

My Voice, or On Not Staying Quiet

kaitlynliu

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Abstract

Welcome to Next Gen sound studies! In the month of November, you will be treated to the future. . today! In this series, we will share excellent work from undergraduates, along with the pedagogy that inspired them.

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Welcome to Next Gen sound studies! In the month of November, you will be treated to the future. . . today! In this series, we will share excellent work from undergraduates, along with the pedagogy that inspired them. You'll read voice biographies, check out blog assignments, listen to podcasts, and read detailed histories that will inspire and invigorate. Bet. -JS

Today's post comes from Binghamton University sophomore Kaitlyn Liu, former SO! intern and student in SO! Editor-in-Chief J. Stoevers's English 380W "How We Listen," an introductory, upper-division sound studies course at Binghamton University, with a typical enrollment of 45 students. This assignment asked students to

write a 3-page biography of your voice. You may choose to organize the paper and tell the story however you wish, as long as you consider your experience in light of our classroom readings and conversations. . .Here are some questions to help you get started. You do not need to answer all of them, but they may lead you toward some important realizations that you can share through this paper: Have you thought critically about your voice before this class? Why or why not? If so, when did you first become conscious of your voice? Why? What do you love about your voice? Why? Who were your models for learning how to speak and style your voice? Have you ever wanted to change your voice? Why or why not? Have you? Have you liked or disliked your voice at some times in your life more than others?

For the full assignment sheet, click [Voice Biography Assignment_F18](#). For the grading rubric, click [Voice Biography Grading Rubric_F18](#). For the full Fall 2018 syllabus, click [english-380w_how-we-listen_fall-2018](#)

While the course usually seats mainly juniors and seniors, Kaitlyn was only a freshman when she wrote this powerful piece!

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The first joke I can recall took place in fourth grade; then again, I am unsure why it is easier to call it a joke rather than its true word, which I learned only three years ago. Perhaps, given the fact that an eight-year-old is typically still protected from most forms of racism, the fact that I could only categorize this statement as a joke back then is what propels me to do so again as a college student.

I remember that he hadn't even formed words, he simply yelled out sounds. He pulled on the corner of his eyes and did his best impression of an Asian man's accent from across the room, letting the whole class know his perception of my race. Ten years later, I realize that this incident was just the start of a lifelong endurance of misjudgment, bigotry, and the largely unwelcome narration of my life.

[“Empty Chairs,” Image by Flickr user Renato Ganoza](#)



"Empty Chairs," Image by Flickr user Renato Ganoza (CC BY 2.0)

In tenth grade, I applied for a student exchange program my high school had recently undertaken called Community Wide Dialogue. The program involved my suburban school pairing up with an urban school nearby to discuss, and hopefully dismantle, racist ideals within our city. Although there is no explicit definition of the word “suburban” that details an overwhelming whiteness of its residents, this seems to be the case more often than not. After being accepted into the group, I attended our school’s first informative session about the program. Walking into the room, I quickly noticed that of nearly twenty-five students, I was the only minority they had accepted. I remember thinking to myself, *Is this the best they can do? Am I a token minority here?* My school had, albeit scarce, minority representation; why weren’t they included?

Being a minority in a program specifically designated for alleviating such ideals meant that I felt very discouraged from speaking in a setting where discussion, specifically from the point of view of minorities, was essential to the goal. I found it was often the white males of both groups speaking for minorities. One day, we studied vocabulary pertaining to racism; this is when I first learned that the term “color blindness” was actually quite racist, as opposed to its intended meaning. Additionally, this is when I first learned the word for what I had been hearing my entire life: microaggressions. My experience suddenly became real; what I had been calling “jokes” was racism.

I felt validated. Being Chinese-American, I am lucky to be protected from more extreme forms of racism that members of the African-American or Latinx population may face. Similarly, I am a minority, but in contrast, I am not perceived as a threat. I am not, as Sandra Bland was, a cause for a repulsive increase in the ease of extending an official white hand. I will never be the tragedy that causes [Regina Bradley](#), a Black professor, to cautiously check herself in order to abide by her grandmother’s warning: “don’t attract attention to yourself.”

The most extreme racism I have endured lies in statements similar to: “Of course you did well on that test!” The only thing that surprised me is that these statements never came from strangers or acquaintances; instead, it was always my closest friends who felt comfortable enough to cause my own sense of discomfort. The most harmful thing about microaggressions is that it is socially unacceptable for the victim to verbalize their being affected by these hurtful phrases. When a victim acknowledges they are hurt, perpetrators are quick to cast their pain aside as hypersensitivity, working to further marginalize them while justifying their own discrimination.

Staying quiet had everything to do with who I was: a female and a minority. I let my intelligence show through my writing and my academic performance. Even if I wanted to speak, I was aware of the little relevance my voice had to others, particularly boys. As Kelly Baker remarks in [“Listen to the Sound of My Voice,”](#) “teenage girls were supposed to be seen, but when they spoke they had to master the right combination in order to be heard.” Of course, just like Baker, I, along with several other females, never could master this cultural puzzle.



“Quiet” by flickr user heyrocc, [\(CC BY 2.0\)](#)

I took after most girls when I say that I tended not to speak much in class so as not to make boys uncomfortable by letting them into a female’s darkest secret: *I was smarter than most of them.* My teachers knew, of course, but they rarely mandated that I spoke out loud. I developed an especially close relationship with my English teacher of two years; he was one of the teachers who had the most insight into my thoughts as written in formal assignments. In other words, he knew my capabilities.

In my second year of his class, he announced that there would be a slam poetry unit in which each student had to write a five-minute poem regarding something they felt strongly about. Most students were quick to write about their perception of the injustice of the school system. I assume this topic was popular due to it being deemed “safe,” meaning the majority of students had the exact same beliefs, and because, as I alluded to before with my deep, dark secret, who would want to make anyone uncomfortable by saying something meaningful?

I decided I would. I could have easily written a poem about a neutral subject that still would have been much more memorable than the others in the class, but my teacher had a faith in me that I decided I would not disobey by lowering my standards for the sake of my classmates’ comfort, so, I did it. I talked about being Asian.



“Poetry Slam,” Image by Flickr user Ländle Slam (CC BY 2.0)

I started the poem with quotes of microaggressions I have heard during my life. It’s said that opening with a joke can lighten the mood, and that was what these sayings were to them, right? I had judged their reactions rightfully; the crowd laughed at the pure absurdity of most of these quotes. When I turned the subject of the poem to how it made me feel, however, is when the class went silent. My voice shook until I reached the third page. I ended up winning the class award for that poem, but do not let that fool you into the amount of eyes that refused to meet mine when I finished speaking.

Their embarrassment is how I knew it had worked. People can cast away a few comments or corrections, but given a platform and five minutes of speech that can not be interrupted, people have to listen. More importantly, they have to listen to me. One of the rules the teacher had put in place regarding our poetry slam was that listeners had to ask each speaker questions after they read their poem in order to receive credit. Our school’s pride and joy, our white, male, three-sport athlete valedictorian, was the first to raise his hand.

“How often do you hear these jokes?”

“Three to five times a day,” I responded loudly, bluntly.

There were no follow up questions.

The word got around. I had people coming up to me and asking me about the poem they had heard about; they began to call it the “Asian poem.” I noticed immediately that the microaggressions stopped, and when a friend witnessed one of the very few I encountered afterwards, her mouth dropped, looking at me to say, “It’s just like the poem!”

My voice had officially become my own through... poetry? I had never considered the ability to find my voice and, in turn, myself through a writing form that I thought to be obsolete. I began writing poems about everything- immigration, love, mental illness, sexual assault- and what was most important is that I was *praised*. As a Chinese teenage girl, I was heard. I was heard by my classmates, by SUNY Oswego, by Ithaca College, by Scholastic. I realized that poetry could better consolidate and portray my thoughts on a topic than a simple speech. It was the art of speech, the cunning of rhyme scheme and line breaks that finally made what I had to say captivating to others because my skill was admirable. It was an acquired learning, figuring out what to cut, where to end, when to eliminate punctuation to portray certain emotions- it was a combination I actually enjoyed solving.

I ended up using this poem for my college application. I distinctly remember handing in a rough draft of what I thought to be the epitome of a college essay only to have my teacher promptly return it, saying, “You should use your poem instead. That is what is going to show your writing skills- not the typical college essay.” She gathered two other English teachers of mine to consult over the idea. Poetry was not the safest choice for a college application. One of the essay prompts on the application was very vague, simply claiming that the selection of this prompt would indicate that your writing was an explanation of something that the you felt was too important to leave missing from the rest of your application. The four of us easily came to a consensus: this was what colleges needed to see. Call it affirmative action, but I firmly believe it was the quality of my writing—the way it carries the sound and the force of my voice—rather than the subject that got me where I am today.

My secret was finally out; I have shit to say.

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Featured Image: “Voice” by Flickr User Laurel Russwurm ([CC BY 2.0](#))

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Kaitlyn Liu is a sophomore at Binghamton University with an intended major of English Literature with a concentration in rhetoric. Kaitlyn takes interest in writing about gender and race along with other intersectional classification systems. She has a passion for nonprofit work, including her previous work with student writers to raise funds for Ophelia’s Place, a nonprofit that provides support for those impacted by body image. Kaitlyn has also been awarded two gold keys for her

writing through the Scholastic Art & Writing regional contest. Outside of writing, Kaitlyn enjoys reading historical fiction and singing for Binghamton's oldest co-ed a cappella group, the Binghamtonics.

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