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Artist Statements

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David Wojnarowicz by Peter Hujar (1981); by Kieran Binney

The poem is an ekphrastic piece, meaning it was inspired by a work of art — in this case, a portrait of David Wojnarowicz, photographed by Peter Hujar in 1981. Both Wojnarowicz and Hujar were prominent artists and gay activists in the 1970s and 80s, during the height of the AIDS crisis, and both died of AIDS-related illnesses.

I originally picked this portrait to write about for a class assignment simply because it was a striking image, but as I looked into Wojnarowicz's background I grew more interested in both his life and the time in which he lived, and it was with that mindset that I wrote the poem in direct address to him. Like many young queer people, I feel a sense of historical connection to the AIDS crisis due to the way the loss of so many lives from the previous generation still affects the LGBT community today. While attitudes and medical care have advanced since the 80s, the institutional-level homophobia and racism that fed the Reagan administration's inaction during the AIDS crisis are still very much alive. This historical context is essential to modern discussions surrounding LGBT rights and social justice.

Ancestry by Indigo Martin

Ancestry websites like 23 and Me or Ancestry.com remove the culture and the meaning behind the concept of ancestry. Ancestry as a concept means looking back at the culture we come from and the ways of life that shaped our ancestors. With queerness, ancestry cannot be traced through bloodlines. It is a passing down of culture through word of mouth. This culture has not been preserved over time but rather erased. This piece is a social commentary on the erased culture of queerness and showing the culture and what has kept it hidden. As someone who identifies as both queer and trans, I wanted to explore my culture and provoke the question of what cultures and ancestries are not told. Minoritized groups and cultures are more susceptible to being erased from history and modern culture. This piece questions why these cultures are erased and what power comes from knowing your culture and history.

The poem starts by discussing how queer and trans people are more likely to commit or attempt suicide compared to their straight and cisgender counterparts. The likelihood of suicide increases in queer and trans youth when they are not supported by their parents and/or peers.

The poem then moves to talk about queer and trans people in history that have been erased or not acknowledged. The first person mentioned is Bayard Rustin, an openly gay, black man in the era of the Civil Rights Movement. He organized the March on Washington in 1963 and helped organize the Freedom Rides. Since Rustin was gay, other leaders of the Civil Rights Movement had him in the background and doing behind the scenes work. His sexuality was seen as too risky and damaging to the image of the movement.

The next person mentioned is Lili Elbe, a trans woman. She successfully received gender confirmation surgery. However, when she got a uterus transplant, she died from complications. The movie *The Danish Girl* was based on her life.

The last person mentioned is Wilmer Broadnax. He was a transman in the early 1900s. He was a gospel singer. The only person who knew he was trans was his brother. When he died, he was outed as trans. This section of the poem ends with talking about how these people were erased. History classes do not mention them. This is what makes queer and trans identities seem like a new thing. There is not a lot of documented history of queer and trans identities. Even less is taught in school.

The next section talks about being queer and/or trans in the military. Recently, there has been a

transgender military ban. The ban is a slap in the face of trans military members and veterans. They are/have risked their lives for this country. They are being told they are a liability and are not valuable. This section also mentions the earlier policy "Don't Ask Don't Tell." This forced queer and trans military members into the closet. If they were out, they could be discharged from the military. This section ends with recognizing the brave queer and/or trans members of the military. The next section of the poem talks about how coming out is a gamble. Queer and/or trans people have a chance of being disowned or kicked out of their families when coming out. They also have a chance of being sent to conversion therapy. One method used in conversion therapy is electroshock. This is an extreme practice and is not often used in modern day. This will show homoerotic images and shock the patient being "treated."

The last section goes back to medieval times. During those times, queer and trans people would be burned at the foot of the stake. They were not considered worthy of burning at the stake. They laid with bundles of sticks, which is where the term "f*gg*t" became associated with queer and trans people. The poem then ends with a reminder that queer and trans history is rooted in death.

Two cents by Sam Avila

I took a Literature class a couple of years ago where we read different poems and short stories that focused on the Civil Rights Movement as well as social justice as a broader theme. I remember reading the poem "Ballad of Birmingham" by Dudley Randall, which magnified the emotions of African-American families in a powerful piece of literature. When I read that piece, I fell in love with writing again and I wanted to share stories through literature.

I wrote this piece because it was a way for me to reflect on a society that can act so hateful towards others simply because of physical and cultural differences. I grew up with my Grandma being an important person in my childhood. She is the one who taught me to be kind to others, to see the world in a positive light, and to stay true to your morals. So when I had heard what happened to her now when I was older, my heart was broken.

I then started wondering, if our society truly believes in treating the common person with kindness and dignity, then how does something like this happen so publicly? There must be a point within our society's conscience to realize that acts like these are wrong, and it seems like it is up to our generation to start this change.

In a world where we would hope everyone respects our elders, that has simply not been a reality for my family. It is clear to me that people are unable to see through stereotypes and prejudices in order to treat others with simple respect. Acts of racism and discrimination occur anytime and anywhere, but we need to call out these hateful acts in order to obtain true justice. This is for my Grandma; for whom I love very much.

The US Healthcare System Has Failed Black Women by Vanessa Malkia

Writing this piece, I was pushed by the anger I constantly feel anytime I am reminded of the state of black women's health in our country. As a black woman in a world that constantly reminds black people that we do not matter, hearing about the negative experiences black women face at the hands of healthcare professionals is incredibly frightening. It begs this question to be asked: Where are we safe? Racism (racist beliefs and acts) has real repercussions that sometimes put minoritized groups in deadly situations.

Due to a combination of implicit bias and structural inequalities, black women have more negative

health outcomes than their white counterparts. In some instances, this results in death. My hope through this piece is that more people will learn about this matter and learn how social issues are interconnected. We are the leaders of tomorrow and knowledge is power. The more we know, the better we can do.

What is the opportunity cost and burden of confronting oppression in and out of classroom? by Beza Tadess

I was inspired to write this piece because at many points in my college career, I have felt exploited by the hands of white patriarchy that deemed the issues that I faced in and out of the classroom as my own to solve. This piece is my heart and intellect in order for me to leave this institution feeling like someone with power will be forced to hear it. I did not write this piece with the intention of inciting pity but rather to start a conversation with the larger university and higher education community about the ways in which our current system robs many students, particularly those of color, of typical college experiences.

There is a vast deficit of resources for people who have the courage to make real changes. I feel it is my personal duty to voice my experience and the experience of many of my friends with hopes of stopping the cycle of exploitation of student activists. This burden is placed upon the majority of students of color and sexual minorities to fulfill roles our institution fails to support. After four years of investment in various student groups and committees, I feel that I have earned the right to highlight issues that cripple our institution. This piece intends to also simultaneously liberate student activists. This is a liberation with respect to having a deep sense of one's own dreams and having an unwavering conviction to stand up for our beliefs.

There are vast implications of pursuing social justice work but the career consequences are often forgotten. I wanted to use my personal experiences to highlight an issue that receives little to no attention. This is particularly important to me because I often feel pressure to minimize myself in order to defy stereotypes placed upon me. This is my public act of defiance. As a black queer woman, this is my way of taking up space and being unapologetic.

A Poem For a Small Town Queer Kid by Indigo Martin

I wrote this piece originally for myself. It was a healing piece about coming to terms with my past and embracing it. Embracing my past is important to me because being discriminated against, being put in violent situations, experiencing microaggressions, and being made to feel like less than a human being has made me stronger. Minoritized people who do social justice work have often experienced some deep trauma. It is important to focus on healing and take care of one's mental health in order to be able to be activists for social justice.

This piece opens with my experiences being outed to my family. It specifically talks about my experience with my dad. The piece then goes into how the experience forced me back into the closet.

The next stanza talks about how during that time of my life, I would self-harm as an unhealthy coping mechanism. I would mainly focus on my thighs. I would also engrave words on my legs like "burden," "f*g," "worthless," and other destructive words. It then mentions how I blamed myself for being weak in this situation. Despite the emotional abuse and gaslighting, I survived.

Next, the poem goes into how I had suicidal thoughts. The beginning of the stanza touches on my relationship with God at the time. I would pray to be straight or dead in the morning most nights. I

thought that I would not have the strength to continue living my life as a queer person. In the poem, I wanted to honor queer and trans youth who had committed suicide. In particular, I wanted to mention Leelah Alcorn. I remember being in high school when she committed suicide. Her story really touched me and has stuck with me. The poem then talks about the afterlife. It challenges the Christian notion of hell and debates if it was as bad as what I was going through. I wanted to explore the idea of "hell on earth" because when I was in that place, I was suffering. It felt like I was in a living hell. I fantasized that death would be nothing, just peace.

The next section of the poem is the most important to me. It starts with "But that morning yu woke up." It shows that I have survived all the bad days and hell that I've been through. I have had a 100% survival rate through everything. The section of the poem continues with all the growth and progress that I have accomplished and maintained. It reminds me of the strength I found that I originally didn't think I had.

The ending recognizes that I did not think I would have the strength to live this long. Most importantly, this poem thanks my younger self for having the strength to carry on even when I thought I couldn't.

Would you be comfortable living with someone who identifies as homophobic?- by M

Entering college for the first time is a very exciting time. You are starting a new chapter of your life, meeting new people, and living independently. While I had the same anxieties that many have over making friends and adjusting to college life, I could not have been prepared for the experience of my freshman year. My first semester at Roger Williams was a very dark time. I cannot express how harmful it is to be excluded and disliked in your living space because of a part of yourself which you cannot change. I was fortunate that I was able to leave that situation and find acceptance and friendship, but the way that the situation was dealt with has always bothered me. I felt that the homophobia I encountered was affirmed and excused because of one question on a questionnaire. In addition to this, when people did begin to question this policy, they were basically shut down and scolded for making trouble.

I wrote this piece initially as a way to get my frustration off my chest. It was cathartic to put my thoughts on paper. After it was finished I realized that perhaps sharing my thoughts and experiences could help future students avoid what I went through. It surprises me that Roger Williams University, a higher education institution named for the forward-thinking founder of Rhode Island, would struggle to adopt policies which are affirming of minoritized students and would actively silence students who try to address problematic policies. Indeed, I have published under an alias because I am not confident that I would not be rebuked for speaking out against this policy. My hope is that my view on this problem will help open up a conversation about the housing questionnaire, and in the process call attention to the way that Roger Williams University serves its minoritized students.