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# Our Sound Our Silence: Self Care in Student of Color Activism

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Our Sound Our Silence:

Self Care in Student of Color Activism

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Media Studies Senior Thesis Project

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## Our Sound Our Silence: Self Care in Student of Color Activism

For to survive in the mouth of this dragon we call america, we have had to learn this first and most vital lesson – that we were never meant to survive.

-Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*

Like the lesson of survival Audre Lorde mentions in relation to Black women and their positionality within the ideological oppressive structures of america, students of color on college campuses are still learning this same lesson as we navigate the institution. We are learning that these spaces were not created with our survival in mind – our survival is something we have to work for, to fight for. And that is what I intend to do with this project.

### **Introduction**

*Our Sound Our Silence* is a performative documentary centered on the experiences of myself and other students of color at Scripps College, and the Claremont Colleges, who do a lot of work and activism to make the campus a place where we can survive.

I am knowledgeable of and personally connected to this community of students of color activists through working at SCORE, Scripps Communities of Resources and Empowerment. SCORE is a social justice oriented space at Scripps College that functions to support students, mostly students of color, through programming, community building, leadership development, and advocating for structural change.

But this documentary is not about the work we do; rather, it is about the effects that doing the work has on us that often goes unseen. It will highlight the silent struggles that this community faces in terms of mental health – how doing this work on campus affects us emotionally, mentally, physically, and the fatigue we experience from working against and within the white supremacy and racism of the institution.

This, then, is the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well.

-Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

*Our Sound Our Silence* is important because the institution often views and treats people of color as machines who they depend on to do all of the thinking, programming, and action planning behind making the campus more diverse and inclusive. Often our bodies are tokenized by the administration who uses us as a shield or as proof to make themselves appear as allies. But then they don't advocate for policy change, resources, or address the systemic oppression that limits our capacity to be students on this campus.

Therefore students of color are constantly working to support each other out of necessity; we have to make this space better for ourselves and the incoming students because no one will do it for us. And while this work is very important and often rewarding our struggles to even survive as just students goes unacknowledged. The institution exhausts us and then silences us. We are so often fatigued from trying to survive within the institution that it inhibits our capacity to even advocate for ourselves. Thus we are caught in a vicious cycle of being too exhausted from already doing the work it takes to survive to do any sustainable activism that will help our future survival.

*Our Sound Our Silence* is playing with this disparity between what is seen or heard from us in our work and activism on campus and how we suffer silently in our quest for survival

### **Conceptual Basis**

But human activity consists of action and reflection: it is praxis; it is transformation of the world. And as praxis, it requires theory to illuminate it. Human activity is theory and practice; it is reflection and action.

-Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

Paolo Freire, in his foundational text for critical pedagogy *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, speaks about the relationships between oppressors and oppressed, colonizers and colonized. Much of his text is about revolutionary praxis – how the oppressed liberate themselves and their oppressors through a dialogical process – that he applies to educational pedagogy. But this speaks to all means of community organizing. Praxis is reflection and a process of critical thinking applied to action directed at transforming structures. It is often defined in contrast to theory; theory is intellectual fodder that does not necessarily translate into action. What Freire argues for is a revolutionary praxis; action that is informed by theory. This interaction between theory and action – praxis – that Freire talks about is the theoretical basis for my project *Our Sound Our Silence*.

My praxis is defined by all of my experiences at Scripps College and within the greater Claremont community. My Media Studies career has focused on media and social change as well as the politics personal storytelling. This focus has been supported through my interdepartmental studies that include anthropology, ethnic studies, and feminist gender and sexuality studies. I am able to draw knowledge from multiple academic disciplines to inform my praxis and the activism behind this project. The development of my praxis can be seen in the work I have done for SCORE. I have been able to apply my ethnic studies and feminist gender and sexuality studies to create social justice oriented programs. For example I worked on the Class Card Project which aimed to get Scripps students thinking about class privilege and the different intersections of class that affect how students navigate this campus. But more importantly, in terms of representing my praxis, *Our Sound Our Silence* is an extension of a project that I already work on. Sophomore year I helped co-found a zine called *Our Sound* that aims to provide a space for marginalized voices on campus. Each semester's issue is themed and we collect submissions from the community via any printable medium. Our theme this semester is self love – Our Sound (Loving) Ourselves. The power behind the necessity of this

topic for my community really inspired me to experiment with how I can participate and expand on the idea via a non-print medium.

### **Performative Documentary and Media Influence**

The inherently personal connection to the community and subject of this project is why I chose to pursue the performative documentary mode. My understanding of this specific mode of documentary film comes from the work of documentary theorist Bill Nichols who identifies six different modes of documentary film: poetic, expository, observational, participatory, reflexive, and performative. And while these modes are not mutually exclusive in practice and execution, nor definitive categories for documentary film, Nichols description of performative documentary best categorizes my project. Performative documentaries “stress the emotional complexity of experience from the perspective of the filmmaker him- or herself,” (Nichols 202). The perspective of the filmmaker is central to the performative mode in a way unique from other modes as they are often autobiographical in nature. Nichols expands on this idea and says, “An autobiographical note enters into these films that bears similarity to an essayistic or diaristic model for participatory filmmaking. Performative films give added emphasis to the subjective qualities of experience and memory,” (202). In my piece I engage with personal storytelling in an expressive way that does not follow traditional storytelling narrative form, which aligns with the aims of performative mode. My project is about providing a time and space for myself and my collaborators to be free in our creativity and means of expression. It is about us and for us; it prioritizes subjectivity and personal experience rather than making a claim to an objective truth for the viewers.

To make more sense of the performative mode one can look at Marlon Riggs’ 1989 film *Tongues Untied*. It offers a tangible example of performative documentary. It also serves as a specific inspiration for the content of my video. *Tongues Untied* addresses the personal stakes

involved in identifying as a black gay male in the socio-historical context of the AIDS epidemic during the 1980s. In his film he uses poetry, music, dance, performance, spoken word, interviews, and community members (like poet Essex Hemphill whom he worked closely with) in order to address the complexities of this subculture. As Nichols notes, “We are invited to experience what it feels like to occupy the subjective, social position of a black, gay male, such as Marlon Riggs himself,” (Nichols 204). It is this emotional and personal ‘calling in’ that strengthens the impact of performative documentaries. In regard to the form and purpose of his work Riggs says, “I moved more and more towards a non-linear, non-traditional documentary. After a while, I even abandoned the word ‘documentary’ seeking my own sort of embodiment and expression in video to represent these voices, their visions, their words,” (Riggs). The representational aspect of the film that Riggs mentions is what really inspired the content of my video, and what pushed me towards classifying my work as performative documentary. In addition his specific use of the theme of silence, how it is used as both an oppressive and liberating tool within the community, really struck a cord with my lived experience as a student of color at Scripps College. Riggs’ close engagement with his personal story and the community motivates me to further develop my praxis as a self-proclaimed student activist through media and media representation.

### **Intent vs. Impact**

Impact is an important element of documentary; it is influenced by the filmmaker’s purpose and intent although it is not exclusively determined by these things. As a filmmaker we can only have a certain amount of control of or foreknowledge of the impact our work has on those who view and experience it. First it is important to note whom the audience and viewers of this project are. Those involved in the project (including myself), our communities, the Scripps and Claremont College community at large, college campuses across the nation, and anyone

involved in community grassroots organizing are the target audience for this piece. This video is to support the work that we are doing and is an effort to build solidarity. But even though the video is inherently personal the themes, experiences, and struggles presented in this project will draw in any viewer as they are asked to share in our experience for a brief moment of time. Thus this project can have a much wider reach than just the specific people and communities it is directly targeted at.

The intent of *Our Sound Our Silence* is to speak to the larger importance of self-care in communities of color and grassroots organizing. We are so caught up in the capitalist systems which value production and active work that we forget that “the personal is political” and that just living and being is a political act and valuable. We need self-care because if we do not take care of ourselves then our greater work is not sustainable which allows the privileged and powerful to continue their reign. Self-care is any intentional action you do to take care of your mental, physical, and emotional health. This is realized in so many different ways. Some examples of self-care are: exercise, therapy, writing, listening to music, hanging out with your friends, and getting more sleep. The range of actions that can be considered self-care is innumerable. Self-care is very individual although it can be practiced collectively. And thus I aim for the creation of this video to be a process of self-care and healing for myself, my collaborators, and the community as we think about, reflect on, and express our silent struggles to simply be.

But there is no guarantee that the intent my project will be realized in the impact it has on myself, my collaborators, and the audience. There are some limitations and inherent flaws in the self-care aim of this project. *Our Sound Our Silence* is about working against the institution and yet it is being created within the institution of academia since it is my Senior capstone project. It is also important to consider the fact that this project is work. This project is a work of activism, the very work that I claim this project is not about, the work that exhausts us and impedes in our ability to be students. So how can this project be self-care when it is also work? Will *Our*



*Sound Our Silence* be a successful self-care practice for me and my collaborators or will the pressure completing this project further exhaust us? Are these two things mutually exclusive? This again just speaks to the complexity of self-care and how it manifests in many nuanced ways. It is important to note these limitations because it will influence how I develop my methods for this project and how I analyze the results at the end of the semester.

Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation and that is an act of political warfare.

-Audre Lorde, *A Burst of Light*

## **Methods**

I think that it is integral to mark the entire process of creating this video. Since one of the goals of my project is for its creation to serve as a means of self-care it is important to note exactly how this project was realized, from its inception to the final project including all that happens in-between.

## **Design**

Initially, as part of my foundational praxis for completing this project, I wanted to incorporate 2-3 community members into the performative nature of the video. My plan was to do an initial interview and then work with them to come up with a creative way to represent their narrative visually. In addition to these collaborations I would have my own space for representation in a performance in the video.

Since my approach is more studio-based, meaning I like to collect images and sound and construct the narrative in post, I do not have a specific design outline from pre-production. In terms of pre-production design I have worked out that I will include three performative vignettes that speak about my personal experience. Also, since the project is fairly short I

decided that 3-5 minutes was not enough time to adequately represent 2-3 performances including my personal narrative. Instead of having my collaborators film a visual performance, their narratives will be included as interviews that surround and inform my personal performative elements.

But because of unforeseen circumstances this semester, which will be discussed later in this paper, I have had to change the scope and design of this project. I was able to conduct two interviews with students, which will serve as my collaborations. But I was not able to film multiple performances for my narrative in the way I had envisioned. I was able to record one performance that I intercut with the interviews. The performance was also not what I had initially intended. I wanted it to be more reflective of the performances in *Tongues Untied* where I use both my voice and my body. But what made it into the project is audio of me free speaking about my experience in relation to this project with images that explore the campus climate of activism.

### **Collaborators**

One of the main participants throughout the process of making this video has been Scripps Communities of Resources and Empowerment. The SCORE office and staff have many responsibilities administratively but some of the key components of this space are the employed student Office Assistants and Interns as well as being the home to the five affinity groups at Scripps (known as SCORE Clorgs): Café Con Leche, Family, Wanawake Weusi, Asian American Sponsor Program, and Asian American Student Union. New groups that are advised by the SCORE professional staff are Sustained Dialogue and Jewish Dialogue – groups created within the past year aimed to expand the reach of SCORE to support more students and create an even more inclusive environment. Many of the students who work at SCORE, are leaders of one the SCORE Clorgs, or are members of a Clorg also hold leadership positions elsewhere on campus. And it is in this space and working with these students that I have really become

politicized, aware of our positionality in the larger Scripps political system, and passionate about joining the fight for our survival.

And it is in this space that I reached out to people to participate in my project. My two participants are Pam Ng '16 and Sneha Deo '17. Pam is a Scripps Senior who has various leadership positions on campus: Scripps Associated Students' Diversity and Inclusivity Chair, Asian American Student Union Co-head, SCORE Intern, Our Sound Editor, and Presidential Advisory Committee on Diversity and Inclusivity Member. Sneha is a Scripps Junior and also holds many leadership positions on campus: Scripps Associated Students' Clorgs Chair, Asian American Student Union Co-head, Asian American Sponsor Program Sponsor, The Claremont Shades Music Director, Co-founder of Code Literacy at Scripps, Disability Illness and Difference Alliance Leadership, Tamasha Bollywood Team Vice President, Board of Trustees Student Affairs Committee Student Representative, and Presidential Advisory Committee on Diversity and Inclusivity Member.

Each of these students are heavily involved on campus and have a lot of experience working both within marginalized communities and within the institution, which is why their perspectives are integral to this project.

### **Media Techniques**

Something integral to my praxis is community collaboration. Part of this is understanding and acknowledging my positionality as both a filmmaker and a member of the community.

Throughout the entire process of creating *Our Sound Our Silence* I have to constantly think about why I am doing this project, who it is for, who it benefits, and what are its limitations. It is also imperative that I constantly accept the limitations of this film and that those limitations open me up for critique even from those within the community.

Before the interviews it is important to develop a working relationship with the collaborators. I made sure that there was space to discuss the project, discuss their involvement, preparation for the questions that will be asked, and assurance that they will also be a part of the editing process and have agency for how they are represented. This is the foundation from which I practice community collaboration.

I conducted the interviews in a very traditional manner because of time constraints. Also I wanted the focus to be on what they were saying and not have their voice be distracted by visuals. For my performative element I recorded audio of me speaking in the moment about my experiences in relation to this project. These recordings were unplanned, unscripted, honest expressions of my thoughts and really allowed me to be vulnerable. They are supplemented by Scripps landscapes that represent the silent campus culture. But the paradisiacal landscape is only a façade that masks the chaos of what life is actually like at Scripps College. This chaos is expressed in the audio narrative and interviews. For an additional visual element I co-opted the Scripps landscapes by placing objects that represent the activism on campus in them. The most important part of the post production process is creating the links between the more traditional interviews and the performative element. My filmmaking style is very studio based meaning that I do most of the construction of narrative in post production.

### **Process and Obstacles**

I had to get reacclimated to being on campus and back in my Scripps community after having spent a semester abroad and a summer at home. But soon enough I had work to do and the cycle of the college semester began. As I spent more time in SCORE (I work there as the Head Office Assistant) and with students of color I began to see more and more the necessity of this video. The experiences that I want to talk about are so real; we are living them daily. As I got more involved on campus I became more aware of just how much work students of color do

and I felt uncomfortable asking them to do more work by being a part of my video and talking about their experiences yet again. I felt like participation in my video would just further exhaust these students in support of something that is within academia and the institution. But eventually I began to discuss my project in community spaces and amongst my friends and I found two willing collaborators.

But the nuances of the subject matter of this video were only further complicated by the amount of student organizing that took place throughout the semester. As I began laying the groundwork for the production of the video I was soon met by an obstacle – overwork and exhaustion – the exact issues that my video attempts to address and help me heal from. My community members and I have been working tirelessly this semester: presenting our needs to the Scripps Board of Trustees, programming events through SCORE, dealing with racism in the form of tone policing and silencing on Facebook, organizing against the inherently racist Demonstration Policy reform, continuing to work in our various leadership positions on campus, and much more.

These actions were put under a spotlight on campus after a protest and demonstration organized by CMCers of Color (student of color organizing group at Claremont McKenna College) sparked a campus wide movement of students of color fighting against institutional racism and oppression. This Claremont movement is part of the larger national discussions and actions that have been happening at colleges across the nation, for example, Mizzou, UCLA, Yale, and many more. Students of color at Scripps used the media attention of these actions in Claremont and across the nation to put pressure on our administration to hold them accountable for the many ways that they have been failing us. This resulted in a lot of student activism happening in a very short amount of time, much of which I lead and/or participated in. Needless to say, I was very overwhelmed, overworked, tired, frustrated, scared, and struggling to deal

with everything. This affected me greatly; I found myself both physically and mentally ill for a few weeks late in the semester. This definitely had an effect on the process of this project.

I was experiencing the exhaustion and fatigue that I wanted to talk about in this project in the most extreme way that I ever had. I was actively one of those students of color who sacrifice their responsibilities as students to do work against, within, and for the institution. My communities and I were burning out quickly because of all of the work we were doing to get students, faculty, alums, and administration to understand the institutional changes we were demanding.

I began to question whether or not my video would be helpful for this movement. I thought that it was pointless to ask my friends and myself to speak out yet again about the pain and struggles we face as students of color on this campus when we have been doing so all semester and have yet to see results from the student body or administration. How many times do we have to bare our souls before people will take our needs seriously? I felt like my thesis video would just add to this emotional labor that goes unacknowledged by the institution and everyone who is complicit in this violence against students of color.

Production of my video halted for a long time. I just could not find the will to work on the project because I was sick but also because I felt like it was pointless. I think that I was finally able to complete the project when I realized that I could focus on the self-care aspect of the video more. Self-care is more what my communities and I need in this moment so if I focus my energy on that then it could still be a successful video. I also put less pressure on myself for this video to be a complete representative of everything I have gone through this semester; it was just not realistic to expect this one video to be a summation of all of my experiences and thoughts. Thinking about this video as just one more part of the journey helped me finally commit myself to seeing the project through. And in the end I was able to finish *Our Sound Our*

*Silence* even though the process was much more challenging than I could have ever expected or planned for.

## **Results**

Thinking about the final video that I produced, my first thought is that it definitely isn't the performative documentary that I hoped it would be. Some of the performative elements are there but not to the extent that I had intended at the beginning of the process. But I am really proud of the audio narrative, which serves as my performative element, because it was definitely the most honest I could have been in this video. I also stand by my choice not to force the 'performances' into this performative documentary. This choice was critical in influencing how successful this video project was at both addressing self-care and serving as a means of self-care for myself.

Earlier I posed the following questions: So how can this project be self-care when it is also work? Will *Our Sound Our Silence* be a successful self-care practice for me and my collaborators or will the pressure completing this project further exhaust us? Are these two things mutually exclusive?

It is hard to qualify and quantify if something is a successful self-care practice. In general I think that the pressure of this senior capstone project, the pressure I felt from academia and the institution to produce a certain tier of work, made me resent the project as a whole. For most of the semester I did not find myself looking forward to this project or enjoying working on it. So in that sense I would say that *Our Sound Our Silence* probably was not a successful self-care practice for me. But I am also not sure if this is a fair assessment because my mental and physical health was compromised this semester because of the organizing happening on campus. So I do not feel like I was even at capacity to give this project a chance to serve as a

healing process for me; I was just hurting so much this entire semester in ways I had never experienced before.

I also cannot speak to whether or not this video served as self-care for my collaborators and my community because I was not able to involve them in the process as much as I initially planned. That being said, I think that I was able to use this project as a catalyst to have discussions about self-care with my friends and other students of color at Scripps. So in that sense this project allowed me to bring self-care into the community. But any judgments about *Our Sound Our Silence's* success as community self-care can only be made in the future, as more and more members of my community get to see the video and talk to me about its contents and about self-care. Additionally, its success can and will only ever be known within in the community and within individuals since self-care practice is personal and not universal.

What I have come to realize through the creation of *Our Sound Our Silence* is that self-care is a process. And it is because of this that I come to the conclusion that my initial goals were inherently flawed since a declarative assessment of 'successful self-care' is not possible. And that is ok. That does not mean that the work I put into this project this semester was for nothing, or was unsuccessful. This video needs to be thought about in the context of everything else I was doing this semester. It was part of a larger and longer process of learning about how to take care of myself while doing activism on campus. And so looking forward I know that I will use everything I have learned during this process to help inform my future activist work, how I interact with my communities, and how I conceptualize what self-care even is.



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