

(i.e., war, torture, and loss of civil liberties after 9/11). Global financial leaders convene surreptitiously to undercut demands and eviscerate our voices. Non-elected corporate heads make binding trade agreements that hold more power than votes by elected bodies. Citizens have become consumers and have been dumbed-down (or outright lied to) by the mainstream media so they do not have the critical tools they need to understand what is going on. I believe people today feel less able to voice their views than ever. Yes, it's frustrating, all these blocks to the voices of change. We must see our common humanity and act in ways that reflect our common interests. We must stop being complicit in the framework of pitting one group's interests against those of another group. There is only one community, the global community. "Act locally, think globally" becomes ever more pertinent. Every choice I make, every consuming "vote," every manner in which I treat someone is speaking truth to power.

Engagement is important because I make better choices when I am informed. I do not want "holidays" from the news, or to ignore horrible events or facts. I prefer to do something about them in some way, large or small. I do, and will, act in a way that reflects what I yearn to see. There is nothing more worth working toward than a just society where people live without suffering, and animals and the Earth are respected. When there is no exploitation, there is no fear.

Gratitude is essential because it keeps me open and able to engage. Without gratitude, I feel I would be overwhelmed with despair. I choose not to despair. Along with disturbing events, there is also much beauty in the world. I don't ever want to overlook the beauty. I speak out to counter the injustice and to affirm the beauty. I struggle with my search for a meaningful life. Apparently, social justice is something that must be kept alive in the mind and heart, and in our dreams, and with sustenance by the wonders of daily living—a hike in the forest or desert, playing with a cat, sharing an organic vegan meal with a friend—these and other everyday graces keep us going.

Joy? Sadness? Healing? Frustration? Some satisfaction, and a heck of a lot of struggle. ☺



Social Responsibility, Reflexivity, and Chasing Rainbows

by Rachel Alicia Griffin

"We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history there is such a thing as being too late."

—Martin Luther King, Jr.,

Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence, 1967

As a critical intercultural scholar activist, I have often found myself awake late at night, pondering whether or not optimism is feasible in a world plagued by so much systemically orchestrated devastation. Thus at any given moment—and really *every* moment—someone somewhere is hurting not by their own doing, but rather because they do not have access to enough power to protect themselves from the imposition of domination. Coupling this reality with the embrace of self-reflexivity as a means to turn my critical eyes inward,¹ I move through the world both reproducing and resisting systemic oppression as a heterosexual, able-bodied, US American biracial woman of color who, by way of a PhD, has become part of the middle class after growing up in the lower working class.

Extending beyond my intersectional comfort zone of marking privilege and marginalization in the lives of people, only recently have I begun the work of connecting human, animal, and environmental

devastation. Having learned not to “expect perfection in an imperfect world,”² what follows are my reflections on how I began to connect the dots in my own life and activist efforts. I share my journey here in the hopes that doing so will foster similar connections for others.

In US American society, we have a number of cultural clichés such as “time will tell” and “in good time” that invite passivity while discouraging civic engagement. From my standpoint, the time for reflection, accountability, and fierce advocacy against injustice is now. Since there is “such a thing as being too late,”³ I want to acknowledge that much of what has been destroyed—lives and resources—cannot be recovered and that perhaps we have simply gone too far in our “profoundly unjust and fundamentally unsustainable”⁴ world. Yet excusing ourselves from bearing witness to anguish, desperation, and loss represents, in my mind, a dangerous sham that even the most privileged will be able to preserve for only a limited amount of time. Therefore, I move forward with the belief that connecting the dots can deepen our commitment to the socially just understanding that the world, as it is in this moment, simply is not the best that it can be. Embracing possibilities, I process through three lessons drawn from my experiences that have fostered my ability to see the interdependence between various forms of cultural devastation. These lessons have also helped me imagine the world differently through a shift from a single reality to multiple realities, and from an “either/or” to a “both/and” outlook.

Lesson One: On Broken Binaries and Enduring Contradiction

Looking back to my childhood, my first conscious encounter with the imposition of domination and the need for an opposing outlook came early. Born in 1980 to a teenage white woman in Detroit, Michigan, I attended school in the predominantly white suburbs. One of my earliest memories is of me sitting on a bench with my feet dangling off the edge while my mother was filling out my elementary school forms in the main office. I overheard the school secretary’s tone and, with my 5-year-old mind, took it to mean she was yelling at my mom. She was upset because my mom had checked the “Caucasian” box

and the “African-American” box even though she was only supposed to check one or use the “Other” box. I was enthralled, and listened closely because my mom was in trouble; of course, at the time I did not understand the politics surrounding why this “mean” woman was “yelling” at my mom. However, I did understand that the boxes were worth getting upset over because I recognized the tone in my mom’s voice as no-nonsense—as in, her way was the *only* way. Watching her stand at that counter and insist that I was not an “Other” and that she would not be checking only one box was powerful enough to leave a strong impression.

Sitting on that bench was the first of countless moments when I would learn that my biracial body did not fit into what I now understand as the Western binary of “black” or “white,” which also functions to secure, for example, “right” or “wrong”; “good” or “bad”; “civil” or “uncivil”; and “us” or “them.” From my perspective, my lifelong navigation of and refusal to abide by the racial binary created an avenue for me to understand our world as fluid as opposed to fixed, and as both/and as opposed to either/or. Welcomed by some and annoying to others, starting at a young age, I replaced definitive periods with inquisitive question marks. It consciously began with my insistence (modeled by my mother) on identifying as biracial even though I am often asked to be *black period*—as in, too dark to be white and less complicated/difficult/taboo. The practice of naming my own identities eventually, with time and increased self-confidence, morphed into a damning of the boxes that I never seemed to fit into, and caused me to ask questions like, “What if everyone is in between?” and “What if I am double instead of half-and-half?” These racialized struggles, written on and expressed through my own body, opened me up to the complexity of both/and in multiple contexts and helped me become more comfortable with the discomfort of contradiction.

Since my very existence is in opposition to dominant racial norms (e.g., “black *and* white” as opposed to “black *or* white”), to speak for myself and survive as I am, I have come to peace with the discomfort that feeling contradiction or being marked as contradictory can bring.

Extending my lived experiences beyond the context of racial binaries, I am working toward acknowledging all of the ways that contradiction, informed by privilege and marginalization, encompasses my life. For example, I purchase name-brand "professional" clothing that can undeniably be linked to inhumane sweatshop labor and shipping practices that leave carbon footprints throughout the world, and yet I wear my "professional" clothes to bolster my credibility as a female faculty member of color at a traditionally and predominantly white institution. Another example, of which there are many, I understand the toxicity of technology and yet I am typing this essay, which advocates for social justice, on my computer with my cell phone, printer, and microwave close by. Paying close attention to these moments of contradiction, to consciously mark both resistance and complicity, is the first lesson that has helped me get better at connecting the dots. While I do not believe that each individual person can productively work against every form of injustice, I do find great meaning in transparency and accountability with regard to our choices.

Lesson Two: On Knowing Versus Understanding

As a survivor of domestic violence and sexual assault, I have spoken all over the country for 10 years advocating against gender violence in general and men's violence against women in particular. Speaking nationally has taught me how to draw strong connections between various acts of violent injustice to create multiple possibilities for audience members to situate gender violence as an issue of vast importance. To be frank, I approach audiences with the assumption that most people, myself included, are self-interested (in that we are not readily willing to listen unless we understand what any given issue has to do with our daily lives). Exemplary of my approach, I position date rape, for example, as equally as important as robbery and murder. This is not to imply that date rape is more important or more painful than other forms of violence, but rather to highlight the value of exploring one form of violence at a time to make our societal need for change more manageable and less overwhelming. My approach

has been expanded to new heights via the Green Dot Strategy that philosophically highlights the broad spectrum of power-based violence in our culture, and our communal responsibility to mobilize against such acts.⁵

Power-based violence can be understood as any form of violence that entails force, threat, or intimidation.⁶ Quite valuable to the labor of connecting the dots is the emphasis on how power and domination function similarly to fuel multiple forms of violence, such as mass shootings, police brutality, human trafficking, widespread cruelty to animals for food and other uses, mass incarceration, hate crimes, bullying, murder, and gender violence. By fusing several violent acts together with the consideration of power, the understanding that violent acts do harm, destroy, spread terror, erode safety, and severely undermine the potential of life on a global scale becomes more tangible and, importantly, more urgent to address. With urgency at heart, we can begin to bridge the gap between knowing and understanding. Helping us map the difference between the two in *Echoes from the Holocaust: Philosophical Reflections on a Dark Time*, Rosenberg says:

Knowing...refers to factual information or the process by which it is gathered. Understanding...refers to systematically grasping the significance of an event in such a way that it becomes integrated into one's moral and intellectual life.... One can know a great deal about the Holocaust without understanding it. Facts can be absorbed without their having any impact on the way we understand ourselves or the world we live in.⁷

The important shift from knowing to understanding is commonly (but not always) accompanied by emotion and compassion—both of which are necessary to connect the dots. Through speaking and teaching, I have become convinced that oftentimes (but not always) people are apathetic toward issues of social justice because they are simply unaware of and/or cannot plausibly imagine the extent of harm, suffering,

and loss that pervasive injustice breeds. For example, asking myself the following questions has helped me shift closer from knowing toward understanding how the dots are connected between human, animal, and environmental devastation in the context of gender violence:

- What do sex trafficking, puppy mills, and *The Bachelor* have in common?
- What are the links between the garbage patch in the Pacific Ocean, strip mining, and treating women like trash?
- Where do racism, deforestation, and rape ideologically converge?
- How do I (as opposed to "do I"), in my everyday life, intentionally and unintentionally support sex trafficking, puppy mills, *The Bachelor*, the mass of garbage in the Pacific Ocean, strip mining, treating women like trash, racism, deforestation, and rape?

Lesson Three: On Listening, Humility, and Vulnerability

Through embarrassment, shame, and guilt in relation to my privilege, I have come to understand listening, humility, and vulnerability as essential if I want to productively work toward social justice. I have to listen—even when what I hear breaks my heart and hands me my privileged ass, I have to listen. I also have to listen when I want to run, cry, scream, and distance myself from the pain that my privilege imparts. Listening is also indispensable to grasping the reality that there are aspects of oppression that I cannot fully understand because they cannot be found in words or pictures but, rather, are lived through bodies. For example, when I talk about men's violence against women to groups of men, I ask them to realize that their male privilege in our patriarchal world protects them from having to reckon with the extreme likelihood of being sexually violated in their lifetime. I also tell them that they can read thousands of books and listen to thousands of female survivors' stories and still never understand what it is like from an embodied standpoint to live in a rape culture. Hence, there are things that women understand from within our female bodies that men simply cannot fully understand. In response, I have

encountered men from coast to coast who contest this by pointing to what they know as an indication of their understanding, and although I stand firm, I can relate to their impassioned desire to claim full understanding of a lived experience even when it is not their own. Looking closely at my own life, it is easy for me to slip into the reasoning that as an academic, I can understand anything if I read and listen enough. Yet the reality is that I cannot fully grasp what it means, for example, to endure oppression as a queer woman, starving child, or formally uneducated adult.

This is where both humility and vulnerability come to fruition. Drawing from lesson two, if we work to shift from knowing toward understanding, we must do so cognizant of our privilege and what Moraga and Anzaldúa⁸ deem "theories of the flesh," which reflect "distinctive interpretations of the world...carved out of the embodied, historical, and material reality of a group's life experiences."⁹ In this vein, particularly in relation to our privilege, we must trust that people who are hurting know more about their pain from the inside than we can from the outside.

Therefore, our activism, ability to create a more just world, and for some, our desire to be a "good" person becomes dependent upon and guided by those who are hurting, as opposed to our desire to help. Embracing the vulnerability of this approach has been difficult for me to do intentionally as a woman of color in a world that has yet to fully recognize my humanity. For example, being held accountable to my heterosexual privilege by a queer white woman renders me vulnerable to her white privilege much in the way that I imagine her being accountable to her white privilege renders her vulnerable to my heterosexual privilege. While vulnerability has brought the chill of fear to my skin and tears to my eyes, I do not believe that I (or we) can afford to allow fear or pain to absolve our social responsibility to reckon with the interconnected nature of injustices—both those we see/know/understand/feel and those that have yet to enter our consciousness. The moments when I have understood this the most are when I have been asked hard questions that, despite all of my education, I have

had to admit with transparent shame that I cannot answer:

- Whose land do I live on?
- Who picks the produce that I eat?
- Where does my trash go?
- What does my cell phone do to our world?
- Where have my shoes been?

Perhaps most importantly:

- What has been done in the name of my privilege?
- What has been done in the name of my comfort?

To even begin to respond to the depths of despair and damage that such questions, when answered transparently, will likely reveal, I rely deeply on listening, humility, and vulnerability. Even when doing so hurts more than I ever would have imagined.

Chasing Rainbows

Returning to where this essay began, I enjoy reading the speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr. as a source of encouraging inspiration, not because he embodied civil rights activism and leadership with faultless inclusion,¹⁰ but rather because he paid close attention to love and to what I interpret as chasing rainbows (i.e., the journey toward a more socially just world).¹¹ For example, in his speech entitled "A Time to Break Silence," quoting Arnold Toynbee, he says "Love is the ultimate force that makes for the saving choice of life and good against the damning choice of death and evil. Therefore, the first hope in our inventory must be the hope that love is going to have the last word."¹² When I revisit this passage, I momentarily let my desire to critique the binaries offered subside to allow the significance of love to take root. Also voicing the importance of love is bell hooks, who says, "Love heals. We recover ourselves in the act and art of loving."¹³ Through the embodiment of "critical love,"¹⁴ I see/feel/

imagine the power and possibilities of chasing rainbows.

Like Shange,¹⁵ I invoke the colorful imagery of rainbows to signify the importance of both individual beauty and joint interdependence. Whenever I see a rainbow, I marvel at the spectacular mixture of water and sunlight and then laugh out loud at my little girl self who believed that she could chase and find the end of a rainbow. I remember running toward rainbows on the playground and being puzzled by the trickery—when I moved, the rainbow moved too! Eventually embracing defeat, I would watch it for as long as I could, and then hope for another chance to chase the possibility. As an adult socialized to accept impossibility as definitive, I have shifted from decrying rainbow trickery, to regarding rainbows as delicate and beautifully elusive. Yet recently I have found myself wondering about the chase. For me, chasing rainbows offers a metaphorical means to connect the dots through a sense of virtuous hope that has the potential to birth a genuine culture of engagement, as opposed to a culture of divisive/disconnected/indifference. Chasing rainbows represents chasing the ideal essence of interdependence, equality, social responsibility, compassion, and reflexivity even when it is unlikely that we will find perfect harmony in our disharmonious world. What if the magic can be found in the chase? What if the very moment that we think we find/capture/seize the rainbow only to be met with raw disappointment, is the very same moment that we turn toward faith and possibility? What if our journey toward the imagined but always elusive socially just ideal is what really matters? It matters to me. Does it matter to you? ☺

Notes

- ¹ H. Lloyd Goodall, *Writing the New Ethnography* (Oxford: AltaMira Press, 2000); D. Soyini Madison, *Critical Ethnography* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005); Ronald J. Pelias, "The Critical Life," *Communication Education* 49 (2000): 220-28.
- ² Rachel Alicia Griffin, "Yes We Can, 'Yes We Did,' but No We Haven't: Marking a Moment While Remembering Reality," *Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping* 16 no. 1 (2010): 10.
- ³ James M. Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: HarperCollins, 1986), 243.
- ⁴ Robert Jensen, "Beyond multiculturalism: Taking power and privilege seriously in teaching diversity," keynote delivered at The Pedagogy of Privilege: Teaching, Learning, and Praxis Conference, Denver, CO, June 2009.
- ⁵ "Ending Violence: One Green Dot at a Time," *Green Dot. Etcetera*, 2010, <http://www.livethegreendot.com/>.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Alan Rosenberg, "The Crisis in Knowing and Understanding the Holocaust," edited by A. Rosenberg and G. E. Meyers, *Echoes from the Holocaust: Philosophical Reflections On a Dark Time*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 382.
- ⁸ Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (New York: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, 1983).
- ⁹ D. Soyini Madison, "That Was My Occupation: Oral Narrative, Performance, and Black Feminist Thought," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 13, no. 3 (1993): 229.
- ¹⁰ I make this point not to disrespectfully defame his memory but rather to highlight how the Civil Rights Movement and its visible leadership fell quite short of taking an intersectional approach to social justice. This is not to say that we cannot focus on one issue or identity group at a time but it is to mark how our efforts against one form of oppression (e.g., racism) can simultaneously strengthen another form of oppression (e.g., sexism). For example, Ms. Rosa Parks is often positioned as secondary to Dr. King when in reality she, alongside many other black women, were advocating for civil rights long before Dr. King became a celebrated leader. More pointedly, when Ms. Parks was helping to lay the foundation for the Civil Rights Movement, Dr. King was still in high school. (Danielle L. McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* [New York: Knopf, 2010].)
- ¹¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981).
- ¹² See note 3 above.
- ¹³ bell hooks, "Living to Love," edited by G. Kirk & M. Okazawa-Rey, *Women's Lives: Multicultural Perspectives*, 5th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 250.

¹⁴ Rachel Alicia Griffin, "Navigating the Politics of Identity/Identities and Exploring the Promise of Critical Love," edited by Nilanjana Bardhan and M. Orbe, *Identity Research and Intercultural Communication: Reflections and Future Directions* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012), 207-221.

¹⁵ Ntozake Shange, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf* (New York: MacMillan, 1975).