A letter/essay I've been longing to write in my personal/academic voice

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Dear Mom, August 25, 1996

I've been longing to write this letter to you. Since we're writing letters back and forth these days, I thought it would make sense to write now. I especially liked the two letters you sent to me in June. Your voice is so comforting in them; it almost lifts off of the pages. It's amazingly clear—as if we're in the very same room. And when I think about your letters, I think about your voice, and it comforts me throughout difficult times in my life, as it always has. Sometimes, when I read your letters, I think, "Some writers work all of their lives to write like this, as if they're speaking." You do it so naturally. It has become an indelible part of my life. Maybe that's why I always wanted to be a writer.

This is going to be the longest letter I've ever written to you. That's funny, but it's also sad, since you would think a letter to your mother should be more important than scholarly essays like the ones I usually write. Shouldn't it?

I've been meaning to tell you more about my work for a long time. And since you and Dad got divorced, I cannot speak to you both together. But, then again I always had to bridge between your two very different perspectives. Sometimes, I also feel a bridge between my academic life and my personal life. So many bridges. I want to tell you about all of the things I'm learning, all of the thoughts I'm thinking, all of the work I'm doing. I want to talk with you about philosophy and religion, teaching and activism, and life. Believe it or not, I also want to publish this letter in an academic journal. Other people might actually want to read this letter. It might even make you famous! Maybe this will convince other scholars to write to their loved ones about what they do. Academic journals don't usually publish letters people write to their parents, but I'm hoping one will this time.

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I'm sending this to a journal called *Western Journal of Communication*. They're printing a series of essays about “voice.” You wouldn't believe how many phrases about voice people use on a daily basis! Here are just a few I've noticed in my recent conversations: “A sea of voices,” “double-voiced,” “voicing your concerns,” “let your voice be heard,” “project your voice,” “voices carry,” “voice-mail,” “Voice of America,” “voice of doom,” “voice of God,” “legitimate voice,” “voice your opinion,” “add my voice,” “chorus of voices,” “authentic voice,” “marginalized voices,” “voices need to be heard,” “tone of voice,” “lower your voice,” “finding a voice,” “the author's voice,” “voice-over narration,” “raise your voice,” “critical voice,” “deprived of voice,” “vox populi,” “voice of caution,” “voicing opinions,” and “competing voices.” Maybe there are so many phrases with the word “voice” in them because voice makes up so much of our daily experiences. It seems to be an apt metaphor for how we think about who we are in the world.

Lately, I've been thinking a lot about the relationship between my thoughts and my “voice.” Actually, thoughts inside my head “sound” like voices. I hear my thoughts. So, when people say, “Say what you are thinking,” or “Voice your thoughts,” that makes a lot of sense to me. I often wonder, “Do other people have thoughts like these, and if so, why don't they talk about them?” I'm not so much interested in how voices sound or in singing voices. I'm more interested in “internal voices”: those little voices in our heads we hear but no one else does, things not yet spoken that may, perhaps, never be said. Do you remember when I used to tell you that your lips move when you write? That always made me laugh. I always wondered what you were saying and thinking. What weren't you telling us? I'm interested in words we don't say. I want to know why we don't say them. I also want to know where they come from. I want to know if the soft words you spoke to me as a baby are still rolling around inside my head somewhere.

I have other interests in “voice” as well. bell hooks, an activist who writes about African American and feminist issues in contemporary society, wrote a book called *Talking Back* which I read early on in graduate school, I think in 1989. *Talking Back* had a big impact on me, Mother. In many ways I think it brought out the child in me, the child who always wanted to say something but was often told, “No!” hooks tells us to work to “talk back.” To adults, talking back often means “back talk,” which is disrespectful. You taught me to respect adults, just as Dad taught me to respect all people with more experience on this planet than myself. But *Talking Back* helped me to remember 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. Part of growing up for me, Mom, meant learning the lesson in reverse: learning to speak out and not to be silent, not to choose despair over action, and not to lose the confidence that what we say may help other people. When I'm afraid to
speak, afraid no one is listening, and worried that nothing will happen even if I do speak, I often think of how you spoke passionately about oppression, and I feel comforted by the presence of your voice. It helps me speak up and out; it continues to speak to me.

When I began thinking about writing an essay on voice, I tried to think about my own voice. Part of what graduate school taught me was how to use an "academic voice": how to support arguments with evidence, how to write efficiently, and how to use a form of writing that other scholars could understand and use. Academic voices do not come naturally; like other voices, they have to be learned. Thus, just as I had to learn to talk back in order to become an adult, I feel the need now to talk back to the academic voice in my head. When I began this project, I thought, "What voice could be more important than the one I use to speak to my mother?" After all, what other voice could show joy, thanks, and profound respect and could return the sweet care and love you gave to me except my voice speaking to you? But we don't usually see that voice in print, a voice of a child to a mother. So, in challenging myself to do both at once—to cross the division between my personal and academic life—the essay became a letter to you. I'm not sure I can do this successfully, but I want to try.

As I write this letter, I keep trying to think of your voice. Hearing your voice in my head helps me remember my own. When I can't remember your voice, I feel sad. I was reading a new book by my friend Casey Lum who teaches at Adelphi University in New York. It's about karaoke! Lori would love it. Anyway, I was moved when I read his dedication of the book. He says, "In memory of my beloved father, Chi Kau Wong, whose voice I can no longer remember." I got tears in my eyes when I read that, and I cried imagining myself not being able to remember your or Dad's voice. Then, I wondered whose voices are in Casey's head now that his father's isn't.

My academic voice and my voice when speaking to you are only two of my many voices. When I first started thinking about my own voice, I wondered how my voice differs from yours and Dad's. After all, I've already begun doing things only to find myself thinking, "That sounds like something Mom would say." Anyway, your and Dad's voices are in my head, but so are the voices of all of my teachers and all of my friends. In fact, all of the people, objects, and ideas I have heard and experienced speak to me, and because in many ways I am and do what I have learned, they speak through me. Even dead things speak to us; ghosts from our pasts haunt us. I sometimes hear Grandma's voice telling me to play my Scrabble pieces or saying, "Now, let's see," as she's thinking about what word to make next and where to play her tiles for the maximum number of points. Voices are like little post-it notes plastered all over the inside of our heads to remind us of what we are supposed to think and say. Which voice do we choose from our repertoire of voices? And what if we don't recognize the voice we speak once it has been
uttered? People who studied rhetoric in Ancient Greece thought we had "places" where we keep things we say. They called these common places "topoi," but for some reason voices make more sense to me. It's like when you start singing a song you didn't know you knew and you think, "How did that song get there? I don't remember knowing that song?" Where did it come from? And [imagine the voice of Bela Lugosi here]: Who wrote that script?

I hope you don't mind my doing this. I've been worried that you might be a little uncomfortable with the fact that other people might see this letter. But it's a letter I felt I had to write, something I want to share with you and with people who read this journal. The funny thing is, sometimes it's difficult talking about what I do in the academy to you and what I do in my personal life to the academy. There have to be ways to do this, to highlight the overlapping aspects of our existences, don't you think? I want to use a voice that successfully speaks to two very different audiences at once, even if in different ways.

When I was doing my Ph.D. at Iowa, a professor there, Michael McGee (perhaps you remember me talking about him), told me in response to one of my papers to write as if I were writing to my father. I thought at the time, "He's got to be kidding! No academic journal would publish an essay written as I would speak to one of my parents!" The very idea of writing an academic paper that could speak to non-academic parents seemed impossible to me at the time, let alone for students with parents who cannot read, or for students without parents.

Another professor at Iowa, Bruce Gronbeck (you remember, he directed my dissertation) at one point advised me to "find my voice." I struggled throughout my dissertation and a lot since then just to "find" my voice. It never happened, no matter how hard I tried. And sometimes it has made me question whether or not I could even be a scholar at all. I just couldn't do it. Whenever someone makes a critical comment about my writing, I often understand that criticism to be about the fact that I have no voice, no "presence," no position from which to speak. Without a voice, who would I be?

Perhaps being without voice is part of the specific experience of being an Asian Pacific person in the academy, being positioned between voices. For instance, some people might see me as a typical Japanese man, while others might criticize me for siding too often with womanists and feminists. Either way it always feels as if I never quite have a voice of my own. Am I voiceless? Should I try to find a single voice and encourage others to do the same? If so, which voice should I choose? Should I accept the voice society has defined for me, like the stereotypical image of Asian Pacific people as paralyzed, quiet, demure, passive, voiceless Asian bodies? Or, should I challenge that voice and say, "Yes, I'm all of those things to you, but I won't stand silently by as you try to
define me and make me into something I'm not!"? As a bi-racial, bi-cultural Asian Pacific person, my voice is read in between already-constituted spaces, spaces from which other people already stand and speak. People confuse me for people they recognize, people who already speak to them. I stand in between the weave of voices, in a non-space and a non-location. I can squeeze between spaces yet never fully inhabit my own space.

Despite having difficulty finding just the right voice for myself, it's amazing to me how clear some people's voices can be. At a film conference held at UC Davis last spring, I saw a panel at which Trinh T. Minh-ha read a paper. Trinh is just down the road at Berkeley. She teaches and writes about film and actually makes very powerful films. After her talk, which was about voice, a local Davis professor asked her a question about her speaking voice, the physical voice she was sharing with us at the moment. My mind immediately began to reel. I began thinking that when I read Trinh's work, I hear her voice (especially her cadence, rhythm, and tone). As I read, I don't hear my own voice, I hear hers. I wondered why this happens to me. Then, I remembered that I had seen her film, Reassemblage, in which you can hear her voice-over narration during various parts of the film. The voice in that film is in my head when I read her books and articles. When I read her book Woman, Native, Other, I read with her voice. It speaks the words and has its very own pace. I wonder whose voice she hears when she makes films and writes, and when she reads: her mother's, grandmother's, or someone's voice she does not even know? Is it her own voice, and if so, how does she know it is hers? Of course, I don't really hear her voice when I read her books; it is clearly just my memory of it—a voice I recreate in my mind and then attribute to her—but it is so clear, and every time I hear her speak, I recognize that voice as the voice in my head. How did it get there?

It wasn't until I started studying what academics call "deconstructionism," "poststructuralism," and "critical race theory" that I realized that I don't have just one voice. I'm guessing no one really does. One professor, Jacques Derrida, who has become very popular among certain people in the academy, writes theories about language and about "voice." I love his writing, especially his book called Speech and Phenomena, in which he describes logic problems that language can't solve and language problems that logic can't solve. Anyway, he says we have two voices: the one we hear in our heads and the one we share with others, the conscious and the spoken. If you think about it, even if you never speak, which would be very sad, you still have a lot of voices in your head. Many voices are in our heads, and most if not all of the time we can't even control which voice speaks at which time. In fact, at certain points, how we speak may be "pre-programmed" into us. The voice may determine our action, it may speak before we think. One might say, "We don't speak. Our voices speak us." Derrida might add
something just a little different. He might say, "Even when we read, voices speak us." But, how do I know what he might say?

But poststructuralism doesn’t have to mean that we have no influence over our voices, or that our relationship to those voices doesn’t matter. Jacqueline Jones Royster, a professor at Ohio State University, wrote an article I should show you. In it, she talks about bell hooks whom she quotes internally: “I find it ‘a necessary aspect of self-affirmation not to feel compelled to choose one voice over another, not to claim one as more authentic, but rather to construct social realities that celebrate, acknowledge, and affirm differences, variety.’ ” That quotation reminds me of my own experience as a person of color, and a bi-cultural and bi-racial one at that. I mean I have a lot of voices in my head from a lot of different places, and though I did do what Professor Gronbeck said and tried very hard to find a voice that was “my” voice, I just couldn’t. I have so many voices. I speak in so many different registers. And, sometimes they all converge and come together—a din of voices at times, a single one at others.

I don’t think this is what Professor Gronbeck meant, but I do know that many people in the academy want you to have a singular voice, or perhaps “the” academic voice. They want you to take it up, to feel its presence, and to have others feel it, too. By taking up this “voice,” they think we would help build a democratic academy, one with a unified voice, one without the distress of an overwhelming cacophony of discordant voices. But despite the fact that people in the academy tell you to speak “your voice,” some people don’t believe we have just one voice or that when we all speak together that our voices are necessarily unified. Royster tells a story about how one time after she gave a speech a woman came up to her and praised her for using her “real” voice as opposed to her “academic” one, as if her academic voice was unreal, as if she simply put it on for this occasion and wore it like a mask. Royster felt the woman denied her the use of her many voices, the variety of voices she speaks, in favor of one the woman felt was authentically “black.” Listeners who expect to hear unified voices, whether “academic” or “real,” deny our multiple voices and perhaps forget that we are not born speaking; all voices are learned ones.

Mom, how many voices am I speaking within this letter? I’m speaking to you, just like I do when I write you letters. But I’m also speaking to a lot of other people reading this journal. I’m also speaking to myself as I write. And you can probably hear your own voice as you read it. Can you hear your voice speaking through me? Some of what I’m saying to myself makes it to paper, and some of it doesn’t. Right there, I’m speaking with many voices. But even those voices don’t fully explain all of the voices that I think of when I’m writing, even if I’m writing to two audiences at once. So very many different voices seem to come out when we speak.
Writing to two audiences at once—you and the journal readers—actually is very much like talking to you and Dad at the same time. You both had such different perspectives, and I always knew you both would react so differently, so I was constantly negotiating between positions by altering what I said and how I said it. And sometimes, I think because Lori and I are bi-racial, you two would communicate through us. You would tell one of us something to tell the other, and vice versa. I'm finding out that this experience is not the only part of my being bi-racial. There is a theory in Asian American studies called the “middle [person] theory” that one of my colleagues in Asian American Studies, Darrell Hamamoto, is studying here. This theory suggests that in the U.S., Asian Americans often find themselves as the “middle” people between Caucasians and African Americans, like Judge Lance Ito was in the O.J. Simpson trial. So, my bi-raciality, my Asian-ness, and simply the fact that I am a person of color in the academy force me to be a bridge, to work across racial divisions, or to do the labor of crossing boundaries so that others can follow more easily. Maybe that’s why I am rarely intimidated by people from other places, and why I tend to seek out conversations and relationships with people with whom I have the least in common.

I continue to appreciate the fact that you encouraged us not to fear people different from us, Mom. Although your family often despised Dad, and Dad’s family often despised you, and though your church refused to marry you and Dad—perhaps both because he was Japanese American and because you had been divorced—you criticized racism and sexism and encouraged us to do the same. Searching for voices that are not already in our heads may help us to cross many social barriers, don’t you think? Perhaps those who are most oppressed might take comfort in speaking to and through others. Humans could become “channels” of resistance, rather than being self-satisfied that what we already know is sufficient for living.

New research says bi- and multi-racial peoples have a unique experience within culture, because we are not able to speak with one voice or identify with one race. Actually, there is even a magazine called Interracial Voice, but I haven’t been able to locate a copy of it. Bi-racial people rarely identify with a particular race; hence, their racial identity is always in flux, or as I prefer to say, dynamic (racial identification is ever-changing). As a result, I think it is easier and preferable for us not to identify with one gender or one sexuality and to realize that we are never fully men or women, gay or straight, but both simultaneously; perhaps we are, necessarily, some hybrid form. Being bi-racial and learning more about it has helped me understand these connections.

A lot of what I’ve read about bi- and multi-racial people (for instance, Maria Root’s edited collection Racially Mixed People in America) says that we have unique experiences because we experience two different cultures and speak two different voices, but I’m not certain bi- and
multi-racial people like myself experience two voices, exactly. And I'm not sure that what we do experience is particularly unique. People who see themselves as part of one race, even marginalized people, knowingly or unknowingly have the voice of dominant society running through their heads as well. Keeping this voice in check, this cross-over voice, this voice of the law and the father, and not letting it creep into the voice box marked "my voice" seems to me a common experience no matter what marginalized group we happen to be talking about. For me, I'm simply trying to theorize, or explain the experience of, the bi-racial existence that I lead. What do you think?

What would happen if we had no ability to screen out what we say, if the words in our heads just came out and our thoughts became words before we could dam them? And what if all people had no damming ability? We would have no ability to self-censor what we thought. We would, in a way, be powerless and vulnerable, yes! But, we might also simply adapt to these new conditions, get used to hearing intimate, scary, perplexing, and shocking thoughts, perhaps just as I have adapted to being bi-racial. Part of what I want to do as a teacher is to cultivate courageous voices that successfully speak in the face of oppression. I try to think about what those voices would sound like and what they would say in concert. In the classroom, I try to account for as many voices as possible, while trying to understand the complicated way voices can interact when spoken all at once.

Though I'm finding out positive things about voice; there are a lot of negative things, too. For instance, just because you speak does not mean people will listen. For many people who work in universities, like myself, speaking does not always mean being heard. I hear this a lot from women and men of color and Caucasian women. Another essay that had a big impact on me (and on a lot of other people) was written by a woman named Gayatri Spivak, who taught at the University of Iowa for a long time. Too bad she didn't stay there; she moved before I got to graduate school. She wrote an evocative essay called "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in which she describes somewhat of a paradox, or a puzzle. A "subaltern" person is someone who, by definition, cannot speak. But there are many reasons why people cannot speak: Either they don't voice the voices in their heads. Or when they speak no one listens. Or what they have to say no one wants to hear. Even if they have something to say and people want to hear it, sometimes they don't speak the "right" language, or they don't have access to media or other tools that would allow them to communicate to people who might want to help them (and to whom they might want to speak). Perhaps their experiences are so terrifying or painful that people simply shut them out: "I can't hear that." So, the subaltern is a bit of a conundrum: it's someone who cannot speak even though people who can speak think subaltern people can and should be able to speak—just like they do. One of Professor Spivak's points is that just because we may want
people to be able to speak does not mean they can. It's a lot like a horror dream I've had where something bad is happening to me, and I try to scream, but as I try to scream, I find out I have no voice. No one can hear me or help me, because, no matter how much I want to, I can't utter a sound or get anyone's attention.

This reminds me of something I recently found out that I can't tell you. A colleague friend of mine told another colleague friend of mine something I'm not supposed to repeat, not even to my own mother. This piece of information could damage both of my colleague friends if certain people knew I knew about it. That's because the thing my friend told me is about me, but if people knew I knew, my friends would get into trouble.

This kind of logic—telling people things they are not supposed to tell others—is pervasive within the academy. And people get really good at not telling you things they know or telling you things and getting you not to retell them. But, inevitably, someone always "gives away the farm." Isn't that a phrase you use? While some people can keep a secret, not all people can. Sounds like P.T. Barnum, no?

This kind of atmosphere in which secrets should be kept from mothers is, as one of my favorite philosophers, Michel Foucault, might say, "panoptic." This means that we monitor or screen what we say so as to avoid punishment we expect to receive, even if we're not sure we'll get caught. This experience of always being afraid of being caught saying or doing something we shouldn't is really debilitating, but it may explain somewhat why we don't feel we can trust people with things we say. Hence, we keep our voices "boxed up" inside. Perhaps, the tiniest, shiest voice inside us, the voice that scares us when we think about it, the one behind layers and layers of denial, the voice we never let speak, never utter or even whisper, is akin to the subaltern of Spivak's theory.

When we do speak, it is so often a voice of desperation: a last act. However, it may be the first one to change things. By speaking, we hope to voice something that does not necessarily exist prior to its having been spoken; we hope to utter a unique thought.

As a scholar, I do have a voice, or at least I think I do. It is a privileged position to be in. Not everyone in society has a voice. By voice, in this context, I mean that someone has given me a mike and a podium. Not everyone gets a mike and podium, but I happen to have one, at least sometimes. My voice may not always be heard, but it is a voice nonetheless. That voice, however, may not always be productive. For instance, my voice may overshadow the voices of people who have less or no access to media. Additionally, in representing myself, some people may think I represent other people as well, which I do not. I speak for myself, and from my own experiences, even though some people may identify with what I say. My voice cannot stand in for other people's voices; if it did, it would surely leave out some part of their
unique life experiences and perhaps drown out things they would say if they had access to a mike. I have an obligation to make sure people do not think my voice replaces voices of other people like me.

When I first entered the University of Wyoming as an undergraduate, I naively thought the goal of the University was to speak on behalf of the universe of voices. I've since been so disheartened to learn over and over again just how often the University speaks on behalf of the United States, or on behalf of "Science," or on behalf of the U.S. armed forces. Rather than think of themselves as part of a global community, some people in the University continue to want to mark out territory, define national boundaries, and prevent a larger conversation from taking place. There is even talk recently of changing the name of my major professional organization, the Speech Communication Association, to the American Communication Association, even though more and more international scholars join the organization every year. I wonder if this is really a coincidence?

Another discouraging thing I've learned is that voices are constrained by social norms, by principles of etiquette, or by what others expect you to say. In that book I was talking to you about earlier, In Search of a Voice: Karaoke and the Construction of Identity in Chinese America, Casey says that even Karaoke singers, to some degree, are regulated by what their audiences expect. You can't just say any old thing you want, any time you want to say it. For instance, when you sing karaoke, you're not supposed to sing the same song the person before you sang. You're not supposed to sing songs twice. Actually, Mom, this is a lot like the academy. You're not supposed to write in passive voice; for instance, you should write, "Actors act," not "There are actors acting." The funny thing is, most academic writers write in passive voice, not active voice. Some people tell me it even "sounds more academic" to write in passive voice!

One of the big "no, nos" in the academy is plagiarism: you're not supposed to borrow people's work without giving proper credit to them for having thought up the idea in the first place. But, what's interesting is that three popular cultural icons in Western culture—William Shakespeare, Elvis, and Madonna (the singer, not the mother of Jesus Christ)—all made their careers by borrowing other people's work. They made huge careers by singing other people's songs or referring to other people's cultural practices. The academy is not immune from such borrowing. For instance, one of the major academic theories, psychoanalysis, relies heavily on the Oedipus Complex, as described by Sigmund Freud. But Freud's theory relies heavily on Sophocles's classical writing, Oedipus Rex, and Sophocles no doubt put a lot of what people said orally before him onto paper. Few people ever talk about versions of Romeo and Juliet before Shakespeare's version, "Blue Suede Shoes" before Elvis's version, or voguing within Puerto Rican and African American gay male culture before Madonna, or more
recently, before Jenny Livingston's film on the subject, *Paris is Burning*. People talk about those who made things famous, not the ones on whose backs stars were born.

One of my favorite books in the entire world is *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. It's a book edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, two activists in the academy who have taught me and so many other people about the lives and "voices" of many women of color. The book is a collection of writing by women of color. The title, *This Bridge Called My Back*, refers to the fact that women of color often have to be the "go-betweens" in conversations. They often take on the burden of teaching white women about racism, men of color about sexism, and heterosexuals about homophobia. Though I am caught between Japanese American culture and Dutch, French, German, Irish, Russian, and Swedish American cultures, I can identify with much of what these writers experience. I benefit from the lessons taught, the experiences described, and the politics employed in the book.

In fact, after I began writing this letter, I recalled a piece in that book by Merle Woo called *Letter to Ma*. Woo writes a letter to her mother describing her anger and attempting to connect with her mother, who often failed to understand why her daughter is angry, why her daughter is political, and how people have many different kinds of sexual experiences. I was struck by the fact that Woo is bi-racial, and by the fact that many of the women in the book are bi- or multi-racial. Aren't we all? But the particular responsibility that bi- and multi-racial people take up to speak across divisions—speaking across the divisions partially constructed by society between us and our mothers—is an awesome one, one that I would encourage others to take up, one that is not unique to us (although it is so often taken up by us), but one that may strengthen relationships while simultaneously questioning them.

Mom, unlike Merle Woo, I did not write this letter to you because I am angry. I always used to feel angry, and I still find anger to be liberating at times, but right now I just appreciate you for being there, for allowing me to express even the most difficult emotions and experiences, and for sharing them with me.

A lot of tears stained the pages of this letter: tears of sadness, of fear, and of joy. My voice speaks all of these emotions and more. I wouldn't even have a voice without you.

Love,
Kent

p.s. I thought I would include more information about the works I mention in the letter, in case you or others might want to look for some of these. Here, then, are the
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