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[Re]Centering Voice: The First and Last Domain of [m/y/our] Story¹

Dirk J. Rodricks
2013 Saurman Award Recipient

*Who am I? Who are you? I am because you are?
What is this mirror of life I look into and whose life do I see?
Man. Friend. Foodie. First-generation.
Christian, not enough. Queer, too much.
Other. Foreigner.
Able. Runner. Lifelong learner.
Lover. Musician. Actor. Human.
Yet I am because I choose to be. And because I can choose.
Here, this place...held by the memories of places past and places yet to be.
Existing in this moment, learning from time; the kind before this now and the kind waiting
around that corner.
I am when time, place, and circumstance converge and collide
with you and with humanity.
Straddling worlds yet strangled by reality,
I am a reflection of you, and yet an original of me – a cultural mélange; a melodramatic
contradiction longing to break free.
I look beyond the mirror to no mirages, only reflections.
I am where I need to be.
I am because you are.
I begin to think, hear, speak, and act.
Again. And again. And all over again.
There is hope. This is my voice.*

¹ [m/y/our] is used here to underscore the complexity of struggle between identification by self and perception by others for both voice and story. It also attempts to reflect the politics of recognition (Taylor, 1994) and issues of (mis)representation (Gallagher, 2008).

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It took me better part of a quarter century to find *my* voice and it still seems like I never seem to stop losing it and having to find it again. Yet learning to navigate and negotiate this process consistently has been one of the biggest lessons learned through my seven years at the University of Vermont and now beyond. As higher education and student affairs professionals, we are conditioned to project our efforts outward towards the wellbeing of all others, specifically our students and their experiences. Often, this outward projection comes at a cost to self. Even when there is a focus on self – we often nurture the physical and *Band-Aid* the mental and emotional dimensions. To be comfortable with not having all the right answers is an on-going challenge. I have painstakingly discovered that leaning into the *not knowing* has helped me [re]create and [re]center my voice. In a world of complex and often intersecting social constructions, Lather (2008) explained the alternative as no longer viable: “To not-want to not-know is a violence to the *Other* [italics added], a violence that obliterates how categories and norms both constrain and enable” (p. 228). This is a veritable struggle of balance and in that struggle, each of us goes through our respective journey of erasing, marginalizing, and silencing the very instrument of our narrative and story: The Voice. “How is it that we [can] become available to a transformation of who we are, a contestation which compels us to rethink ourselves, a reconfiguration of our ‘place’ and our ‘ground?’” (Butler, 1995, p. 131). This very question necessitates vulnerability. How can I embrace the vulnerability that comes with voice? I believe more than ever my voice is not only the instrument from which my practice emerges but also the very *fruit* that my practice must influence, impact, and yield. The voice becomes the center of this vicious cycle. It is thus primary and both the beginning and end of my practice.

As a proud Brown, “Third Culture,”² queer doctoral student immersed in post-colonial and critical pedagogies, I may appear to be one-step removed from student affairs practice. Yet, student development theory and skills test both my teaching (e.g., interactions with students) as well as my research (e.g., impact on research design and delivery). So while this reflection is rooted in the many parallels that mark academe and student affairs practice, I also ground it in the concept of *change*. I believe that in order for there to be something new, an adjustment must occur. There must be a shift, a change, a departure, and/or movement from the status quo. Moving from the safety of the *HESA bubble* to the sprawling urban cosmopolitan metropolis of Toronto and specifically the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) of the University of Toronto necessitated an adjustment. I no longer had the safety of a community that spoke the same social justice language or

2 David Pollock defines this phenomenon of *Third Culture* as person(s) who have spent a significant part of their developmental years in a passport culture distinct from their home (or host) culture and move back and forth between the two. When placed in a third culture, these Third Culture Kids (TCKs) or Adult TCKs (ATCKs) “frequently build relationships to all the cultures, while not having full ownership in any...a ‘neither/nor world’” (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009, p. 13).

at the very least understood it. As is typical of many HESA graduates, my desire to change the world was quickly injected with a much-needed dose of pragmatic realism. This piece reflects some of those lessons learned. Finally, change often follows loss. This year has been a difficult one for *The Vermont Connection* and specifically for the two current cohorts. Individually and collectively, we/they have struggled to put words and make meaning of loss. *What might this mean for voice?* Whether one transitions countries (as is my case), starts a new job (as is the case of my cohort-mates), or grieves loss (*The Vermont Connection* as a whole), there is a need to recalibrate and (re)center who we are at both an individual and collective level. Here is where most stumble. The stumble occurs in the belief that such recalibration and (re)centeredness must adhere to a certain standard that renders voice as *most authentic* – a one size fits all case, if you will. I need to seek authenticity of voice rooted in my experience and one that works for me. Johnson (1987) wrote, “the sign of an authentic voice is thus not self-identity but self-difference” (p. 164). Understanding the self in relation to the other renders the highest form of self-authenticity. Through this personal, professional, and environmental context, I present five lessons learned – all serving to give primacy to voice and what I believe to be the first and last domain of student affairs practice.

Cultivate Criticality

The moral imperative for student affairs professionals is to *critically* know the self. Criticality here goes beyond simple social identity memberships, cultural demographics, and personal and group histories. It is all of that and more. I am often easily guilty of unconsciously speaking from my marginalized identities rather than owning my privilege (of which there are so many). Doing so allows me to stay blissfully unaware of the complex intersectionality defining identities for those around me. In previous writing, I have called this “intersectionality blindness” (Rodricks, 2013). Being critical encompasses a deeper understanding of “identity symbiosis” defined as a critical consciousness of the simultaneity of marginalized and privileged social identities (Rodricks, 2013) that exists not only for me but how I may encounter and engage with others.

This lesson is rooted in regret. I let an incident early in my program control much of my experience for that first year. I lacked criticality or “conscientização” (Freire, 1970, p. 81), which starts with self. My anger took away any ability to see past my marginalized identities thus (unbeknownst to me) giving away any agency I might have had. I became a victim rather than a survivor. Criticality preserves agency despite the marginalization marking voice and story. While agency looks different for different people, I write with confidence of solidarity of those closest to me at the time. When criticality did hit (and it does often when you least expect it), besides getting my agency back, its greatest gift was my ability to discern which battles were worth fighting and where my energies were best preserved by

disengagement. As a Brown, queer aspiring academic, this has allowed me to not merely survive but rather thrive.

Engage Resistance

The secret to thriving in Vermont, Burlington, UVM, and HESA is not simply to realize that resistance is endemic to the experience. One of the biggest lessons learned quickly into my HESA experience was that everybody is on their respective journey. *“This is not the first nor will it be the last time I am the lone voice in the room”* is now a constant mantra but I cannot (nor should I need or want to) control another individual’s course. This again became paramount when I arrived at OISE. Not everyone speaks my language nor could I expect them to. As a doctoral student, choosing to disengage was no longer an option, I had to jump into the deep waters and swim against the rising tide. Criticality helped steer my discernment to engaging resistance. It became a matter of whether I felt battle fatigue (Cuyjet, Howard-Hamilton, & Cooper, 2011) was too great a risk that day and if it was, I better adjust my engagement with resistance. Disengagement is not retreat; it is an act of self-preservation.

Be prepared for resistance to your narrative, depth of identity symbiosis, and voice. Acknowledge the resistance and embrace it. There is much to be learned from how and why another resists you. That knowledge will deepen your identity symbiosis and further embolden your voice.

Embrace Vulnerable; Nurture Solitude

Each person processes differently. I talk to myself perhaps now more than ever. For a long time, I denied myself the pleasure of sitting in the stillness and embracing the pleasure of having a much needed aloud conversation with myself. For example, in the frenzy of *“learning to mentor”* others, I had forgotten how to turn to and trust my instincts, story, and voice when it came to issues about me. Now, as a student affairs professional turned aspiring scholar/academic, I have extensive conversations (with myself) often asking, “What would a student affairs professional do?” quickly followed by, “How can I do this differently?”

Much has been written about self-care for student affairs professionals. Yoga, playing sports, crafting, etc. have been mentioned as worthy ways to engage in some much needed *TLC* and I would agree; but, with one caveat. These must be in addition to and not at the expense of taking us further away from engaging the *torturous* vulnerability from being alone, sitting still, and letting thought converge with word against the framework of story. Indulging in some solitude (even for the extroverts) as a way to empower voice may grow your confidence and sense of self-worth.

Hear Others; Hear Yourself

While identity symbiosis allows me to better learn from others, I also believe that in hearing others I deepen my identity symbiosis as well. In listening to others, I am better positioned to hear myself. Such a reciprocity reassures and energizes my voice. During my brief time at OISE, I have been exposed to many new (to me) writings on critical thought. Rawlins (2003) powerfully laid out the case for hearing others:

Hearing others is not a passive enactment of being-in-conversation. Hearing voices, it says something about you that is critical. It identifies you as someone who has postponed speaking, someone who is reserving and respecting the space of talk for (an)other. It announces you as someone potentially open to the other's voice, at least in this moment when he/she (sic) is speaking. Listening in this way is a committed, active passivity. It is an opening in practice, conscientious listening...Even so, this speaking constituted by your listening matters only if you actually do hear, only if you allow the other person's voice and stories to reach you, to change you. For if you really hear what the other is saying, you cannot remain the same. You are not the same. Something of value has been shared with you. Hearing the other's words, stories, concerns, and particulars tells you this. (p. 122)

Cook-Sather (2007) eloquently captured the inherent challenge of cultivating voice through that of others: "How hard it is to learn from voices we do not want to hear and to learn to hear the voices we do not know how to hear" (p. 394). How easy it is then to get distracted and thrown off course; our vision and focus obscured by the privilege of position and its charge? How strongly might this ring true for the work of student affairs and higher education professionals? I continue to realize every day, in new ways, how I am *not* immune from the failure of silence as a means to collude, conform, and support a status quo. It often comes back to checking my airtime and choosing to take a step back and listen twice as much as I speak. This (re)centers both my *modus operandi* and *modus vivendi*.

"Forward Action"

Five years ago, I would never have imagined that my research agenda would be focused on teaching and learning situated at the interstices of race, gender, sexuality, and national origin with my Brown, third culture, queer voice being its impassioned motivator. These research interests expose my belief that action (social justice or otherwise) falls on a *passive-active* spectrum. Rooted in my dominant and marginalized social identities and their symbiosis, any empowerment of my voice is best witnessed in action – word or deed. I now aspire towards "forward action" – an action with *systemic* impact that can move a community forward. As social media continues its stranglehold on the way information is shared, I realize I am often

guilty of shortchanging my voice in favor of “social media armchair activism.” I refer to this as when (from behind the comfort and self-perceived safety of a virtual avatar) I *share* a hot-button issue and ask for comment from interested friends and colleagues. While such armchair activists are surely needed, I believe it neither systemically alters the status quo nor is it sustainable. Now, I will never be one to protest out in the streets. I have chosen instead to position my professional life’s work to hopefully be emancipatory. I adopt theoretical frameworks to integrate criticality in not only my literature reviews and subsequent analysis of findings, but also in my methodology. This is *my* “forward action.” It has challenged me to educate myself on identities I know little about. It has afforded me a powerful vehicle to constantly make meaning of my voice as I seek to give voice to others while being mindful of issues like (mis)representation. Wherever you may be and whatever you do, I encourage you to not only grow your social media armchair activism but also find your own “forward action.”

Conclusion: Making Space for Both Voice and Story

Change will always be a part of the higher education and student affairs world – each year brings a fresh student class rooted in a new point in history with different characteristics, achievements, challenges, hopes, and dreams. Is our success then contingent on the ability to adapt and to change? According to Allen (2013), space is “a perpetual state of becoming” and something that can be “made and remade” (p.61). Change affects all dimensions of being and becoming – physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, etc. Whatever the dimension, our respective space must hold (and grow) both voice and story and not to mitigate change rather despite it. I believe more than ever that the propensity to be even remotely effective here lies in the willingness to get vulnerable and question everything (especially self).

A critical presence before Grammy Award-winning recording artist Beyoncé decided to sample her on a latest self-titled visual album, Chimimanda Ngozi Adichie’s “The Danger of a Single Story” raised some provocative questions for me: ³

*Whose story is being told?
Who is telling that story? And to whom is it being told?
Where is it being told? And how?*

And finally perhaps most importantly...

Who is listening?

³ On December 13, 2013, recording artist Beyoncé released her self-titled visual album with a track entitled “***Flawless.” The track samples Adichie’s (2013) “We should all be feminists” speech at TEDxEuston 2012. See also Adichie (2009).

These are critical questions the value of which cannot be overstated. Life, replete with the “master narrative”⁴ (Stanley, 2007, p. 14), will have conditioned (read as duped) most into believing the aforementioned series of questions as a perfectly *linear* process [voice and story as interchangeable, right?]. Yet as social media (*re*) defines the way news is accessed, exchanged, and discussed albeit *au milieu* of increasingly entangled web of social identity markers, it would be foolish to believe that this perceived perfection is anything but a kerfuffle. There is no single truth and there are no answers, only provocations. I believe a deep provocation to all of the aforementioned questions therefore lies in the power of voice and the ability to find my own through change. But that is only half my battle. How and where do I learn to nurture, comfort, strengthen, and (perhaps if I am lucky) empower it to make the grand difference I was commissioned (and am committed) to make as higher education and student affairs professional? Simply put, to whom is *my* voice responsible? #endrant

The story and the voice are symbiotically entwined in space at any given time. While the voice may be the product and the story the root, there is a process to be understood. Perry (2012) explained:

We are primed to use stories. Part of our survival as a species depended upon listening to the stories of our tribal elders as they shared parables and passed down their experience and the wisdom of those who went before. As we get older it is our short-term memory that fades rather than our long-term memory. Perhaps we have evolved like this so that we are able to tell the younger generation about the stories and experiences that have formed us which may be important to subsequent generations if they are to thrive. (p. 75)

This is not new for student affairs and higher education professionals consumed with issues of tradition, legacy, ritual, teachable moments, and life lessons. We are encouraged to search for patterns and “repetitions in the stories we tell ourselves [and] at the process of the stories rather than merely their surface content” (Perry, 2012, p. 84). When I do so, I find I am better able to explore the different lenses through which I may interpret the world. I recalibrate, I (*re*)center. I become vulnerable. Brown (2010), an expert on vulnerability, exhorted, “maybe stories are just data with a soul?” Well, if that is true, then voice becomes the necessary catalyst to breed solidarity in the process that Perry presents. In the awareness of interconnectedness and through change, my (*re*)centeredness seeks solidarity, yearning for a shared humanity amidst the myriad of voices reflecting a plethora of story. #rinseandrepeat

So...what is *your* story? Where is *your* voice? And to *whom* are you responsible?

4 The term “master narrative” here references a White, heterosexual, Christian, Able-bodied, and Upper/Upper-middle class male standard that has been universalized as ideal at the exclusion of others and seek to support the maintenance of dominant group power. Also see Stanley (2007).

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