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RAINBOWS OF RESISTANCE: QUEER IDENTITY AND REVOLUTION IN SOUTH AFRICA

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The political and social landscape of South Africa is one marked by a dizzying multitude of paradoxes. For me, Cape Town served as a potent microcosm to observe the conflicting social, political, cultural, and religious dynamics that shape the daily reality of those who inhabit South Africa's urban spaces. The bustling city was at once vibrant and volatile, welcoming and hostile, progressive and oppressive. I found myself regularly inspired, anxious, scared, enlightened, and exhilarated. Having lived it, I still cannot believe that such an incredible and contradictory place became home to me.

I went to Cape Town as an incoming freshman with Honors Carolina to learn the history and lingering effects of apartheid in South Africa. I was struck by the stories of oppression engineered by apartheid. I wanted to know more about the ways individual identity had been and continued to be shaped by the socio-political trauma of apartheid rule. I returned to Cape Town for my Burch Fellowship with the intent of interviewing black lesbians on their identity formation experience in this simultaneously progressive and oppressive environment. I foresaw interviewing these resilient individuals and telling their stories as a potential vehicle of empowerment for those who have been historically and continually silenced.

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Apartheid rule in South Africa sustained a viable racist and

homophobic patriarchy. The country has embraced a democratic system of government for over two decades, but the remnants of the notorious system of apartheid are still visible. On a moonlit hike overlooking the city, I saw illuminated outlines of districts that were still informally segregated along racial lines, consistent with those of socio-economic status and opportunities. The resultant societal tensions are heightened by the still-present rigid conscriptions of masculinity, femininity, and appropriate sexual relations that were promoted during the era of apartheid.

These aspects of apartheid's legacy visibly persist in many ways that threaten the safety, freedom, and equality of all LGBTI+ individuals in South Africa. The country was the first in the world to explicitly outlaw discrimination based on sexual orientation and the fifth in the world to legalize gay marriage, but hate crimes and discrimination undermine the hopeful reality of equality for all citizens of the country.

I arranged an internship at the Triangle Project, an NGO in the suburbs of Mowbray outside of Cape Town to support their empowerment programs and services for LGBTI+ individuals in the province of the Western Cape. After meeting many who were experiencing primary and secondary victimization and had little sources of support outside of the Triangle Project, I revised my project to educate and empower individuals vulnerable to debilitation by the state or society. I was inspired to create proactive tools that would be accessible to all LGBTI+ individuals affected by patriarchal, racist, and homophobic oppression.

Creating multimedia campaigns that highlighted the available means of resistance to oppression and rights violations comprised the bulk of my new tasks. I designed videos, pamphlets, and posters that promoted local events, support organizations, and resources people within the LGBTI+ community could use to claim their rights. I both attended and documented protests and workshops related to queer resistance and protection to learn current practices. I talked to student activists, pride parade organizers, healthcare providers, insurance brokers, sexologists, therapists, counselors, researchers and NGO leaders on the ways in

which individuals could protect their identity and feel comfortable and even empowered by their sexuality.

I also conducted interviews at a rehabilitation center in Johannesburg, South Africa. The new center was meant for queer individuals recovering from addiction and was led in the start-up phase by two gay men and a bisexual woman who met in a general rehab center. Each had a recovery compromised by homophobic counselors and caregivers. One in particular dealt with being told in rehab that he deserved his new HIV+ status. He continued to overcome systematic deprivation and familial rejection, homelessness, and prostitution to become an accredited counselor and begin his own center. His suffering was foundational to the establishment of his progressive rehab clinic and epitomized the potential productivity of pain in the reclamation of power.

Life in Cape Town was just as busy outside the office. I attended open lectures and dialogues at nearby universities on sexuality and gender. I became actively involved in queer student protests at the University of Cape Town after a series of events that created an academic environment hostile to LGBTI+ students. Because I lived in a loft in the city center for international travelers, there was always something to do and people with whom to explore. We had breathtaking experiences and excursions. Seeing iconic Table Mountain from my balcony upon waking everday never lost its element of awe to me. It was hard to escape the reality of wealth inequality. The city had a lot of beggars and violent crime and nearly everyone I lived with, including myself, was mugged or pickpocketed. However, I felt only a fraction of the kind of vulnerability and fear that many people I worked with or encountered had come to see as routine.

I saw first-hand the way in which oppression breeds the power to oppose it. I met an overwhelming number of

incredible LGBTI+ individuals who used their marginalized identity as a source of empowerment. I saw the power of the individual creating new ways of being by redefining sexual, socio-political, and cultural identities on one's own terms. The art of balancing vulnerability, compassion, and resilience is one that I hope will have an enduring legacy in South Africa, just as I know it will have in my own life.