

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Intimate Whirlwinds, Part II

Christopher · Wednesday, February 19th, 2020

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We carried the hyper masculine lifestyle as if it was the only way to go, wearing it like a badge of honor. The neighborhood boys would come together to smoke weed and drink; listening to Lil Wayne's *Tha Carter II*, *Dedication II & Drought* series, Eminem's entire catalogue (at that point his fourth album, *Encore* just came out), Dr. Dre's *2001* and The Game's *Black Wall Street* mixtapes on repeat including his first two albums, *The Documentary* and *Doctor's Advocate*. I covered up my insecurity of thinking I wasn't enough by acting out in violence. Showing I too could be tough. One night me and two of my cousins held a conversation regarding whether or not we would rather be a Blood or a Crip. No one opted-out or stayed neutral. Shortly after, all of us survived a drive-by shooting hitting the floor at their house in Pasadena. It was heartbreaking.

Soon in middle school and throughout high school, I bore witness to the same thing in the school yard. Students touching each other. Hearing rumors about who was having sex with who. Individuals acting out violently. In the heat of rage, I once called a female classmate a "bitch." Flipped a table during an argument with a teacher. Got into countless fights with bullies; once even using 2x4's, another time with lacrosse paddles. I almost took a life by choking someone who was smaller than me. I did not talk to my parents. They knew something was off. I did not let them in. I feared intimacy in the sense of connecting. I refuse to let anyone compromise my masculinity.

That is until 2007, in the 9th grade, I experienced my first real "infatuation." A girl named Sharleen. She was a transfer student from outside of California. Seeing her for the first time during a class icebreaker and hearing that she enjoyed video games, and anime, I instantly became attracted to her. I did not know the first thing about love, but the warmth was definitely real. I could not sleep at times. I lost my appetite. I got frantic as my attempts to speak to her would turn into blather, sitting next to each other in almost every class. When it came to Sharleen, sex was not a big factor. I just wanted to express all my weird quirks. The anime I watched, the Nintendo games I have because all the things that were not related to sports or the most popular music artists were considered weird.

I strive to be like my parents, who were high school sweethearts that met in the 10th grade. They always told me and my older sister not to do what they did and go live life to have different experiences with different people. Being the impressionable teenagers we were, we both ignored them. Romanticized the idea that being with someone is the endgame. Nothing else in life mattered

that much.

Long story short, I waited until the end of the year via email to tell Sharleen I had a crush on her. Sharleen did not feel the same and left California for the remainder of high school. I seriously convinced myself that I was in love with someone I do not know at all.

Shades – Attention Deficit

Self-hate and colorism continued to dictate and influence my decisions. The following year, a beautiful dark-skinned girl showed genuine interest in me, but I did not pursue the relationship out of unease from being teased as that “*dark-skinned couple*.” We never talked after she kissed my cheek saying she liked me. My melanin was a timeless cage. Sadly, this became a repeating pattern for the rest of my high school career. I felt as if my dark skin became a detriment in cultivating romance. Along with that, I was teased as the black man that would end up with a white woman, due to my “*lack of blackness*” and interests.

Near the end of my Junior year of high school in 2010, my creative writing mentor, Mike Sonsken took me and several students around Los Angeles to perform poetry. One venue we stopped at was Carson High School, which is 30-45 minutes away from View Park High School. I met a white girl named Amy. In this platonic relationship, I portray myself as a “*Nice Guy*.” Figuring if I helped her through her issues of being a survivor of emotional and mental abuse, then I would have her. Claiming her as an object to be held on my pedestal.

We traded good morning text messages. We held surface level conversations surrounding music and artistry. We shared the same favorite hip hop artist, Lupe Fiasco. We never really dug deeper into each other’s landscape, due to my lack of confidence. I waited almost an entire year to reveal my adoration.

On Valentine’s Day 2011, I was invited to perform at Carson High. I showed up with a single red rose, and a small teddy bear. Pulling Amy to the side amidst pouring rain, I told her I had feelings. She could not reciprocate. A week later I found out, she was dating a white guy. Blending all my insecurities together, I felt as if she did not want to date me because I am dark-skinned. I felt that no one found me attractive. I attended school the following week in pieces, broken.

“*We are all complicit in this system that leaves men undervalued, because when young girls are small we talk to them we ask them questions, we don’t do the same for boys. We don’t invest in the emotional lives of boys. So when you get to 30 years old and someone asks you how you feeling you don’t have the words, the language..*” – Jorel Caraballo, Licensed Therapist

Reacting violently at home, I punched a hole through my wall. A comment that remains with me today is “*you are too dark for anyone to marry*.” Joking or not, for that to come from a classmate

one shade lighter than me, in front of a light skin instructor, and a classroom of 25-30 laughing students hurt. That is traumatic. In a white supremacist culture that embraces toxic masculinity, the idea of confronting and digging through our own landscape for damaged roots is ignored.

Specifically, in the black community, regarding young men, we do not challenge these negative ideologies, due to lack of tools given to deconstruct at an early age. Media outlets portray us as Monsters, we were never given a chance to unlearn harmful systems of oppression before a police officer guns down another innocent black man in the street. These problems intersect becoming a part of a dynamic where individuals are forced to be silent out of fear.

Being expressive & black is dangerous from inside of the community and out. Rather than presenting a “teachable moment,” the act of “calling in” may be perceived as challenging someone’s manhood. This has evolved to what we know today, as *Cancel Culture*. In the good fight against evil, we either ignore that we were once evil or forget why we are fighting in the first place.

How do you fix a system that was never meant to be fixed in the first place? What is love and intimacy under the veil of White Supremacy? What does self-love look like for People of Color navigating a system that is purposely designed to crack one’s mental and emotional stability? Even though that incident occurred nearly a decade ago, the thought of “*being too dark for anyone to marry*,” became the end all, be all reason that rings in the back of my head for how I handle rejection up until mid 2019.

In 2011, the conversation around, self-love was not brewed yet. If I allowed my loved ones to dig on my landscape, in my teenage years, things would have turned out differently. However, I needed to start educating myself on the concept of intimacy as it extends further beyond just the physical heading into college.

I obtained a hyper-sexualized image of college life from 3am late night television. The 1-800-phone-sex-hotlines. The *Girls Gone Wild* commercials created by perverted white men grooming young women, giving them alcohol to take advantage. Being affected by colorism deeply I was terrified entering a completely different world. Going from an all black high school in the west side of South Central Los Angeles to a PWI (at the time), CSU Monterey Bay six hours north. Within the first couple weeks of the semester, some black students resented me after being unsure of joining the Black Student Union at a club fair called the Otter Showcase.

I was more interested in sitting around playing video games all day, also my parents told me not to become an activist. Being expressive & black is dangerous. Overwhelmed by the array of cultures surrounding me on a daily basis, staying outside passed my scheduled classes to socialize was not the plan. Unfortunately, having two roommates in a dorm of three, living in a building notoriously known for doing wild shit, I obviously had no choice but to converse. Due to not showing up on the first day of move in weekend one of two roommates bluntly commented, “I thought you were dead.”

Hey – WeAreKING

Developing a connection with strangers was painfully uncomfortable. Being around people forced me to allow people to ,at the very least, traverse on my land. I always wondered why people would

ask me so many questions about myself? What did they want? What were they looking for?

First day of class I became self-conscious regarding who had their eye on me to the point that I attempted to isolate myself from fellow classmates by sitting in an area where nobody sat. A young woman who sat next to me for the entire one hour and 30 minute class time put me on edge. I accidentally drooled on myself introducing myself to her.

One night my next door neighbor came over to my dorm and started a light-hearted conversation surrounding hobbies and interests. Suddenly, it turned into a conversation about segregation in black and brown communities after talking about a project she was doing for a class.

The intensity of that conversation bordered on the intimacy I had never felt before at that point. Discussing what it means to “*Drive While Black*,” to be “*On the wrong side of the tracks*” not to go to certain places due to gang culture and politics. Understanding her personal mission in school, to bring about change and awareness to where she’s from for her family.

Everything was platonic, however the deeper I dug and the more I allowed her to venture on my terrain, the more feelings got involved. I did not experience sexual attraction, however I really enjoyed her company as a person.

Doing small things like getting dinner with our group of friends, her making cupcakes, or forcing me to watch an unbearable three hour marathon of *Vampire Diaries* all mattered. Unfortunately, due to my immature outlook and idealistic view on romance I ruined the intimacy. Thinking those nice gestures equated to something more when in reality she was indeed just being the best and kind human being she could possibly be. I caused a riff between us rooted in my toxic masculine ways.

Coincidentally enough, weeks later I joined the *MENding Monologues* production. I had no knowledge on what the show was about beforehand. I went in blind. During the audition I was, oddly enough, asked to moan. It was at this point I realized I was extremely uncomfortable with my sexuality. I hated talking about sex. I hated sex jokes. Sometimes the words “*cum*”, “*pussy*” even “*vagina*” made me feel uncomfortable. However, at the same time, I wanted to explore sexuality. My neighbor asked if I wanted to go to the *Vagina Monologues* show and I said no, based on the name alone.

As the play production rehearsals commenced for *MENding*, the cast learned about rape culture, patriarchy, and hyper masculinity. The concept of hyper masculinity is something that resonated with me the most, as the majority of the gang violence in my hometown of Los Angeles stems from that. I remember growing up going to school everyday seeing everyone (including myself) throwing up gang signs for neighborhoods when we were not from those gangs, just to look cool or to look tough. There were, however, some students that were actually gangbanging. Some survived, and unfortunately some died.

because we are fools. – his and hers

Concepts surrounding Male Privilege cause me to become overly conscious with women to the point of apologizing for damn near everything even just being in their presence breathing. Acknowledging the fact that I am a Black man navigating in spaces that paint me as hyper

aggressive, made building intimacy and cultivating romantic relationships ten times more difficult. Ideas of exploring sexuality became non-existent. In my art as a spoken word artist, I start to utilize coded language; stripping away a sense of vulnerability. Overall, slowly closing myself off from interacting with people around me.

The following year, a woman gained interest in me. Her bluntness of asking questions surrounding who I was not only caught me off guard but helped me experience a new level of intimacy. She asked me what parts of a woman do I like? How many kids do I want? Then asked what my story was? When she first asked me what my story was, I had no idea what the hell she was talking about. No one had ever asked me what my story was before.

Beginning from an awkward silence to fumbling over my words, I just suddenly started talking about my upbringing. She pointed out that I needed to do better at taking care of myself. Take more pride in my artistry. I had no idea how to react with her resting her hand on my knee-cap and smiling at me. Thoughts of kissing came to mind, but simply asking for consent was intimidating out of fear of rejection, coming off too aggressive, and looking stupid because I never kissed anyone before. I finally found someone that was interested in me, and genuinely 110 percent showed it; one of my initial thoughts was ***“wow someone actually finds me attractive. My skin color does not matter.”***

A day later, I asked so many friends what to do, because I had no idea what to do with myself. One friend suggested that I write a poem leading into asking for a kiss. It was cliché. I did not want to do it that way, but it worked. Soon after, she left to study abroad and I began to crave the feeling of intimacy.

Constantly attaching myself to people as long as I possibly could to feel anything. To even feel the smallest atom of a hair or word in someone’s story. That’s where manipulation starts internally. Justify why you are not overreacting. Why that person is not texting you back to start a conversation. Assume they are being deceptive. I desperately wanted to be heard and seen. I lack the skills to comprehend and communicate. Also I still held an unrealistic view on what it truly meant to connect with someone. Due to these traits tension rose between me and her.

(Photo by Jay Stevens and WISE)

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