

"YES WE CAN," "YES WE DID," BUT NO WE HAVEN'T: MARKING A MOMENT WHILE REMEMBERING REALITY

Rachel Alicia Griffin, Ph.D., Southern Illinois University at Carbondale

This narrative, written as a letter to those engaged in and those considering social justice as embodied activism, seeks to unite the author's yearnings for progress with reflections on lessons learned thus far on her own journey toward social consciousness. Although some may critique this style of writing as too informal or too immediate, the hope is that the use of the author's personal/academic voice (Ono, 1997) will create a space in which far more people are able to locate, hear, contemplate, challenge, and/or identify with her perspectives as an academic scholar whose work is always personal and political. This letter describes how she has come to understand voice as crucial in the struggle against oppression. The ways in which she has come to terms with privilege and marginalization at the intersections of identities is also explored. Lastly, she endeavors to create a critically self-reflexive space in which she and others can be held accountable for the ways we reproduce and affirm systems of privilege while simultaneously addressing how we might become more progressive.

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To All Who May Listen,

I have felt this letter tugging at the corners of my mind for some time now . There have been times when the cravings to write this letter have been so strong that I have found myself scribbling relentlessly on whatever I could find. This letter has been birthed in all of the moments that I have smiled, cried, and wanted to scream until the ears and hearts of everyone around me pressed pause on the racing pace of life to stop and simply listen. The first time I considered writing this letter to you was while reading bell hook's (1989) thoughts on the power of "talking back." I found myself on her pages when she told me that:

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of "talking back," that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject—the liberated voice. (p.9)

In reading her words over and over again, I came to realize that I was afraid of my own liberated voice. I was afraid not only that sensible words wouldn't flow if I beckoned but also of the secrets that my lips would spill if my mouth honestly answered my heart's request to speak. I was afraid of placing vulnerability center stage by choice in a world that already gazes upon me with contempt. Reflecting on the significance of learning how to talk back, Ono (1997) reminds me "...that when we are silent too often we start to lose our voices, our ability to speak out in defiance of mistreatment, of degradation, of humiliation, and of pain inflicted on our and others' bodies" (p.115). Pondering the recovery and loss of my liberated voice, I feel as though I am caught in the crossfire between the desire to be heard and the alleged safety of silence. Having decided to write to you it seems as though Audre Lorde's (1984) words have finally settled into my soul:

We can sit in our corners mute forever while our sisters and our selves are wasted, while our children are distorted and destroyed, while our earth is poisoned; we can sit in our safe corners mute as bottles, and we will still be no less afraid. (p.43)

Allowing her words to sink in, I have come to understand that she is excruciatingly accurate in a way that I wasn't willing to know until now. Hence living within my brown, female body, free from onerous scrutiny, fictitious accolades, and the cruel imposition of invisibility isn't a possibility and whether I voice my discontent with the domineering workings of the world or not, I will be afraid. I have also come to understand that to position speaking as a choice is in and of itself a privilege since many must speak just to survive (hooks, 1989) and still many have no space at all to give voice to their realities.

Seeking a way to grapple with and move through my fears, I discovered that others had written letters to "talk back" (hooks, 1989), speak truth to power (Scott, 1990), enlighten, arouse, implicate, share, and resist. Inspired by the creative works of Baldwin (1963), Ono (1997), and Calafell (2007), I have decided to move forward and write a letter to you relying on performative writing as a relational and embodied style of prose that is both expressive and liberating (Madison, 2005). Through this letter, I want to show you how performative writing offers a means for us to bear witness to our shared humanity. In doing so, I add my voice to the chorus of those who position performative writing as a method to avoid the homogenization of human experience and to insist upon the significance of rich personal narratives juxtaposed against the master narrative (Corey, 1998; Madison, 2005; Pelias, 2005). Yet, I am not only writing you a letter; if you read closely you will hear that I am sending you an invitation. Not an invitation that reads "agreement only" or "no conflict allowed," but rather an invitation into the messy complexity of finding a way to peacefully coexist across our differences. I welcome you into my subjective space which as you lift my words off the page will become our subjective space; a personal and yet public space for emotional engagement and deep reflection on possibility.

Like you, I imagine, I have found myself frustrated, saddened, and angered on my journey toward social consciousness. I have felt overwhelmed beyond words as I have learned to see the ways that my privilege

functions to harm and imprison others on the margins of society. This journey has required reckoning with the ways my brown, female body carries the traces of history and bears the marks of indifference since as a woman of color I live in a society that did not intend and was not organized for people like me to live peacefully. Yet to do this work honestly I have also been required to reckon with the ways my privileged identities bear down on the efforts of others to free themselves from the very margins that I strive to surpass. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1995) offers intersectionality as a conceptual means to understand how people live at the intersections where race, nationality, age, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability, religion, and region collide. According to Crenshaw (1995), to understand how power and privilege operate, there is a "need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed" (p.334). For me this means that I am a biracial (African American and Caucasian), heterosexual, able-bodied, U.S. American woman who doesn't identify with organized religion, who grew up in the Midwest in the lower-working class, but has since by way of a Ph.D. become part of the middle class. At the intersections this is who I am, juxtaposed within the systemic complexity of what Patricia Hill Collins (2000) calls the matrix of domination which refers to the social hierarchies of power in "which intersecting oppressions originate, develop, and are contained" (Collins, 2000, p.228).

Housed within the matrix, I have had to learn (and continue to learn) to position my privileged identities as being of equal importance to my marginalized identities, despite the hegemonic encouragement to maintain the invisibility of privilege. More specifically, I have come to understand that all of the ways the world tells me "yes" are just as important to my journey in life as the ways that the world tells me "no." In this vein, Audre Lorde (1983) comes to mind with her strong declaration that "There is no hierarchy of oppressions" (p.9). Extending Lorde's (1983) powerful insight, Beverly Tatum (2000) offers, "The thread and threat of violence runs through all of the isms. There is a need to

acknowledge each other's pain even as we attend to our own" (p.13). Working from their insights, I draw a heightened sense of shame. Hence, as a woman of color I have been taught to position racism and sexism as more important than for example, heterosexism and ableism—as if my pain is somehow greater than the pain of others. Moving toward accountability and a critical turning point in my own consciousness, I have come to believe that oppression at the intersections is not about hurting more or less, but rather it is about hurting differently. From this vantage point, there is no need to delve into what Kendall (2006) calls the "Pain Olympics" (p.91) or what I would more bluntly describe as a social justice equivalent to a patriarchal pissing contest. In essence, I believe that painful lived experiences such as poverty, hate crime, and sexual assault hurt deeply across any identities that one holds. Using myself as a survivor of sexual assault as an example, I do not believe that I hurt more than a heterosexual White female survivor or less than a Latina lesbian survivor. Rather we all hurt differently and although those differences are very significant, our pain is equally tragic. Moving away from the imposed hierarchy of oppressions, which ironically mimics the dominant systems social justice aims to dismantle, has been difficult and yet, I remain committed to the undoing of hierarchies that prioritize whose pain is more worthy of public address. Should many myself and you included, continually deconstruct hierarchies, I believe that our combined forces will astonish those who have a vested interest in swallowing our efforts whole. However, should we continue to work against each other (for example, heterosexual woman ousting lesbians; U.S. Americans of color discriminating against immigrants; gay White men dismissing the racialized experiences of gay men of color, etc.), then our valuable time and energy will be spent in a struggle among marginalized groups rather than our efforts being dispensed against the larger systems that function to keep us all on the margins of power.

I want to share the moment with you when the importance of this hard lesson became clearer to me. I was standing among the masses of people on the Washington Mall when

a biracial Black man, preceded only by White men, became the President of the United States of America. Together, we watched him be sworn in to "preserve, protect, and defend" the U.S. Constitution which at its inception wasn't written to secure the rights and liberties of people who look like him. He stood on a balcony of a building that was built by slaves, and his strong presence commanded respect. A command that we know throughout most of U.S. American history would have gotten him killed. Together, we listened as Barack Obama addressed the world for the first time as President. He spoke of hope, crisis, humility, determination, strength, and endurance. As he spoke, some appeared mesmerized while others cheered; some smiled while others seemed to be praying with their eyes squeezed tightly shut and their palms open to the sky, and some simply nodded with tears flowing down their cheeks. Taking in the crowd around me, I was touched deeply by the realization that people had worked together across their differences to earn this arguably unimaginable and yet very real moment. My partner and I were surrounded by folks of various skin tones; there were people with canes, crutches, and wheelchairs; children and adults of all ages; and when I closed my eyes to allow my ears a chance to just listen, I could hear more languages being spoken than I could count. Even more amazing is that despite the millions of people who descended on the capitol and became of pool of identity, ideological, and material differences—there was a tangible force of positive energy in the air. We seemed to be listening as our new President called for community, dialogue, and service in the hopes of creating a more equitable world. Since January, I have been struck by the prospect that the election of Barack Obama marks the beginning of a new era for social justice. However, for him to fulfill his potential as President, each of us in our own families, neighborhoods, and communities will need to make a diligent effort to bond through, rather than in spite of, our differences for more than an inaugural moment. And our bonds will need to be nourished with time, commitment, and earned trust. There is part of me that wants to approach you with patient encouragement and

yet the words of Dr. Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. (1964) settle heavily on my mind. "It would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment." The word "fatal" dances back and forth between my ears telling me that the time for patience has long passed. I need you and you need me, now. Together, we need to move forward in a fierce critique of the ways that seemingly boundless apathy, cruel disregard, dangerous contempt swim across our shared oceans.

Although some may perceive my views as too idealistic or even radical, I must say that I truly believe that we have an opportunity before us; a chance to change the tides of indifference toward oppression and suffering. Not to be overly naïve, I understand that President Obama is a new leader immersed within traditional, obsolete, and detrimental systems of domination. Nevertheless, I remain adamant that the oppressive realities endured by most of the population in our world today do not reflect the best of what we can do as a people. Oftentimes, I find myself in an adult toddler tantrum cynically asserting that "this" (meaning the world as it is) can't possibly be the best we can do. In contradiction to my sarcastic optimism, Robert Jensen (2009) reminded me on a rainy and thus already gloomy night that we live in a world that is "profoundly unjust and fundamentally unsustainable." From his view, rooted in the type of harsh love that I have grudgingly learned to treasure on my quest for social consciousness, the title of my essay should read: "'Yes We Can,' 'Yes We Did,' but No We Can't." Oddly, in many ways I agree with his grave assessment of the realities of domination, consumerism, and the damage that has already been done to the earth that sustains us. However, I am not yet in a space where I am willing to relinquish possibility despite our catastrophic conditions. My heart won't allow me to deeply hear that perhaps we have just gone too far. Inside of myself, I feel the need to speak to you—to feel you—to implicate us. In this vein I am going to continue to write to you, rooted in a politic of wistful hope that we can and we will do better even if we are drastically limited given what cannot be undone. Between you and me, I believe that if

we don't do better then we will die within ourselves long before the earth swallows us up in the cycle of life and death. As I move forward with this letter, I am reminded by Pritchett (2009) to "Write as if you are dying—because, of course, you are" (p.52).

Together, I believe that we can build communities large and small that are rooted in respect, support, and consciousness. Searching desperately for a reason that will convince you, perhaps our common ground in moving toward community is the shared need for more compassion. I have yet to meet a person who can't use more compassion in their life. Likewise, speaking to the spaces where interests converge, if history has taught us anything, it has taught us that our lives are intertwined across our differences whether we want them to be or not. Looking at the harsh realities of poverty, imprisonment, healthcare, education, consumption, and war (just to name a few) that far too many people know intimately, we can see what happens when compassion and humility are overcome by hate, greed, and apathy within our communities and beyond. Our choices to generate change and ask others to do the same will be influenced by our access to resources. For some of us, a choice in favor of community might mean making an effort to genuinely listen to folks who identify with marginalized identity groups and bear the brunt of decisions that are made in the best interest of a privileged few. Others may ask a family in need to dinner without the expectation of a favor owed or ask to share a lawnmower instead of buying a new one when the old one breaks down. (I never have understood why every house on any given block requires its own lawnmower, what is the shame or discontent in sharing?) Some may realign budgets to help alleviate the pain of those trapped in exhausting cycles of existence just to cling to the brink of comfort where comfort is rarely found. Still others will answer Lorde's (1984) call for "the transformation of silence into language and action" (p.42) mirrored by Jensen's (2009) call to utilize privilege to say the things that others might be punished for saying which necessitates taking a public stance against the forces of oppression that labor to keep people on the margins of

society starving for respect, dignity, and opportunity. Embracing practicality, I understand that change is cumbersome and that those with access to abundant privilege have vested interests in stifling progress. I must also admit that I am discouraged by the marked absorption of dominating practices by members of marginalized communities as well, myself included of course. bell hooks (2000a; 2004) and Wendell Berry (1992; 2000) call out patriarchy, sexism, racism, indulgent consumption, and technological obsession to name a few and I might add an all too common sense of complicity with and indifference toward human suffering as well. At times I feel as though I am angrier at myself and others who bear the weight of oppression for perpetuating the isms since we are intimately familiar with the inhumane costs. Often lost in anger, frustration, and sense of powerlessness; I find myself located within a deep well of pessimism simultaneously wishing to draw you in and keep you out.

Despite the pessimism that seems permanently lodged in my gut, after attending the inauguration I returned home more convinced than ever before of the precious chance that our change in leadership has brought to our horizons. Unlike years past, there is a possibility that progressive ideologies might flow from the top down or at least not be instantaneously dismissed in theory and practice. In my heart of hearts, I am convinced that our new administration has something to offer those of us who seek progressive change. Likewise, I am convinced that despite our present circumstances that we can devise new ways of everyday being. At the extreme risk of being nauseatingly cliché, "Yes We Can" do better as a people to reach out across our differences and live our lives in ways that do not reproduce systems of domination bolstered by false promises of meritocracy freedom, and equality. Together, we can work harder individually and collectively in the places and spaces we move in to communicate our shared interest in emotional, psychological, and physical survival. We can work to extend a hand that indicates, regardless of agreement, the understanding that someone's beliefs, values, and experiences are equally as

important to them as our own are to us. I can invite you and you can invite me. I can listen to you and you can listen to me. I can disagree with you and you can disagree with me. I believe that all of this can be done without the contemporary staples of objectification, exploitation, and hate. Will this humanizing approach always work—doubtful in an era of extreme warfare, biological terrorism, and nuclear threats—yet, *we can do better*. In the embrace of optimism, I think it would be unwise to expect perfection in an imperfect world. However, looking outward through cynical lenses, I feel affirmed in telling you once again that "this" (meaning the world as it is) cannot possibly be the best we can do.

Returning to my memories of D.C., I arrived home with a replenished understanding of my social responsibility to listen, to learn, and to educate in my day-to-day life. I face these responsibilities feeling inundated by a sense of powerlessness since exclusion based on beliefs, values, stereotypes, assumptions, norms, and the exploitive desire to selfishly profit is deeply rooted in our world. It seems that I have been "thrown into a story that pre-exists and post-exists me. A story and a history that is already unfolding and being told" (Lewis, 2006, p.832). Amidst the distaste for powerlessness that now coats my typing tongue, I feel a strong sense of limited agency as a brown woman in higher education. In a stark moment of clarity at the struggle that remains, Becky Thompson's (2009) brilliantly plain assertion that "The academy is not a healing place" comes to mind. There are not many things in life that I am certain of, and yet, I am certain that she is right. I am also certain that those who have dedicated their energy, time, resources, risked their family's lives, and surrendered their own have not done so for us to embrace blissful ignorance or ignorant praxis. As I speak to you, I find myself wondering how to ensure that I, you, we remember that people need us to uproot colonial histories, tell offensive secrets, and confront oppressive practices that dominant society loves to tuck into dark corners and nooks and crannies. On my quest to avoid the dark spaces of denial that seductively barter tranquility and ease for ignorance and complicity like Calafell

(2007), "I am scared to slip into these spaces of denial" (p.428). Wondering out loud to you, I must ask, how do we remember the significance of our privilege as practitioners, faculty, administrators, and students? How do we remember to be accountable and responsible toward those who have been forgotten? How do we remember that our complicity, albeit intentional or unintentional, with the tricky arts of domination (Scott, 1990) sustains subjugation? Selfishly, I return to the academy and my personal and always political concerns about how I can effectively engage activism, teach, and conduct research in a way that respects and cares for the souls of my students (hooks, 1994) and those who share their lives with me. I have felt the power housed within the combined knowledges and strengths of the lettered and unlettered (Collins, 2000) and Collins (2000) prompts me to defy the pretentious nature of the academy by seeking guidance and conversation from those who are often forgotten. Propelling me further, hooks (2000b) calls for us to move our work beyond the ivory tower. She calls for academic scholars to recognize that accessibility does not sacrifice complexity but rather can create more spaces to capitalize on the powerful contributions of research. Surrounded by the murky waters of uncertainty in terms of how to navigate and fulfill their impassioned appeals to my conscious, I resolve to aspire, as I imagine many of us in the movement for social justice do, to be among the "cultural workers" eloquently described by Cornel West (1990) as:

...intellectual and political freedom fighters with partisan passion, international perspectives, and, thank God, a sense of humor to combat the ever-present absurdity that forever threatens our democratic and libertarian projects and dampens the fire that fuels our will to struggle. (p.519)

For me, emphasis on the word *aspire*. Engulfed by a wistful hope that we can in fact do better, I want to share Wendell Berry with you; he offers us accounting as a literal and

figurative means to render the costs of blatant disregard visible. He asks that we subtract our losses from our gains (Berry, 2000). In the context of domination, the outcome of this equation reflects only one possible answer: change. We must change to do better and doing so will require dedication, commitment, sacrifice, and discomfort. We will have to listen and pay attention even when we don't agree, can't grasp understanding, and furiously disagree. We will have to reckon with the ways we have hurt at the intersections and bear witness to those who have cried out when we have hurt them. We will have to learn to live, see, speak, and behave differently. When I think about our dire need for change, a simple phrase by critical race theory scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (2002) comes to mind, she says, "Necessity is the mother of all invention" (p.13).

In my lifetime, I cannot think of a conscious moment when the necessity for a creative means to move forward toward new realities has been greater. Returning to my musings flooded by the momentum of the inauguration, we have a President, one of few among many, who openly acknowledges and identifies with the costs of oppression. And although it is quite tempting to get lost in sheer amazement that the President of the wealthiest nation in the history of the world bears personal and professional witness to the cruelties of oppression, my amazement is marred by reality. Yes, Obama is a biracial Black man who was freely elected the President of the United States and yes that is astonishing; many believed they would never see the day in their lifetime. I too stood on the Washington Mall shaking my head from left to right in discombobulated disbelief with tears streaming down my freezing cold cheeks. However, stemming from the depths of my soul, I am anxious and terrified. I fear that we are too quick to set history aside. I fear that we are too quick to lose sight of the dismal realities that most people continue to endure. I fear that "business as usual" will continue with marginalized communities being trampled on, pushed out, and forgotten by folks with power and each other. I fear that across multiple identity groups that we do not understand that

he is *1 man* with *1 administration* haunted by the footprints of a nation that has rejected most and accepted only an elite few . I fear that only so much can be done in *4 years*. I am anxious and terrified and yet met with a sense of urgency to believe that we can all do our part to get somewhere that is closer to something better by bringing critical consciousness to the forefront, unmasking the false appeals of domination, and doing more with our privilege. In writing to you, I think I discovered the most profound sentiment that I have to offer, which certainly isn't all that profound:

We have come far , but we must go further.

And we must be mindful of how we celebrate steps taken in the direction of progressive social transformation. In 1963 James Baldwin wrote to his nephew , "You know, and I know , that the country is celebrating one hundred years of freedom one hundred years to soon" (p. 22). Delgado (2006) heightens Baldwin's (1963) caution when he identifies celebration as "...the first step to complacency" (p. 56); he reminds us how often celebration has deterred continued struggle by masking the ominous underbelly of the status quo that has yet to be sufficiently exposed. To be clear, I believe in celebrating the individual and collective hard work, strengths, and triumphs of the social justice movements happening around the globe. I want to join hands and raise them above our heads while tears of joy tumble down our cheeks too quick and carefree for Kleenex to catch. However, I need to ask for us to cling to the realities of the oppressed, even those we don't understand or can't imagine, when the waves of amazement, astonishment, and delight crash at the shores of our efforts as they did when the first man of color was elected President of the United States. We must celebrate and remember accountability, responsibility, and the need for actual change in the everyday lives of those who hurt deeply in ways that are too terrifying to envision. To be overcome by our victories, large and small, is to risk critical consciousness which is not by any means expendable. For myself, and I imagine you as well, this will mean navigating

the tension between the highs of triumph and the lows of exhaustion, tempering our progressive egos with constant reality checks, and addressing the omnipresent tension between our privileged and marginalized identities. Through the embrace of narrative and the beauty of the written word, I have arrived to the momentary end of my letter to you. From a space of hopeful humility, I ask that you remember my invitation.

I want you to see me and I want you to write back so that I can see you.

I want you to feel me and I want you to write back so that I can feel you.

I want you to shout, shriek, yell, and cry, never to be silenced while submerged in the pride and pain of being human, until I press the pause button on the racing pace of life to stop and simply listen to you—so that I can know you and you can know me.

In mindful celebration,

[AUTHOR]

P.S. Please bear in mind that since you had the time, energy, ability, and access to scholarly publications that permitted you to read this letter that you embody a position of privilege and as such I would argue have the social responsibility to move into critical dialogue with what you enjoyed and detested.

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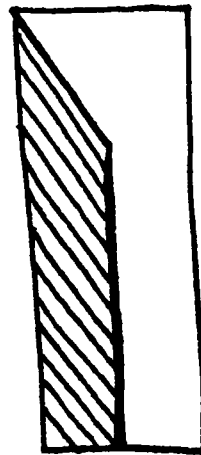
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Rachel Alicia Griffin (Ph.D. from the University of Denver in Human Communication Studies, M.A. in Communication and B.S. in Communication and Sociology from Central Michigan University) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Speech Communication at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. Her research interests span critical race theory , performance, Black masculinity , Black Feminist Thought, and gendered violence. All of her current research projects speak strongly to notions of power, privilege, and voice, which she has presented at national conferences, keynote addresses, social justice events, and diversity training sessions. Comments regarding this article can be sent to: rachelag@siu.edu



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