

AZANIA_HOUSE INTERSECTIONALITY AS A CATALYST FOR BLACK IMAGINATION

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If we understand oppressive powers as those that not only police our actions and place glass ceilings on our holistic potential, then we must recognize them too as powers that suppress our imaginations. Perhaps this is the most significant action of oppressive power, as it substantially inhibits oppressed bodies from enacting resistances that lead to our material and psychological liberation. It is from here that I would like to propose *intersectionality* as a freed thinking form that not only humanizes oppressed bodies, but allows us to imagine humanity outside of stifling white, male, heteronormative structures.

The *approach* of an *intersectional approach* is an approach like any other. It describes the character, the personality of the approach, but it does not change *that which we are approaching*- the decolonization of the spaces we occupy, and in this case, of UCT institutional power structures. In fact, it makes this approach a collective journey that is receptive to, and inclusive of the specific pains and struggles caused by institutional oppressions.

THIS WHOLE BLACK WOMAN

Intersectionality is an approach that acknowledges the particular positions in which it finds its people- it meets them there, as they are. It tells us that oppression happens as a result of a poisonous hegemonic culture- the culture of whiteness, patriarchy and heteronormativity- but that there is no hegemonic experience that can encapsulate the

particular oppressions experienced by particular people. It is an approach that acknowledges that people experience oppression at the intersections of their identities, but even so, oppressed people need not compartmentalise and fragment their personhoods, deconstructing these aspects of their identities for the purpose of struggle. In fact, intersectionality tells us that this is impossible- we need to be decolonised as completed units; we cannot separately decolonise each aspect of our persons. So while intersectionality must acknowledge the process of saying 'I am a woman, and therefore I experience oppression', 'I am homosexual, and therefore I experience oppression', 'I am black, and therefore I experience oppression', etc, it wholly affirms the *entire identity* of the homosexual black woman *who's person is oppressed* by the space in which she finds herself.

Because of the kinds of oppressions we have experienced at UCT, Azania House stands ideologically as a space in which we refuse to perpetuate the oppressions of institutionalised patriarchy, racism and heteronormativity. These oppressions detract humanity in every instance that our characteristics depart from the straight white male 'center'. In the establishment of this space, we have called for an intersectional approach, a de-centering of our understanding of oppression, in order to be inclusive of all oppressed peoples. In this thinking, we create the possibility of a space that includes oppressed people as a collective, directly subverting the exclusionary tactics of institutions like UCT, who we have seen systematically oppress those who depart from the established hegemony. If we are to mimic these divisive strategies, we would only echo 'divide and conquer' tactics of colonialism that sought to prevent the recognition of humanity amongst diverse groups



of oppressed peoples. So whilst engaging in groups of people who can share similar experiences as a result of occupying similar positionalities is of course a liberatory act, true intersectionality catalyses an explosive decolonial power through humanising a mixed group of people at once, and arming them with multiple tools for struggle. There is power in collective pain, in collective rage, if only we might see it, recognize it, and acknowledge it within each other. Intersectionality collectivizes.

THE DERAILING INDIVIDUALISTS

The intersectional agenda of Azania house is in direct response to the history of patriarchy in black consciousness movements. The popular imagination of black consciousness resides in black heterosexual maleness. While Azania House cannot claim to be completely devoid of this particular expression of black consciousness, it is a space that continues to be self-reflexive, and aware that this kind of exclusionary phenomena can only be the result of an adherence to violent and ignorant colonial structures that we

are already subject to in institutional spaces. These colonial structures are dangerous because they offer a strategy of deflecting personal responsibility in contributing to the systemic oppression of others, and scarily, these structures play out within blackness(es) all the time. They allow the space for a collective struggle for some (read *straight black males*), while appealing to individualism to dismiss the weight of responsibility that comes with the acknowledgement of ones privileged positionality in the world. This is characterised by denying personal culpability in an instance of oppression- for example misogyny in a black conscious space- using individualistic relations to prove innocence. When the 'I' is included in an argument that seeks to excuse the violence of an individual holding more power over another within a given space, we must always be suspicious.

Because of liberal tactics, we are forced to deal with the derailing notion of this *individual*, and we do so by recognizing that no individual is free from holding certain power and/or disadvantage, given their positionality in the world. We are only individuals in order to recognise that we occupy a collective space, characterized by positionality, that includes both power in some instances, and disadvantage in others. We need to understand that in failing to engage in this self-reflection that seeks an understanding of the self in relation to power structures at large, we reinforce the systems that we attempt to decolonise.

INVISIBLE, INTERSECTIONAL, IN-DIVISIBLE

The notion of *being invisible* is one that we, as oppressed people, can all relate to. It is this relationship of understanding the sensation of being unseen, the relationship that involves us finding and *seeing each other in the dark*- it is this relationship that matters.

Wandering through the dark passages of the new Azania House during load-shedding hours is hardly a departure from the way I feel when the space is well lit. Here, we have let go of the colonial gaze and we have let go of the violence that tells black people to 'other' one another; in a sense, we have turned off the lights and are hustling to re-invent electricity. Despite the constant threat of being victimized by the institution, which we seek to decolonise, this darkness has provided a new kind of safety for a diverse group of some of the best people I have ever met. Intersectionality gives us a key into finding each other in this darkness, and feeling each other out without having to carry with us the burden of inhumanity, which comes with the 'perspective' offered by colonial lighting. When we discover ourselves in this dark, invisible, mysterious space, I cannot begin to imagine the inventive languages and visualities we will use in our struggle towards re-defining black humanity in the larger South African space.