

DEBRA BUSMAN

## 7. SILENCES AND STORIES

### *Honoring Voice and Agency in the College Classroom*

The brilliant Audre Lorde (1980) once admonished, “Your silence will not protect you.” Of course she is right, although, at times, in those small moments of everyday cowardice, it can feel as if it might.

Silence. A story. I am a 40-year-old re-entry student at the University of California. In class I am silent. I sit through lectures by those with the many initials after their names, knowing myself to be a total fraud, an imposter who does not *belong*. Head down, terrified that I will be found out, busted, and kicked out of the university, I am silent. Although now a grown woman and successful business owner, my educational self sits stunted at adolescence, barely having finished junior high school; *the bad kid*, the trouble-maker—too stupid, surly, and stoned to be wanted in anyone’s classroom. Growing up, I was about the furthest thing from college material as one could get.

Yet, here I sit, decades later, a student at a fancy university. Even though I am *old*, re-entry students are fairly well tolerated. The important thing is that I am white; as long as I stay silent I can pass. As long as I stay silent, because I am white, I am presumed to belong. As long as I stay silent, because I am white, my presence is not questioned. I learn to hide the not-so-middle class markers of my bad teeth, bad education, and bad language, and I ride that silence like a free pass at the boardwalk, paid for by stolen coins. This I know how to do. To steal and to pass.

As a wild hooligan child raised in Los Angeles, I’d put on my pink, pressed *white girl* blouse, comb my unruly hair, and steal stores blind as security ran to follow my young dark-skinned Mexican friends, you know...the dangerous, untrustworthy ones. Now, at the university, I am utterly in love with language and learning, intoxicated with books. Fierce is my hunger and I am eating knowledge like a feral dog at a steakhouse dumpster: gulping, gnawing, stealing away the best bones for later. I am silent, but I am learning.

Then, one day, the white male sociology professor with the sparkly good teeth and the many initials after his name is giving a lecture on juvenile delinquency, adolescent drug use, homeless youth, teen sex workers. This is his dissertation topic, his field of expertise. My life. I am on heightened alert, cautious yet curious. But what comes out of his expert mouth is an articulated spew of stunning ignorance, pathologizing young folk’s full humanity into the narrow confines of a “population” of “at-risk youth” with “antisocial behaviors” in need of “intervention” and “tertiary

prevention.” His words are big but his knowing is not. I think about my friends on the streets and then listen to the professor’s words—pompous, patronizing, pitying at best, and I am utterly stunned. *He doesn’t know anything about them! This expert is completely ignorant! I know more than he does!*

There was something terrifying yet exhilarating about that moment, when the veil was pulled from the illusion of academic expertise. I became obsessed with the question of authority—of authorship. Framing these power dynamics in racialized context, Gloria Anzaldúa (1983) writes, “White eyes do not want to know us... *Who am I, a poor Chicanita from the sticks, to think I could write? ...I write to record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me, about you*” (p. 166). Who has the power to tell whose stories, to craft and shape and warp the dominant narrative, to gather initials after their names like little ducklings and assume that their privileged perception is the one, capital “T” truth? In all those warped tellings, whose stories are erased, disappeared, or twisted into some unrecognizable perversion of reality? (Gates, 1991).

As social action writers and educators, part of our work is to break silence, challenge the master narrative, insert counter narratives into the dominant domain (Adler, 2009). We must disrupt... and, yes... dismantle. But, at that moment, I was not yet a writer. I was a 40-year-old with the stunted psyche of an adolescent street kid. And when I began to write, which I knew immediately that I must, it was not my academic, authorial voice that came through with its contested analysis. No—what emerged as I put pen to paper were the voices of the kids I hung out with on the streets of L.A. so many decades before, dealing drugs, hustling tourists, shaking down johns, sleeping in cardboard boxes out behind Montgomery Wards.

Here is a brief excerpt from the piece that emerged that day, now the title chapter of my novel, *like a woman*, in which the narrator, an “at-risk youth” herself, claims agency in the telling of her own story, on her own terms (Busman, 2015).

*The other girls tell me I am going to have to dress “like a woman” if I’m going to make it on the street. “Screw you,” I laugh. “I’ve been fucked all my life and I’ve never had to wear a dress yet.”*

*“Just tryin’ to help you out, girl,” they call out as they walk on down Santa Monica Boulevard, ankles bowed out over wobbly spike heels, popping their gum and adjusting their spaghetti strap bras as if they had something special going on down there. Don’t none of us, ‘cept Lisa have any tits yet and even if I had ‘em I wasn’t about to go dressin’ in no drag shit. For one thing, it costs too much and I’ve got better things to do with my money. And for another thing I can’t hardly walk in that shit, much less run. Or fight. Some girls can, though. I seen one girl whip off those fuck me pumps and bust some motherfucker trying to get something for nothing across the side of his head quicker than I could have cracked his nuts. Said she fucked up his eardrum cuz she got the pointy part right inside his ear hole and see, check out that blood, girl. I think she was just feeling good cuz she got his wallet, messed him up and didn’t even break a heel.*

As this story expanded into its present novel form, I intentionally utilized this first-person narration as a means of centering the perspective of youth on the streets whose stories have rarely been heard. By having street kids tell their own versions of gritty lived reality, I was able to develop them as complex characters, smart, funny, kind, reckless, creative, flawed, fully human, which in turn allowed me to “flip the script” and ask questions such as, whose behavior was truly “antisocial,” the grown men who tried to rape teenage girls, the parents who disowned their queer sons and daughters, kicking them out into the streets, or the kids who stole and fought their way into survival?

Today, I teach in the Creative Writing and Social Action Program at California State University Monterey Bay. Housed in the interdisciplinary School of Humanities and Communication, our Creative Writing and Social Action courses examine this issue of voice and agency, and question who gets to tell the story and whose stories are not heard. Students are encouraged to break free from their own silences, to bust open the master narrative. We are a Hispanic-serving institution whose university vision statement calls on us to serve “the diverse people of California, especially the working class and historically undereducated and low-income populations” (CSUMB, 2015), so many students come from farm-working families in Salinas, King City, Watsonville. Often, these students’ parents had to leave school after the third or fourth grade, sacrificing everything so their families could survive, now working two or three jobs so their child can be the first to go to college.

For these students, as well as other first-generation students of color and working class white students, told from the jump they were not *college material*, the very fact of their presence at a university is a charged act of political resistance, a transgression into the terrain of the middle class. For them to then take control of their own narrative, to *tell* the story rather than be the object of another’s version of history and culture, is a profoundly radical and transformative act. This can be especially risky for students whose previous success was conditioned upon the very premises of silence and obedience. Many students from working class school districts have been taught that to be a “good student” meant that you were quiet, well-behaved, that you stayed below the radar and did not use “I” in an essay. They often come in, much as I did as a student, believing themselves to be imposters, somehow trespassing upon this middle-class and white terrain, feeling like college survival and success came from passing, leaving home language and culture behind, staying silent unless parroting back safe academic language and conventions (Valenzuela, 1999).

So how do I, as an educator, now encourage and facilitate student voice, support the transition from K-12 compliance into creative and intellectual agency and self-empowerment in a college classroom? How can I help create a caring classroom community that welcomes home culture and values, what Valenzuela calls *educación* (Sleeter, 2011)? And what happens when students do speak truth only to find their truths colliding with those of fellow classmates?

One of the gifts, and challenges, of teaching in the CSU system is the wide diversity in our classrooms. At any given moment, they might be composed of both working and middle class students from Salinas to South Central to Orange County,

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surfers and skaters, college republicans, veterans and re-entry students, sons and daughters of migrant laborers, military families, and white collar workers, each bringing their own cultures, histories, and ways of inhabiting and perceiving the world. All are asked the same thing in a course offered through the Creative Writing and Social Action Program—to bring who they are and where they come from into the classroom, to bear witness, to write what they know, to speak truth (Adler, 2009).

What happens when the stories of a young Naval Officer, writing with fierce military pride about his father, a fighter pilot in the Vietnam War, share classroom space with a 70-year-old Vietnamese refugee, who fled the bombs and napalmed fields of his country, barely surviving the “American War”? What happens when the realities of a pilot dropping a payload at 30,000 feet meet up with the torn limbs, burnt flesh, ruined rice paddies, and decimated villages that were the recipients of such a proud American mission?

What happens when a young woman, whose mother and favorite uncle are both career Los Angeles police officers, hears stories of police brutality, planted evidence, cracked skulls, mandatory sentencing and the daily assaults on brown and black youth in South Central, Oakland, East Salinas? What happens when the previously uncontested ideology of *To Protect and to Serve* gets blown apart, problematized by the experiences of a fellow student, writing about how his cousin was picked up by the LAPD, then dropped off two miles away in neighboring streets controlled by a rival gang and killed within 20 minutes? Who is being protected? Who is being served? Why didn't she know about any of this, information that is as common as corn to black and brown communities all across the United States? How does she hold this story, told by a young man she cares about and has shared several classes with, in the same heart/mind that idolizes her mother and uncle? What happens to the young man, who has only known the tyranny of racialized police violence, the brutality and sadism of the badge, when he hears her stories of family love and picnics, tenderness, laughter and humanity? What happens when the enemy becomes humanized, when previously silenced stories are told?

Here is a brief excerpt from a piece called “You Gotta Be Ready,” (Busman, 2002) which provides a glimpse into the challenging terrain of a Creative Writing and Social Action classroom:

*To teach Creative Writing and Social Action means you gotta be ready for some serious truth to be spoken. When you ask students to break silence, to bear witness, to connect the meaning of their own personal lives within the larger societal frame, you gotta be ready for the truths that fly out, crawl out, peep out, and scream out from underneath the thick walls of practiced silence. You gotta be ready for stories of border crossings, coyotes and cops, night beatings, wife beatings, baby beatings, date rapes, gang rapes, daddy rapes, gunshots and chemo, pesticides, HIV, AZT, protease inhibitors, and the pink-cheeked 19-year-old who says, “Hey, next Tuesday I’ll have five years clean and sober; can we have a cake in class?” You gotta be ready for stories that*

*start out, “Ese pinche Columbus didn’t have no stinkin’ green card.” You gotta be ready for the straight A student who has to leave school because her INS paperwork hasn’t come through yet, and the social security number she gave at registration was the first nine numbers that came to her mind, and she cannot get financial aid because she is “illegal.”*

*To teach Creative Writing and Social Action means you gotta be ready for the young blonde girl from a private high school in Sacramento’s suburbs who rolls her Mabelline eyes the first day of class and says, “Is this going to be one of those courses where they try and ram that multicultural crap down your throat?” The same girl who, weeks later sits weeping in class, heart and mind open, listening to shared stories of INS thugs and deported grandfathers and pesticide-poisoned baby brothers, wheezing from asthma. Stories about cousins orphaned by police bombs dropped on fellow family MOVE members, seven- and nine-year-old brother and sister taken from their home, sitting in the Philadelphia police station, surrounded by cops watching the bombing live and in color on TV news, laughing, telling the children, “See those flames. See those tanks. That’s your daddy inside there. That’s your daddy we finally got right where he belongs.” And the young, blonde, private-high-school student, who truly believed that California always ‘belonged’ to the United States and that racism ended with the abolition of slavery, or at the very least after Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I have a dream” speech, turns her face to the class, Maybelline running down her cheeks, and says, “I’m so sorry. I didn’t know. They never taught me about any of this. I’m so sorry. I just never knew.” And her workshop buddy, Aisha, the self-described Pan Africanist revolutionary, takes the girl in her arms, rocks her softly. And Carlos, sitting in the back, can’t help but shake his head, muttering: “Damn. And they got the nerve to tell me that my people are quote ‘under-prepared’ for college.”*

How do we, as teachers, handle all the complexity and contradictions? How do we take good care of our students, of all the *truths* that emerge when we ask them to bring all of who they are into the classrooms? How do we create safe spaces for students to break silence when we know for ourselves as writers that there is really nothing safe about writing? Gloria Anzaldúa (1983) addresses this in dialog with Latino writer Cherríe Moraga: “‘To assess the damage is a dangerous act,’ writes Cherríe Moraga. To stop there is even more dangerous... Writing is dangerous because we are afraid of what the writing reveals: the fears, the angers, the strengths of a woman under a triple or quadruple oppression. Yet in that very act lies our survival because a woman who writes has power. And a woman with power is feared” (p. 171).

What happens when a young gay man chooses to share his coming out story—decides to take the huge risk and break silence about his long journey from homophobic shame and adolescent torment, being called “sissy” and “faggot,” beaten out behind the football bleachers day after day after day, somehow surviving and now embracing a thin tendril of courage to claim pride, to begin the cherishing of

self? What happens when, this same day, another student has written of his long and painful recovery from drugs and alcohol, the crazed days when he and his buddies would “get fucked up and drive up to San Francisco to beat up the queers?”

Sometimes the domain of breaking silence is understood to be for those who have been the targets and most obvious victims of social oppression—survivors of rape, incest, racial injustice, poverty, domestic violence—and these are all stories which need to be told, which need to be heard, which need to become part of what interrupts the censored denial of everyday privilege, lies, and ignorance. But, for everyone who is harmed, there is someone doing the harming. Where are these stories? Perhaps even more damaging is the enforced silence of the oppressors—the buried stories of those who batter and rape—the tight silence of soldiers who have killed, the girls who recognized their beloved granddaddy’s shiny shoes in the group of Klansmen gathered at the center of a Mississippi town. As difficult as it may be to receive these stories, they are all part of the same larger narrative we are all caught up in. As Barbra Deming reminds us, “We are all part of one another” (Meyerding, 1984) and, when we open to, rather than censor, these stories, what inevitably emerges is another layer, another story of pain, buried beneath the brutality.

Silence. A story. I am teaching a Creative Writing class in which a young Anglo son of a central valley grower writes about his fraught relationship with his father. At one point in the story he describes riding in his dad’s truck, coming home at dusk. As they pass by a group of fieldworkers standing by their trucks drinking beer, relaxing after a long day working in the hot sun, the father says, “See, boy, that’s why I don’t worry about paying them minimum wage. You give them Mexicans more money, all they do is drink it up.” For the young man in the creative writing class, this was a throwaway line in his story, a response to my request that he incorporate dialogue. But, for the three young Latina students in the class who were from a labor camp in the same central valley town as the young man, it was incredibly painful. He could have been speaking about their fathers, hardworking providers, up since 3 a.m. to work in the fields, living five families in a garage, the front yard the only place cool and spacious enough to socialize and have an after-work beer.

The young women were devastated. One left the room in tears during the workshop discussion of the young man’s story, hurt that he could not understand why his dad’s words were disrespectful. Another was angry. “You know,” she said. “I have had to live with this racist crap my whole life. I didn’t come here to college and pay all this tuition money to have to sit here and listen to it again.” As discussion continued, the young man began to come to the realization that he knew nothing of the lives and realities of entire families and communities he lived next to his whole life and that, for him, *truth* had come filtered and unquestioned through the lenses of his father’s racism. As his stories unfolded throughout the semester, the deeper truth of his father’s own alcoholism also emerged, the private shame of thousand-dollar-a-day hidden treatment centers, failed businesses and a ruined marriage, the deeper subtext of shame and self-loathing that got reduced, racialized, and externalized onto a group of workers, sharing a public beer on a dusty Fresno street corner.

As challenging as the process was for all students involved, and as tempting as it was for me as professor to shut a volatile conversation down, I knew that there were deeper stories that needed to be told (Derricotte, 1995). The young man needed to hear the impact of his words on classmates he cared about, students whose stories he had read, whose lives were becoming less and less invisible to him each week. As a writer, he needed to learn to both “write what you know” but also question the limits of knowledge. The young women needed to feel empowered to speak up and voice their pain, to resist the racist reduction of their lived experiences in others’ narratives (although, this is tricky territory, and, as another Latino in class rightly pointed out, “It’s not my job to have to educate ignorant white people. I’m here to get an education.”).

In a creative writing class, we are fortunate to have lots of tools to support us in the work of going deeper—all the gifts of craft can be called into play. A difficult clash of stories and realities can often be guided by a discussion of the questions of audience and responsibility to one’s readers. Instead of the temptation to censor the difficult areas, the egregious elements of racism, to make them shut up and go away, sometimes it is better to go more deeply into them. For example, when the grower’s son was encouraged to expand his depiction of scene and setting in his central valley narrative, he began to learn more about the daily realities of field work, pesticides, and heat. When asked to provide richer character development for the father in his story, to further understand the character’s motivations and desires, he uncovered the rich vein of a man struggling to put together a life ravaged by the disease of alcoholism. What he learned as a writer was that, while the characters in his story might be blind and racist in their ignorance, as an author in charge of the narrative, he must be guided by a greater heart and consciousness. Yes, like all writers, he must begin with writing what he knows. But, as a social action writer he also has to learn to listen. He may also have to delve more deeply into the frightening terrain of what he does not yet know if his work is to resist rather than replicate oppression, leading us towards a more just world.

And what about those of us who teach? What roles do silence, speech, and listening play in our work if we wish to resist rather than replicate systems of oppression? How do our own social identities and life histories impact the ways in which we address race, class, and gender dynamics in the classroom (Sleeter, 2011; Tochluk, 2008; Wise, 2010)? As a white woman carrying race, age, professorial and class privilege, it is important that I be especially mindful and vigilant about examining my own biases and assumptions, however well-intended I know myself to be. Ignoring racial dynamics in a classroom, or taking cover under the guise of colorblindness, is not an option, because “when one claims not to see color, one ignores much of a person’s identity” (Sleeter, 2011, p. 99). While there may be strategic moments in the facilitation of charged classroom discussions around race where it is wise to allow student dialog to run unencumbered by professorial intrusion, it is important to also keep in mind that silence speaks volumes and is never neutral. As anti-racist and #BlackLivesMatter groups remind white folks, “Silence = Consent” so, if we are serious about developing caring classrooms and honoring the voices of all our students, we must be mindful of our silences and to what exactly we are actually consenting (White, 2015).

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Decades ago, as a queer, working class white student with a rather colorful past, I had believed safety was to be found in the refuge of silence and attempts to pass as middle class and, to some extent, it was. But it was only when I began to claim voice and break silence, to insert all my fraught and contested identities into the academic mix, that my education truly began. As an educator, the power dynamics have shifted and it is now my role to support students in bringing their full selves, what poet Mary Oliver (2004) calls their “one wild and precious life” (p. 94), into the educational experience. And to be sure, it is risky business navigating all these charged identities in the classroom, including our own. But I am heartened by the wisdom of one of my greatest teachers, Audre Lorde, a Black, lesbian, feminist, activist, and mother who refused to have any of her complicated identities erased. A woman who once told me that the work is always more important than the fear. So, I will close this chapter as I began, with Lorde’s (1980) words: “When I dare to be powerful, to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid” (p. 13).

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