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Love Letters for Liberatory Futures

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Abstract: This collection of letters serves to explore the narratives of a collective of women of color in academia by examining individual, collective, spiritual, and institutional strategies for surviving and transforming our institutional spaces and the ways that White Supremacy has shaped our journeys. Multiple perspectives are viewed, and we have written to our children, our future social work students, our future selves, our BIPOC faculty siblings, and our feared enemies to envision and embody more liberatory futures.

Keywords: liberation, academia, BIPOC faculty, institutional racism, White Supremacy

Introduction

As a collective of women of color faculty in a predominantly White institution, we appreciate the way that this publication has continued to make space for BIPOC narratives and to center issues of structural racism in our field. As we read this most recent call, we had a range of reactions to thinking about the ongoing forces of White Supremacy in social work as well as the ways that our bodies, voices, and labor are continually tapped to do the work of anti-racism in the institutions we inhabit. We found ourselves exhausted by the ways we repeatedly share our narratives of oppression and are expected to do so in various forums as BIPOC faculty and social workers. However, we did resonate with the aims and scope of this call as we all have lived experiences of racism that are important to share, and have found individual, collective, spiritual, and institutional strategies for surviving and transforming these conditions.

As a group of scholars, we occupy many different identities and intersections of experience. We are Black, Asian/Asian American, Latinx, Multiracial, queer, first generation, parents, daughters, tenured, pre-tenure, and come from diverse geographies and class backgrounds. We have had varied pathways to academia and yet are connected by threads of shared experience, context, and congruent values and commitments. We sit in different programs and points along our tenure track careers in a school of social work in the Pacific Northwest, in a city where all but two of us moved for our academic positions. Motivated initially by the pandemic, we sought each other out to intentionally build community and collective care. When we learned of the call for presenters on dismantling White supremacy for a series of symposia being held by the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work in 2020, we began to meet regularly to discuss our professional experiences in the school and think about our connections to each other and the academy. What emerged was a collective support group, a conference presentation, and theorizing about what it has meant for us, as women of color, to be in this field in academia during 2020–2021: COVID-19, racial uprising, academic precarity, and a time of great social need.

For this piece, we collectively came to the format of letter-writing and creative expression as a way to present our reflections on the experiences, strategies, dreams, reminders, and aspirations

we have for ourselves, our students, our field, and our future colleagues. As you read our pieces, we invite you to listen for the double-storied experiences of institutional oppression and our strategies of resistance therein. For us this has been both a form of trauma healing and narrative practice (Mitchell, 2005; White, 2004; Yuen, 2007). Our work engages in collective narrative practice as we have sought to connect our individual stories with a collective group and context for change (Denborough, 2008; Denborough et al., 2006). We have contributed to each other through the sharing of wisdom and continued commitment to being in community together. This has been a strategy of persistence. We work from the belief and come from numerous cultural traditions in which storytelling is central to healing and protecting our joy. We know that pain can be avoided, disrupted, interrupted, and healed through this collective narrative practice and wisdom sharing across time and space.

We are using the letter writing format to preserve our individual voices, and to mark our various places along the tenure and post-tenure process. In our letters, we drew upon ancestral knowledges, our own experiences, and our shared meaning-making to write directly to different people and groups. We see this as a disruption to traditional, dominant culture styles of academic writing and as theorizing in its own right. As such, our narratives here are personal and our approach is political as we ground our writing in our lived experiences. Further, as many of us have experiences of transnational families and are living in diaspora, the significance of letter-writing as a form of communication across distance felt resonant.

In this piece, we write to our children, our future social work students, our former selves, our BIPOC faculty siblings, and our feared enemies in order to envision and embody more liberatory futures. Each letter or “entry” is written by a different author and yet we see our voices as deeply interconnected and co-constituted. The first letter is written to future social workers with the expectation that this particular moment of social unrest be remembered and the liberatory potential within it realized in the future. The second letter is from the perspective of an early tenure track faculty and reflects on the sacrifices required to enter this profession. The third letter is from a faculty member further along the tenure process calling for future scholars to hold tightly to their purpose for working within academia and the pursuit of joy. The fourth letter, from a tenured mother to her daughter, recognizes that our children are with us on this journey and may one day become our colleagues. The fifth letter is from the perspective of a post tenure scholar on what comes next. We close with a poem that is both a prayer and a ceremonial offering of resistance.

Dear future social worker,

4/20/21, 3:05pm PDT

We are writing this letter on the day that George Floyd’s death was ruled murder, if you consider a guilty verdict vindication. It is our hope that you have learned about the movements that ignited in 2020 during multiple pandemics, one being racism, in your social work history or macro practice courses. We were initially taken aback by the inundation of emails following the

verdict on April 20, 2021. A flurry of well-crafted messages, within minutes following the announcement. We pondered whether the messages were pre-generated. They seemed so scripted. These emails were chock-full of words and phrases such as racial trauma... it's been an extraordinarily difficult year for Black people... this does not mark an end to injustice... and there is still much work to be done. In the year since the uprising in America, many continue to question: What has changed? Black and Brown people are tired of the perpetual cycle of White supremacy and racism. Is this truly a turning point or false hope? It is certainly not a time to celebrate. The value of life is justice. We will celebrate when it is no longer necessary to protest. For many of us who occupy Black and Brown bodies, these emails and messages simply do not resonate.

It is our sincere hope that by the time you are reading this letter that a massive shift has occurred as a result of our unwavering determination for true justice and liberation. As social work educators, it is our hope that the years that we have dedicated to battling monsters in the institution, many who changed faces, titles, and positions, have been eradicated. We hope that social work practice embraces paradigms of critical consciousness and liberatory practices—not only embrace, but that they become standard frameworks used in all courses. It is also quite possible that by the time you're reading this, there is an expansion of these paradigms, which would be a success. Social issues may continue to plague society, but we hope that all of the talk about anti-racism did not become a fading trend or the politically correct phrase to embrace in 2020.

We hope there was finally a recognition that people of color are exhausted. The endless conversations about racism and what to do about it are not why many faculty of color committed to being a part of an antiquated system. We were motivated by the possibilities we could create. We did not see disrupting racism as our sole role or responsibility. We did not occupy spaces within the academy and within social work programs to teach others how to dismantle a system that we did not create, yet were significantly impacted by. During 2020, social work as a profession had to critically examine its underpinnings. It was a profession that distinguished itself by its embrace of social justice, yet staunchly defended racism inherent within its curriculum, values, and principles of the profession.

We hope all of the work that was done will banish the ghosts of racism from haunting you. May you know that although we were tired in our souls, we did this for you, just like our ancestors did it for us. We never got sidetracked by the illusion, hype, false promises, and lip service. We allowed those who were performative or prescriptive to fade into the background as time went on. We confided in those who mirrored our experiences, proved dedicated to the work through action and sincerity, and developed our own strategies to thrive. We simply knew that we could not rely on a system that was never intended to support us. In this respect, we were innovators, forging a less cumbersome path and teaching others how to do the same. We hope you are reaping the benefits of our labor and never forget our history and legacy. We held this vision for you and developed a blueprint for you. It is our sincere hope that you are no longer battling the adverse impacts of racism. It is also our sincere hope that if this is the case, that the profession of social work learned valuable lessons from the year 2020, took those lessons to heart, implemented significant structural changes, and is now in alignment with combating and not

contributing to racism. We will be watching, inspiring, and encouraging you. It will also be your responsibility to do the same for generations to come.

Sincerely,

Your Ancestors

—

Dear beautiful, intersectional, first year, faculty of color,

You have fought so hard to get here and sacrificed more than seems fair or just. You have undergone the most amazing and brutal transformation on your journey. Please, try not to forget why you started out on this long road to begin with. Your love for your community, the foundation for your passion and drive is intimately tied to your why, and easily misplaced. You will need to remind yourself of your why over and over again like an anchor when you are adrift in the sea of the academy. This system was not built with supporting and sustaining you in mind, and its core is rotten with White supremacy.

You will experience cognitive dissonance about why you're doing this work. The outrageous demands, driven by patriarchy and heteronormativity, where people of color are drawn into the fold, a place where our simple presence, point of view, or critique is feared. The traumatic memories of generations of our ancestors attempts to claim space and break into a system that was not made by us, or for us, has left us rubbed raw. A system embedded and enmeshed with a White savior complex, built on a foundation of White supremacy, because for so long it was the only way.

You will feel like a butterfly, caught in the institution's net. Frantically beating your wings, trying to be free again. With only memories of freedom, trapped in a glass jar, the academy waits for your fight to go out. The monsters will stare in at you, waiting for the light in your eyes to dim. They will want to put you on proud display, one for their collection. Silenced. Assimilated.

The academy can be a lonely place. Isolating in a way that you could have never been prepared for. The funnel up for us, as people of color, contributes to the loneliness. The higher you reach, the greater your ambitions, the smaller your community. The more suffocating it gets. The more colonized your mind and soul are.

This system is going to try and take everything that is left of you if you let it. It will demand that you both solve its problems and stand in solidarity with its weaknesses.

Never, for a single moment, forget that you owe it nothing. You have already sacrificed so much, do not sacrifice yourself at the feet of the institution. Your body, blood, and bones are not for them. Your ancestors and histories are not for them. "We were never meant to survive"

(Lorde, 2000, p. 255–256), but look at us. While still few, there are many of us who are surviving and fighting for more liberatory futures.

Remember, no matter how it feels, you are not alone. Find your people, trust them, claim your space. They will sustain you. We will sustain you.

Sincerely,

Those who've walked before you

—

Insecure attachment,

Welcome to this side of higher education. I am so proud of you. You did it. You figured out how to get your degrees. You did something that few in your family have done. You are part of a very small number of Black academics in this country. There are some things you should know about the life you've chosen.

Firstly, and most importantly, the work you do is important. You are important to the people you teach, to the students you mentor, to the communities you research with, to the direction of this institution. You can choose when and how you want to use your voice. You can choose. Remember that in all of this you have a measure of choice. You will need to look for it. You have more choice than staying or going. Though you will toy with the idea of going as often as you work to stay. That is the insecurity of your attachment to this institution, and its attachment to you.

Hold on to why you've come here. You came here to work for racial and gender justice for your community. You saw something in the tools and mechanisms offered in this place, this School of Social Work, that could help you develop more of the muscles to support your people. Seeking has brought you here. Continue to seek. There is generation and growth in the seeking. Do not allow the constrictions of this place to tell you not to seek. Academia is a place of creativity coupled with rigidity. It is a place that rewards innovation and punishes those who push for it. As you think about working with your community, listen to what they want. As you sit in your institution ask yourself, what can I take from here that will help my people; that will help Black lives survive and thrive through birth; that will support our children to make it past one; that will love Black families in all of our formations; that will support all bodies to live and love in freedom. In this place may you have moments that move our community towards liberation. I ask you to remember that. That is what you seek.

This will feel urgent. It is and has gripped this country since its inception. The reality of oppression cannot, must not, please do not allow it to, negate your experiences of joy. It is in joy, beauty, tenderness, connection that you will find what sustains. The quest for dancing is as important as the work for change. You must know a measure of joy; it is oil in the engine of your soul.

In terms of your own growth, what do you want? This institution will take every ounce of you. There will be sacrifice for you. But do you feel that coming here is generative and good? Separate from all of the collective pressures and your care for the collective. If you don't have grounding in yourself this is not sustainable. But also, you don't have to do this indefinitely. This may be a lifetime track for you, or it may just be a chapter moving you towards something else.

My aspirations for you:

Well, I wish I could be like a bird in the sky.
How sweet it would be if I found I could fly.
Oh, I'd soar to the sun and look down at the sea
And then I'd sing 'cause I'd know, yeah
Then I'd sing 'cause I'd know, yeah
Then I'd sing 'cause I'd know
I'd know how it feels.
I'd know how it feels to be free, yeah, yeah (Simone, 1967)

May you be joyful,
May you be happy,
May you be free.

– with you in sequins

—

Dear 13-year-old daughter,

It's 2021 Mother's Day. I love you, both you and brother! Wow! You are growing so nicely as you enter adolescence. Oh, how you have become articulate and sure of yourself. I didn't know being a PhD mama of color would take me here to where you are, so much stronger than I was at your age in navigating a world that can make us feel less than and unworthy. I was a shy girl, trusting that the monsters rarely existed, only to face them throughout life, even as I became a mom.

When I was thirteen, we had to leave Molokai, Mommy's home island, because Grandma and Grandpa's employer, Del Monte pineapple company, closed down. Grandma and Papa decided to transfer to the same types of jobs on Oahu. Those were the jobs they knew. The thought of looking for a different type of job stressed them out. It was at this time in Mommy's life I first began to see some essence of unfairness in the world.

When Grandma S was thirteen, she was going to school and living with her aunt. She soon would be married seven years later to Papa. Grandma had some college experience, but did not finish. When she married Papa and came to America, she was discouraged by Papa to enroll into college. Papa emphasized that he needed her to work to help build their future.

When your Great Grandma H was thirteen, she was not in school. In fact, what we know, she had a first-grade education. Despite that, she was a very vocal person and wise in her own right.

Fast forward now, you should know that you were just 2.5 years old when Mom started this tenure track position. I was the first Filipino American professor to be hired at the School of Social Work. It was my first full time gig in higher education! Your dad was supportive of me earning my doctorate and being in this career trajectory. Mom has seen many couples and families go through hardships and challenges in this path. I was scared, anxious, and often felt insecure being a professor while raising very young children like you. I felt isolated, because I didn't have Grandma S or Papa nearby to provide help. Your dad and I had to do our co-parenting duties on our own.

Because Mom taught many social justice related courses in undergraduate programs, you became aware of the disparities and inequities that existed in the community at a young age. There were times when your dad indicated that there were some discussions that needed to be age appropriate. I guess it did not help that I dragged you everywhere—conferences, community-based work, and events.

Through the years, I am seeing some of the impact that all this exposure has on you. You are so aware of oppressive forces and their dynamics. Now with multiple pandemics, you have experienced the world go through drastic changes. Yep, Mommy has seen your social media posts on BLM, Anti-Asian hate, LGBTQI rights, immigrant and refugee issues, and climate change. The best part of it all, is that you have a big, empathetic heart! And, you are thinking like a scientist, lol ... like Mom! I also love how you remind me time and time again to practice self-care and rest. This helps me fight the monsters from within and out there. During the pandemic, I love learning things with you like baking, and doing more arts and crafts. I love spending more time watching you and brother grow, as before the pandemic, I was always tending to work (e.g., teaching, student meetings, etc.).

I just want you to know that I love the person you are becoming! Please keep moving forward. Your generation is more equipped to address racial inequities and global capitalism. When this pandemic becomes more manageable, there will be many things that I hope we keep as a family, as you blossom. In the meantime, please know that you come from a lineage of strong and beautiful women. Know your worth.

Love,
Mommy A

—

Dear pre tenure WOC professor in a White school of social work,

I hope you are taking care of yourself and yours during these multiple pandemics. It has been such a challenging time for many of us. I am with you in all that you are experiencing! This year and a half has shed light on the disparities in the academy, a lot that we already knew. It just

made them more explicit for more to see! The trauma is real. There is also beauty and grace that are emerging in all the chaotic movement.

As I actively think about going up for promotion to full professorship, the highest rank in the professoriate, I think of the phase in my career where you are now. Know that I am proud of your arrival! I have been waiting for a critical mass of us to be part of this school. I am proud of the handful of us who had these courageous and hard discussions and decisions to rightfully have you occupy this space. I not only boldly justify such occupancy, but know that I will continue to advocate for your needs and voices to be heard. I have your back.

Hyun (2005) uses the metaphor of the “bamboo ceiling” to describe the structural processes and barriers Asian American women face in professional spaces. Likewise, “the glass ceiling” is commonly used to describe the challenges faced by women and other minoritized people when trying to move to higher roles in a structural hierarchy (Kagan, 2022). People say, “Pull and elevate as you climb towards the bamboo or glass ceiling.” That ceiling is hard to break! When we break that ceiling and feel that we have attained major life achievements for ourselves, families, and communities, we note how it comes with deep scars of pain and struggles. It need not be such. I look forward to the day that this path is not ableist, classist, and all the embodied -ists. I aspire it to be a path of healing, liberation, and empowerment for us and our peoples.

I say that you must, at all cost, preserve your soul. The White academy will suck every beauty and light of your soul, telling you that you are not enough. You are enough and then some. For each milestone, however big or small, honor it. Honor the people, places, and processes that led you to it. Take the time to care for your well-being. Reclaim the rituals or ceremonies that were forgotten along the way, as your ancestors will gently remind you of your purpose. Remove the temptation of glorifying the individualized success early on, as the addiction can be potent. Practice how to identify power hoarding that the academy rewards through its tokenized ways. Be disciplined in the stance of humility, as elitism is reinforced as well. The academy breeds on such, and may enable the forgetting of the earlier seedlings of one’s collective purpose to serve.

When the academy justifies epistemicide (the killing and intentional erasure of knowledge systems, including Indigenous and minoritized communities’ ways of knowing), with a growing critical mass of us occupying, we must resist. You are not alone, even if you are the only one there for a moment. Ancestral wisdom and love show up when you least expect it, including the times when you feel beaten, fatigued, and down. It is those moments that will pull you out, reminding you and holding you tight.

Congratulations on being here, again! I look forward to continuing to walk and be with you on this journey!

Deep respect,

Dr. A

dear monsters:

bite me.
I mean it.

get a little closer.

try it.
invite me to “the table”
make sure my “voice is heard.”
I’ll wear the cape. I’ll be on time.
I freaking dare you.

cuz every time I hear that invitation—veiled threat—weak attempt at action—
I feel the reverberations in my bones
the spirits of all the other Others’
still sitting at that Table
waiting to be fed.

see,
my people warned me about you.

I’ve heard you called reviewer two, imposter syndrome, ivory tower—
[I called you Academons once, when I was more afraid]

I have heard you morph your voice, matching the language of women of color; stealing the pedagogy of queers, blurring the lines; arming yourself with “equity” and other words that make us think you understand, believe, support this struggle; offering a “statement” during the Q&A, filling the space with your voice, filling the air with your own fear.

silence.

I pray that I will know when you arrive
nightly rituals to ground myself in my knowing.

and I am learning not to be afraid.

(re)membering that I have skills for this fight.
my father taught me not to wave at the ghosts walking down old mountain roads.
kupuna instruct me to lower my eyes when I hear the drums.
mama helps me seek the moon, the birds, the winds for disturbances.
my siblings remind me to find the interconnectedness, the spaces of sameness, to not feel alone.

we do not have to be afraid.
instead

we leave an offering
wrapped in bananas leaves
scattered with ash, with soot:
we hope for you to be fed, to be warm, to be held,

but not by me. not by we.

– yours, in monstrosity

Our Call and Response: To the Readers

There is no conclusion. This is a work in progress. Our double storied narratives of oppression and strategies of resistance stand within an expansive field of experiences held tightly by BIPOC women in academia and others with minoritized identities. Even as we look forward, towards liberatory futures, we look back to honor our ancestors and those who preceded our journeys to pave our way. Our letters are just a piece of a continued conversation. We are still collectively in this resistance grappling with the many different forms of White supremacy in our institutions and in our communities. We invite you to engage with our shared narratives, and to sit with what you have read and consider how to implement meaningful change in your own respective institutions, communities, and space.

Our collective work has been both a form of trauma healing, narrative practice, and theory building. We continue to reflect on the through lines of our individual and collective experiences and explore what theories and strategies we can create from these embodied experiences. We take care of us and view our collective care as a strategy of survival and resistance. In the face of epistemicide, we stand in defiance, holding these visions for better practices in our communities, our academic spaces, and our field, as a collective and towards true healing and liberatory futures.

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