, this story becomes a narrative of "just another homicide in Oakland" and therefore a normal occurrence. In actuality this becomes part of racialized narratives that view racialized bodies as "savage" and inhuman: that issues of "black on black and brown on brown violence" are what's holding people of color down. This is a continuation of colonial tropes about people of color and negates not only the

complex personhood of the people involved but the complex relationships between inner city violence to state and state sanctioned violence.

Furthermore, in *The Next American Revolution* by Grace Lee Boggs she talks about the current state of education in the US. The relevance could be found when Boggs says “So half of our inner-city youth routinely drop out or walk out of schools...” Alex had dropped out of school system out of touch with his reality, committed crimes, participated in the drug economy and had been incarcerated as Boggs says that many do by the hundreds of thousands. Furthermore, in *The Problem of Education-Based Discrimination* by Stuart Tannock, the author states that there is a widely accepted notion of “Education-based discrimination”. Varying intersecting discriminations already facing the financially poor, working class and marginalized people of color are compounded by what Tannock calls the, “Differentiation on the basis of education”.

Yet, as we learn from *What is Interdependence? Consumption vs. Community* Tiny talks about having to drop out of school in the sixth grade, at age 11, so she could work to support her family. Something she wears as a badge of honor, “I am honored that I could help my family, that I could help my mother, and like poor children all over the world, I am aware that without my help she would not have made it.” Like Tiny, Alex did what he could do in order to provide what little he could to the family.

But his death does not define his life. Alex persevered. This is his graduation picture from the East Bay Conservation Corps- where I also got my high school diploma. I don’t see my brother as just another statistic. In actuality he was a loving father to his kids, caring son to his mother, and a role model to his brothers who realized and achieved his dream of going to college to become a chef and running a kitchen. I learned from my oldest brother, Alex, how powerful role models are, especially in communities like East Oakland where we were born and raised. Having been incarcerated multiple times and battled with substance abuse problems, I knew that if Alex could overcome these obstacles and reach his life’s goal, then I definitely could too. To be able to witness what we can achieve is essential to our own development and self-actualization. Even though he is no longer here, Alex is still a shining example for me.

Homicide victims aren’t the only victims of homicide. Obviously my remaining brothers and I have suffered at the loss of our brother. And Clearly his kids have had to undergo this terrible experience and will have to deal and cope with this their whole lives as well. But I wanted to focus on the toll this terrible tragedy has taken on our mom. She’s already endured so much in her life but managed to press on- stoically. I picture her as a dam holding back the full force of the river and time. Occasionally an alcohol induced pressure release system would help with the stress of it all, but at the same time reveal an underlying fragility, the seams fraying because of all the cracks created by all the pressure... my brother’s murder, seems to me, the boulder that caved in the dam; itself an act that would be enough to do a thorough job. My mom’s health has deteriorated: stress induced (incurable) rheumatoid arthritis that only promises to get worse, coupled with depression and a broken heart. Her body, soul and heart ache. She’s had to go to many doctor’s and psychologists and state employees and just about every single time- they interrogate her about what happened and every single time she has to relive the memory of her son getting killed just to get medical attention.

Going back to what tiny has talked about privacy not being private for certain folks.

There is no cure to what happened to my brother and the suffering it's taken on us. Pain is natural, but suffering shouldn't be, these are the words I once heard that currently resonate with me. I remember shortly after this happened one of Alex's friends saying to me how they're going to find the people responsible for this and make them pay. All I could think to myself was why would I want the family of whoever did this to suffer and go through what my family and I are suffering? Obviously healing has to come from another way or form.

I think this is where spirituality can help. When I used to think of spirituality I immediately thought of the historic bloc of organized religion and how jaded it has made me towards it. Conversely, one of the readings on spirituality stated that, "...secularism is an ideology developed in the West that was imposed on non-western countries through colonialism" this belief in "rationality" and being of the rational mind, and not the so called savage body, was one of the many justifications for genocide, admittedly I believe that this way of thinking has also steered me away from spirituality. Many folks have died for practicing their traditional customs, such as what's known to us as Dia de Los Muertos. The fact that this indigenous spiritual practice has endured, has resisted colonization, has faced attacks from commercial and hipster cooptation, yet still thrives- speaks to the strength and need for spirituality. For the past few years, my mom and I have been putting together an Altar for Dia de Los Muertos. As a matter of fact, it was my mom this year that reminded me that we needed to do one. Although all our problems won't be solved- I believe this can be a path for healing.

This is an avenue for healing for my family. We have never been ones to verbally express ourselves to each other but in creating an altar, I was able to explain to my mom the varying parts of it and their significance to the best of my knowledge. The most current incarnation of our altar we made at her house was in her living room so when you enter the house it's something that can't be ignored. Strangely indicative of how too often, problems don't get talked about usually because they become stigmatized. This is something my mom has had to endure. She doesn't talk about her issues I feel like and I think by not processing things she doesn't healthily cope with them and they have manifested in suffering in her physical body.

Another way these types of things become stigmatized is through stereotypes. Like when people not from Oakland tell me things like, "OMG you live in Oakland? How have you not been stabbed yet" (actually happened) these things become some kind of joke or trope that's rife with racism and classism.

This isn't about merely accepting these types of violences in our communities and finding ways to cope with them. Through sharing and acknowledging each other's pain, we can learn to empathize. It's something to leave for our descendants as or ancestors have left for us. My nieces and nephews can experience and find healing from our altar and spiritual practice as well, as the adults we can model how to heal or talk about our feelings about these kinds of things. They could even learn to create their own and use it as a way to reminisce about their dad. We all don't have to sit around with our faces buried in our electronic devices. This isn't the solution, but a form of healing: which can be an entry towards other forms of healing.

This isn't going to solve the larger injustices, inequities and issues that created our situation- that is not dissimilar to what other families in communities like Deep East Oakland experience. There was that story a few weeks ago about the artist who died from

being shot in West Oakland while painting a mural to empower the community. (I actually work for the same organization). One of the conversations I had with somebody about this terrible incident they were wondering about how much *trauma* someone had to have endured, not just for themselves but generationally, to have caused them to react in such a violent way and want to shoot someone and end their life. Our communities have been under attack for so long in a multitude of ways, can it really be undone? Not just materially/physically but psychologically? Is this what *Decolonization* aims for?

Spiritual practice is something I am exploring myself, which is perhaps an appendage to decolonization- a way of claiming agency of something long buried. But it's difficult because of how religion has negatively impacted people's lives. This is what has kept me away from spirituality on some level. But although my mom is religious and I don't consider myself to be; we can be spiritual, and we can do it together and with others in our family and community. I feel like spirituality is not something that is done once and everything will be all good. Even now when I take my mom to her medical appointments, the slight inconvenience I may feel even remotely resentful about is far outweighed by the good of just spending time with her. Ironically its not going to the doctor that is healing for her but it's the act of going, of spending time with me or whoever else might be coming with us and talking in the car or in the waiting room. This type of deeper connection reminds me of another quote we hear often in class, "Revolution begins with I".

Lastly, my aim is not to "characterize" my mom as this broken woman. In actuality she's the strongest person I know. She came to this country at 14 years old, undocumented, not knowing English and has been working hard ever since. I just recently learned that she worked in the fields in the central valley picking strawberries! But yeah, she took any job that was willing to pay her any amount, and I still have no idea how she managed to raise 4 boys on her own. She still lives in the Deep East still doing more than what she should be doing and helping taking care of her grandkids.

I don't know where, or how far I will carry this project, but it has given me the space to reflect on these things. I have certainly gained a deeper appreciation for what my mom has done for us and for spending time with her. Also, I had always felt that I have never properly grieved with my family, going back to how heteronormative patriarchal gender norms have socialized males that we cant be emotional, coupled with the varying forms of racism I have witnessed, experienced, and even participated in- all of these things and then some, have had significant impacts on my development that I am starting to connect the dots to and have been putting in work to reconcile. So being able to revisit this whole experience brought up all these things feelings again and sitting in class listening to other classmates talk about their family members passing contributed to these feelings. For so long I've felt, quite frankly, afraid to express myself- and maybe that's why I like doing art as a way to express myself and again tying it back to all these socialized things about race and gender which plays into what Gloria Anzaldua calls the *Cartesian Split* where pretty much Western Liberal Modernity (whiteness) says the rational mind is the most important thing but how this disavows the body, and the heart and its emotions as "savage", and also how being in academia perpetuates this discourse. These are all things I am still working out in my head (and body) and I feel like this class, and this assignment, in part gave me the time and space to do so.

