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Letter to My Daughter

Kristian Contreras
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My body is the first language I learned to speak. Eyes crinkling, stomach a flutter, the ache in my throat. Hunger, of course, for love, the pain of knobby-kneed bruises, and the satisfaction of saffron on my tongue. You can forget it, the way the body talks to you. Its ways of knowing. I've forgotten how to translate its messages, overflowing like voicemails on a dust-covered machine. I hope you stay fluent.

Like my high school French, the conjugations are blurry. My memory too scarred from years of yearning and exclusion. Eyelids laden with defeat, I'd lost sight long ago of the woman I wanted to be. My neck, heavy with gratitude, kept me focused—head down—on the scoreboard. *Tek wuh ah telling yuh*, your grandmother would chide, there is no room for complaining in this house; *dem wan tek er'ting but dem cy-ant tek yuh* education. The stiffness of my neck trickled down to my fingertips and authored the image of perfection, the allegory of the outlier.

I would make it, for her and for you, to the finish line. Flat-footed legs would carry me to the end, arms outstretched to the embrace of Otherness. A sea of white men and women welcomed me to the proverbial table and I did not hear my body screaming. With earned credentials, I breathed in triumph and opened my lips to sing my freedom song. I thought I made it. Yet the stiffness of my neck tightened its hold across my throat and left me voiceless. I tried to sing, but silence engulfed me. I did not remember how to listen to this body, these limbs that knew the truth. That embrace of Otherness meant trading in my “sighted eyes” and “feeling heart”¹ not for a seat at the table, but for a place on the menu.

Ignoring these harbingers of fate, I contorted my body into palatable morsels for consumption, a symbol of perfection—spine curved in subordination, grateful to be tokenized, a smile affixed to a numbed and unthreatening Brownness, and eyes perpetually focused on the floor and away from an authoritative gaze. This shrinking game of silence did not sound like freedom at all.

I did not know how to honor my body, one borne of immigrants and lullabies of Guyanese *patois* and Spanglish. I did not know the steeliness of my chest or how to refrain from bending my backbone rendered from the fingertips of our ancestors. I wish I remembered, was able to redo this path so you may never be led astray. I wish for you to listen to these warning signs and never fill your lungs with the weight of acquiescence.

¹ Schultz, C., MacLowry, R. (Producers) & Heather Strain, T. (Producer, Director). (2017). *Lorraine Hansberry: Sighted eyes* | *Feeling heart* [Motion Picture]. California Newsreel.

For me, these lessons came later, *wrapped in rainbows*² and sandalwood. Loneliness drew me away from the table for a *room of one's own*³, and bell taught me how to build my own table and how to sit at the head. Black women, our sisters, met me with hands outstretched at the precipice of defeat. They are your aunts, your cousins, your mother, our family. I learned to listen, exhale, and memorize the glides and fricatives of forgiveness. In worn pages found in old bookstores, I found Alice and Beverly, and stretched myself in the warmth of our people and of Blackness long ignored. With your Aunts, I cradled your future in my hands and learned to confront the wells of my fear. These muscles strengthened with the stillness of my breath as it escaped a once-mangled throat. These bones cracked with the discomfort of accountability and kept your mother upright in the face of anti-Blackness, once disguised as the safety of Otherness, now rejected as a tool of White Supremacy.

I want you to wrap your cinnamon arms around the fullness of your body, to forgive the times your silence, like my own, sound safer than your own voice. I hope you see that you bring more to the table than an appetite, and to be hungry to know, to learn is a gift and not a punishment. With patience, I hope you find your way back to yourself, to listen to the map of your own heartbeat. I want so much for you, to traverse this journey in tune with your body—never wavering in the allure of Otherness; to never feel the stifle of gratitude because I know that being visible is not the same as being seen. Remember your softness, readied by aloe vera and cocoa butter, when external definitions want you to be hard. Remember that this Ph.D. did not save your mother.

I hum now, the melodies of my freedom song. Its simple notes so familiar, they sound like the syllables of your name. I hope you listen to your body; I hope this life lets you sing.

Your Mother

Author's Note

I first read Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Letter to My Son* (2015) on July 4th, soon after it was published. I was living in Atlanta, GA and working as the founding director of a diversity and inclusion center for a mere four days. Nine days later, Sandra Bland was murdered by police on her way to begin a new job at Prairie View A&M University—her alma mater. After her highly publicized death, I scrambled to find the resources to design a discussion program to help my campus community members name, unpack, and move through yet another death at the hands of police brutality. I found *Letter to My Son* and voraciously read through each line; I finally had the words to name and express what I was feeling. I carried this discomfort, fear, regret, and panic in my body for weeks. In the days leading up to the start of the academic year, I traced the phrase "And yet, I am still afraid" (para. 8) with my fingertips so much that the ink smudged on my printed copy. I felt Coates' words wrapped

² Boyd, V. (2003). *Wrapped in rainbows: The life of Zora Neale Hurston*. Scribner.

³ Woolf, V. (1981). *A room of one's own*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

around my throat. On some days, I still do. Sandra Bland's education and burgeoning career in higher education did not protect her. It will not protect me. As I continue to navigate my own doctoral journey and reimagine what the possibilities of education look like, I still return to *Letter to My Son* and his book, *Between the World and Me* (2015). Both are among the most important pieces of literature I've read and connected with. I offer this letter to my future daughter in a similar fashion. I offer her hope, support, love, and translate my own body to be in tune with hers.

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Author

Kristian Contreras is a recovering higher education administrator pursuing a Ph.D. in Cultural Foundations of Education at Syracuse University. She is an expert in equity and inclusion education and has done this liberatory work throughout the U.S. in an array of higher education settings. Her research agenda centers on the constraints of capitalism, racism, misogynoir, and plantation politics on Black women's embodied experiences in the academy. Kristian is committed to reimagining the academy as a source of pleasure and actualization of bell hook's (1994) call for epistemological freedoms. She enjoys Black feminist fiction, eyebrow maintenance, baby animals, and surpassing the limitations often associated with marginality.