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The Spectrum of Perceptions and Cure Oppression

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THE SPECTRUM OF PERCETIONS AND CURE OPPRESSION

Them. I begin with three dedications. Not in order of importance. To Nome Lam who's given me so much inspiration; her ideas about DIY culture and her interpretation of the non-linear narrative have helped me create this presentation. To everyone who is oppressed, not only by ableism or speciesism, but by all oppressions. Anyone who has ever been defined as other and felt the pain, exclusion, loneliness and violence in that definition. My journey is your journey and my struggle ends only when yours is over and won. And thirdly, to a person who has helped me and supported me more than anyone in my struggle to look beyond patriarchal and ableist understandings of myself to understand who I really am as an individual and a justice activist. I know it is a cliché to say it, but you know who you are. Thank you. By way of an introduction, I guess the best way I can describe what I'm going to do is kind of like an audio scrapbook. This presentation is mainly composed of adaptations of journal entries and my commentary on them, *thus it is completely incoherent but intentionally so*. I also want to say this is very personal and difficult to read, so it may be difficult to listen to as well, so please be aware of that and take care of yourself.

Meet a young woman in a psychiatry hospital. She is sitting on the floor in a small room where every movement is muffled by the padding that covers every surface. But she isn't moving at all anymore. She is thinking about the walls around her. There the walls inside her mind made real. She can touch them, or kick them and hurt her toes with her own insignificance and utter powerlessness. They enclose her, impregnably and indifferently fade her black and down. They are an eyeless presence, a somehow taunting symbol of her rapidly shrinking world. To give into them would be so much like the sun falls down. She rests her head on her knees and closes her eyes. Of course the walls are still there. Their silence is a self-satisfied silence of all those who are powerful as they watch those who are helpless. They have no need to justify themselves, to apologize, or to explain. They leave her alone with herself; her own perspective eats her up. The perspective is the world's perspective. Don't touch anyone you will hurt them, things will go wrong, betrayal, heartbreak, disaster are inevitable. The question is not if, but when. And what is the logic of this warning: stop trying, stop struggling, no one understands or wants you how you are. Sink, be absolved.

What is it about walls like that make you want to kick them? It's annoyingly predictable. Is it the secret subconscious knowledge that if enough people kick them for long enough and hard enough they really would fall down. What would happen next? Have we been hoping from perch to perch in our cages for so long that we've forgotten how to use our wings? How would we live without the violence of walls in a world set free? If it weren't for the walls, what is happening to me and everyone here would be their problem. They couldn't forget about us anymore, they would have to meet us and listen.

Oppression is a story of walls. It is made up of walls, of chains, or barbed wire. It is a world view built on exclusion. In the hospital, surrounded by diagnoses and theories and interpretation of the bored gaze or resentful stare; the woman writes nobody knows who I really am. She pauses for a moment, feeling the emptiness beneath her anger. Then writes, I'm not even sure I do.

A moment from a movie I watched with my sister: A young woman says to the guy she's in love with, you're the coolest person I've ever met and you don't even have to try. He replies, "I try really hard actually". I hated the movie but that one line broke my heart because I know what it's like to spend all day, every day, around people who are your closet friends and they don't notice, have no idea how hard you are trying. And the harder you try, the more you screw things up and it's always your problem not theirs. And on the rare occasion you actually get something right, when you feel yourself connecting with someone and it's so amazing to have a glimpse of people, and why people bother with this at all and you feel like jumping for joy and you realize they are already turning away. Because this is normal for them. And this is what normal does: it stamps on all your achievements, your moments of triumph; there is always something better that is beyond your reach, there has to be. If it wasn't for the glittering mirage of normal on our horizon we might begin to believe in ourselves. And this is the violence pretending it is possible to define someone else's subjective experience and as both ableism and speciesism and indeed all oppressions do, to defy it as worthless. This is the violence of this mundane act of exclusion.

In a culture made out of death, being sick is the healthiest response there is. It is either that, or

become a part of their pathology. Oppression is a pathology from which we are all in recovery. This is cure-oppression. If we can't be cured we wait for normality to assign us a purpose or simply put us in one of its rubbish dumps. It is because of cure-oppression, the need to change, to be accepted, or understood, or valuable. The definition of herself as a problem, of her every experience as pathology that the young woman wrote in her diary that one of her goals, one of the things that would make her happy was get better and learn how to make and keep friends. Her only hope of finding friends was to get better. To change everything about herself, to camouflage the dissonance of her perspective so successfully that people would no longer turn away in nervous or disdainful comprehension. People would embrace the things in which she learned to hide herself. And maybe, deep inside where the real version of herself was hiding, she would feel it and be less alone; she would be accepted. She didn't fully realize at the time that she would be dead as well.

Looking back at that young woman from where I am now, I don't understand her because she doesn't yet understand herself but I recognize her and I recognize the defenses that made her armor. Mistrust forms a cage around her, she is terrified of loving; it will anger her to a world she hates. She is desperate to be loved.

This is how Audre Lorde's mythical norm works. Normal is a disguise. No one is like this person but we all have to pretend like we are or submit to the rules and worldview and version of reality created by those who pretend most successfully. We define nothing. Not even what we believe in, how we feel about our body, what we get to dream about. Our stories are silenced. The world that we still secretly believe that we could have created together are shattered. Like reflections in water that were so solid that you could have stepped into them. When a stone is thrown the reflections never look quite the same again. The social construct of normal is that stone. Because of that stone, the young woman writes in her diary, I wish I was somebody else, anyone would do. I wish I was different, I wish I was dead.

I am an x-ray, a collection of bones, an empty cage of ribs without a heart. An anatomical jigsaw that makes no sense. When they made me they forgot that you need a purpose to live. My soul is scar tissue around my heart. I am a black hole. People's good intentions, and false concern, curiosity and shock get lost on me. I swallow atonement and forgiveness is for breakfast and slowly starves to death. I have no memory of shining in my own small corner of the universe before I forgot I was a star, before I turned inside myself and swallowed all my light. I am an exile. My touch brings a contagion of truth. I have stepped across the border into the country of lost souls, who've stuck their finger up at salvation for its price tag and clichés and comforts and chains. Who demanded things like love and understanding and pain that doesn't have a movie script? They wanted to be heard so much, they wanted to be touch and be touched without fear. They dreamed and imaged and fought with their fingers that bled to the bone and they ended up there. Where their songs go unheard and the silence bursts eardrums and hopelessness whispers from the walls as they close in. Here, you can walk forever without knowing where you're going, without getting anywhere.

I am invisible but there is no lie big enough to hide me. They offered me medicine but I saw it was poison relabeled but ended up drinking it anyway. And they didn't know what to do about my choice, they didn't know how to write what happened next, it wasn't a part of their story so

they wrote me out. I am a footnote you can read if you look closely. But my story has become alive now, only I can tell you the unsettled version that was erased.

Two definitions. Sentience: having a subjective experience of the world around you, having your own unique world, having a story. Oppression: when these stories cease to matter.

The young woman walks through the automatic doors at the psychiatric hospital in the glaring sunshine. She stands still with the realization that she is still a prisoner and still surrounded by prisoners.

Inside me, despair had a strange determined hopefulness laying around. There is so much still to be done. And here is the power that I have protected from, I think, I feel, I remember. These things make resistance. The world is afraid of me for a very good reason.

Kay, this is the last part, the final picture in the scrapbook. Um, so before I tell you the story that ends this, I have one message. Which is my both my own message and behalf of everyone who is oppressed and anyone whose experienced the violence of exclusion. And it's this: forget everything you think you know about us, because nobody except us can know our own truths. There are as many ways of being as there are beings. And there are as many versions of beauty as there are searching for the beautiful. This makes me smile.

So the story, the story begins a few days ago when the young woman, who became me, was sitting in the park. And she was sitting beside a greyhound called Sami, who was lying beside her. And a woman walked into the park pushing a wheelchair with a little girl in it who was perhaps 8 or 9 years old. And they stopped walking in a patch of sunlight, right across the path from me, and the little girl gets out of the wheelchair and she, she just starts running around in circles and dancing. Like she flings her arms wide and she just feels, how amazing it is to move and feel the sun and be alive. And I watch her, and I see other people watching her.

I see people walking past and I wonder if they grope through their stifled minds for a definition or a label to define her, so they can be condescending and so they can turn away and discount her, discount whatever she is feeling as unimportant or non-existent, so they can feel pity instead of wonder. And I think of how I tried so desperately, so constantly for years to relate, to understand, to impersonate, to take part. Because I thought I could be hollow inside and it would be alright. I could survive or continue to exist or whatever this not living is called, so long as someone cared about me. All the mess of nerves and contradictions of defenses have hid me and all my starving and exhaustive hope. And all that time, I could have been dancing in the sun.

So I watch her, and Sami lays beside me and she is watching too. And I feel like she is perfectly contended. And I share my world for a moment with these two beings, and their calmness and joy. And I feel the vastness of a world made up of infinity of perspectives. And I think about the possibilities what respect for all of them might bring. That struggle is before us; right now we have a fragment of the piece. Thank you, bye.