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Queer Joy as Rage: A Tool to Transform

E. Jeremy Torres

Highlighting the transformative potential of queer joy as a form of resistance and revolution within higher education. It emphasizes the need to challenge oppressive systems and narratives through the celebration of joy, reclaiming identity, and building resilience. By asserting and reveling in their joy, queer individuals can challenge societal norms, demand change, and affirm their right to live authentically.

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Introduction

In the realm of higher education, much attention has been dedicated to delving into the challenges and animosities faced by queer and trans (QT) individuals. Scholars, such as Graves (2018), Wilder (2013), and others, have meticulously examined the persisting oppressions like racism and colonialism in the United States, shedding light on their profound impact on the teaching and preparation of students. The imperative for universities to address these issues becomes evident, urging scholars to keenly observe the conditions influencing the experiences of marginalized communities on college campuses for a more profound understanding of their needs (Quaye & Harper, 2015). Among the diverse communities within higher education, QT populations emerge as particularly susceptible to inhospitable environments. Research studies (Evans, Nagoshi, Nagoshi, Wheeler, & Henderson, 2017; Vaccaro & Newman, 2017) reveal that QT individuals often grapple with a lack of acceptance and support due to prevailing heterosexist atmospheres. As QT scholarship evolves, it now encompasses a nuanced examination of various subgroups within the community, including considerations of spirituality, disability, race, and more (Duran, 2019b; Rankin, Garvey, & Duran, 2019). Recent endeavors have explored the concept of belongingness for QT students of color in higher education (Brcka-Lorenz, Duran, Fassett, & Palmer, 2019; Duran, 2019a; Strayhorn, 2019). While these studies contribute to understanding the multifaceted factors shaping the experiences of QT students of color, they primarily focus on individual identities, overlooking the crucial environmental factors influencing their sense of belonging. Most notably, these studies fall short in considering the transformative potential that centers around queer joy in the college campus environment for QT students.

Resilience and Queer Joy

The significance of resilience in higher education cannot be overstated, as it directly shapes student outcomes (Eisenberg et al., 2016). Walker and colleagues (2006) offer a compelling definition, portraying resilience as the ability to swiftly recover from challenges and endure ongoing hardships. Cotton et al. (2017), along with Nicolazzo (2016, 2017), introduce a nuanced perspective by presenting resilience not as a static possession but as an active verb—a practice. They argue that resilience can function as a strategic practice, empowering individuals to overcome oppression on college campuses (Nicolazzo, 2017, p. 88). In the context of queer individuals, resilience is often viewed as a tool to navigate oppressive systems like homophobia and transphobia (McConnell et al., 2018). Recent scholarship, notably by Nicolazzo (2016), expands this understanding, centering resilience as action against systemic oppression, particularly evident in the experiences of trans and gender-expansive individuals. The concept of using joy as a tool for resistance against systemic oppression has deep historical roots, drawing inspiration from religious leaders, academics, and civil rights activists.

As a self-proclaimed queer joy activist, I align myself with the resistance against systems that hinder happiness for people like me and the broader queer and trans community. Queer joy transcends mere contentment with one's existence; it encompasses optimism as a force propelling the movement toward equity. When marginalized identities become politicized, maintaining moments of genuine love

and radical activism becomes a delicate balance. Preserving queer joy becomes not only essential for personal well-being but a means to center survival and resistance. Establishing spaces that allow queer students to embrace their individual identities is a personal priority, uplifting spirits and fostering inclusivity for those unable to fully participate in the community. The power of queer joy extends beyond personal experience—it becomes a formidable weapon against unjust systems. Thus, queer joy emerges as a radical tool against heterosexist and heterogendered systems of oppression, a force to be cultivated within and beyond higher educational settings. Making space for queer joy is a radical form of resistance against oppression for multifaceted reasons, each contributing to a profound transformation of societal norms and expectations.

Positionality

As a queer, nonbinary, and Puerto Rican individual, my commitment revolves around centering the experiences of queer and trans community members, a focus that forms the core of my extensive work and advocacy. I am deeply invested in educating others about the multifaceted challenges encountered by queer and trans collegians within the oppressive frameworks of heterosexism and racism, particularly as they manifest within the intricate landscape of higher education. At the core of my professional ethos is the deliberate rejection of objectivity, a stance that allows me to forge a profound connection with the passion that fuels my work. By discarding the notion of objectivity, I am empowered to be intentional and explicit in centering and articulating the profound impact of my positionality on my motivation and commitment to the realm of higher education. Drawing from my lived experiences as a first-generation, queer, Latinx individual hailing from and residing in the New York City projects, I navigate the complexities of my identity within the academic sphere. I am acutely cognizant of the power dynamics inherent in higher education and grapple with the privileges afforded to me, earned through tenacity in navigating the academic landscape. Entering academic spaces, I am keenly aware of how my presence is perceived—a potential disruptor of norms or, at times, merely as a diversity token. This awareness underscores the inherent contradictions and complexities woven into my physical placement within the institution. I have not been immune to the violence inflicted by racism and homophobia from actors within the academic landscape, an ongoing struggle that places me in a perpetual state of contradiction and conflict. In the context of the U.S., and particularly for those occupying the most marginalized positions, higher education has historically been framed as a sanctuary, promising an escape from the daily specter of death. Paradoxically, my personal narrative and experiences defy this idealized promise. I embarked on my journey into the institution as a means of survival, a lifeline offering respite from the pervasive threats of death and violence that loom in my community. Simultaneously, I am acutely conscious that the very institution I entered as a refuge is complicit in perpetuating the cycles of death and violence affecting my community. This internal conflict shapes my perspective and underscores the intricate dance between survival, promise, and the harsh realities of the higher education landscape. In recognizing the limited research on the experiences of non-binary individuals, my work takes a pioneering stance by addressing how queer joy can be a transformative tool of resistance for the queer and trans community. I cherish my insider status as both a researcher and practitioner, leveraging my unique position to shed light on underrepresented narratives. Beyond my nonbinary identity, I carry

multiple facets of privilege within academic spaces—fueled by my academic degrees and the diverse positions I have held across institutions. These privileges, while acknowledging their existence, serve as tools that enable me to navigate and contribute meaningfully to academic discourse, fostering inclusivity and understanding in spaces that may often lack diverse perspectives.

Queer Joy as Rage: Tool to Transform

Research consistently highlights the stark disparities in the sense of belonging among students with historically minoritized identities compared to their more privileged counterparts (Strayhorn, 2019). Notably, this discrepancy is particularly pronounced among collegians of color, where extensive investigations into various racial and ethnic groups consistently reveal a lower sense of belonging for students of color compared to their White counterparts (Johnson, 2012; Johnson et al., 2007; Museus & Park, 2015; Strayhorn, 2019). The literature also extensively addresses the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ students, shedding light on their experiences of discrimination and isolation on college campuses (Evans et al., 2017). However, amidst these challenges, it becomes evident that meaningful peer connections and supportive institutional messaging play crucial roles in fostering a positive sense of belonging for LGBTQ+ students (Vaccaro & Newman, 2017). This research not only delves into the nuanced experiences of students identifying within the LGBTQ+ umbrella but also extends its focus to communities of color, collectively emphasizing the imperative need for a comprehensive understanding of belonging within diverse student populations.

Making space for queer joy emerges as a radical and transformative act, challenging oppression on multiple fronts. One of the pivotal ways in which it serves as a form of resistance is by countering negative narratives perpetuated by oppressive systems. These systems often thrive on harmful stereotypes about queer and trans individuals, seeking to marginalize and stigmatize them. Embracing and celebrating joy becomes a powerful tool to dismantle these narratives, presenting a positive and authentic image that disrupts preconceived notions. Furthermore, the act of celebrating queer joy becomes a profound mechanism for reclaiming identity. Oppression frequently involves the erasure or distortion of marginalized identities, imposing external narratives that do not align with individuals' authentic experiences.

Queer joy can be a powerful tool for channeling rage. In the face of oppression and discrimination, experiencing joy can be a radical act. It can defy the expectations of those who seek to diminish queer existence and can serve as a form of resistance. When channeled effectively, queer joy can fuel activism and advocacy efforts. It can inspire communities to come together, celebrate their identities, and demand change. This joy can be a form of defiance, showing that despite the challenges faced, queer individuals are resilient and deserving of happiness. Additionally, queer joy can serve as a reminder that LGBTQ+ individuals are more than their struggles. It can humanize the community in the eyes of those who seek to marginalize them, making it harder to dismiss their rights and needs. In these ways, queer joy can be a powerful force for change, transforming rage into positive action and solidarity. By asserting and reveling in their joy, queer individuals can reclaim their identities on their own terms, asserting that their existence is not solely defined by struggle or adversity. In the face of dehumanizing forces inherent in oppression, expressing joy serves as a potent affirmation of humanity. It showcases the full spectrum of emotions and experiences that constitute queer lives, reaffirming that

individuals are multifaceted beings deserving of recognition and respect beyond their marginalized identities.

Moreover, actively fostering joy within the queer community becomes an essential strategy for building resilience. Oppression takes a toll on mental health and well-being, and the deliberate pursuit of joy becomes a declaration of resilience. It demonstrates that the community can thrive despite external challenges, reclaiming agency over its narrative and refusing to be defined solely by the hardships it faces. Additionally, the celebration of joy fosters unity and connection within the queer community. Shared experiences of joy create supportive networks that serve as a source of strength and solidarity in the face of oppression. By coming together to celebrate joy, individuals build bonds that empower them to navigate challenges collectively, reinforcing the resilience of the community. In essence, making space for queer joy is a radical assertion of the humanity, resilience, and agency of the queer community, challenging oppressive systems and affirming the right to live, love, and thrive authentically.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the imperative to carve out spaces of queer joy cannot be overstated, recognizing that the creation of such spaces is an intentional and transformative act. This responsibility falls squarely on the shoulders of student affairs practitioners and leaders in higher education. The strategies outlined above serve as a blueprint for these professionals to actively cultivate inclusive environments for queer and trans students, acknowledging the unique challenges they face and providing the necessary support structures. To exist in a realm of queer joy is not merely a luxury; it is a fundamental right that demands deliberate action.

Student affairs practitioners play a pivotal role in dismantling barriers and fostering environments where LGBTQ+ individuals can express their identities authentically, free from discrimination and judgment. By cultivating inclusive spaces, providing ongoing training, and implementing affirming policies, these practitioners contribute to the creation of campuses where diversity is not only acknowledged but celebrated. Moreover, the strategies extend beyond immediate campus boundaries. Partnerships with local LGBTQ+ organizations and fostering allyship initiatives contribute to a broader network of support. Representation, visibility, and the integration of LGBTQ+ content into academic curricula further amplify the voices and experiences of queer and trans individuals. In the pursuit of creating affirming spaces, continuous feedback mechanisms, legal protections, and empowerment of student leaders are indispensable. By embracing these strategies, student affairs practitioners have the power to shape a transformative and inclusive campus culture—one that not only meets the immediate needs of queer and trans students but also sets a precedent for a more equitable and celebratory future in higher education. The commitment to fostering queer joy is not just an act of responsibility; it is a radical step towards a more inclusive and harmonious educational landscape.

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