

**“Hey, You There!”:
Theorizing the Open Letter
as Methodology in
Academic Writing**



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Abstract

From James Baldwin's (1962) "A Letter to My Nephew," which laid bare the brutalities of being black in 1960s America, to Chanelle Miller's published victim impact statement addressed to her assailant, which provided vocabulary and was kindle for #MeToo, examples abound demonstrating the ways in which the open letter continuously surfaces during pivotal historical junctures. Although the contextual significance of this format of authorship is widely used in scholarly disciplines ranging from education to history, the structural significance of the open letter as a methodologic approach to academic writing has yet to be theorized, leaving questions that merit attention: Why is the open letter so often used by marginalized groups? What are the literary and rhetorical effects of the enclosed addressed between sender and receiver? Finally, how does this format of writing create and affect the positionality and subjectivity of authors? By writing a letter addressed to Academia/School, this essay makes the case for the open letter as something to be studied but also a methodology and study in and of itself. By drawing on literary theory, cultural studies, and research on writing in academia, this essay suggests that the open letter is an important form of authorship and argues for revisiting the open letter as a legitimate form of scholarship as well as an authentic form of academic writing in education.

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Dear Academia,

To adequately follow the quandary of academic writing, or “simply put, writing done for academic purposes” (Fang, 2021, para. 1), I would like to make clear the address of this letter. You, Academia, who we might generally refer to as School, is a modality, a verb and a noun, a word that has multiple meanings. You are a physical space that instructs and houses our youth; you are an edifice of enlightenment, a postsecondary institution where we grow as intellectuals; you are a school of thought, a discipline with which I have developed a love affair; you are a lens by which I see the world; you are a job for some; for me, you are the means by which I make a living. You are my everything. You have a long history of being many things, too. Don’t forget where you come from. You are a school, and any writing we do for or with you is of the genre academic. You are academic, from the Latin *acadēmicus*, from the Greek *akadēmeia*, the name of a park just outside of ancient Athens, the park where the philosopher Plato taught his students. Academic writing is and always has been for you.

Last spring, midway through the first year of coursework for my Ph.D. program in Educational Studies, I came across a call for essays on the changing landscapes of academic writing. As an apprentice scholar still developing my craftmanship and a fledgling teacher with only single-digit years of experience under my belt, by your metrics, I am just a novice, an entropic arrangement of uncertainty and randomness. Yet, while I pondered the boundaries of the call and my (in)abilities to speak to the matter, I couldn’t help but think about you. You are Academia, School, and I think you are to be confronted and addressed, directly addressed, in order to negotiate the preponderance of academic writing and the development of authorship. After all, you, Academia, are a suffix to the call for essays of academic writing, a call that in essence is about your rigidity and formality.

After all, there is in fact *a priori* to academic writing, and that *a priori* is you. The same processes that guided the growth of my penmanship under your panoptic guidance in the public education setting are in fact quite similar to, and result in, the form with which my writing must subscribe as a scholar: it’s all formalism from the very top to the absolute bottom. From the five-paragraph essay to the strict adherence to the layout of the journal article, you have rigidly structured the crafting of prose and have set in stone what real academic writing is with military precision, irrespective of the “spirit” and “inclusive manner” with which your style guides were created in the first place (American Psychological Association [APA], 2024). The founders of APA, for example, made this very clear from the beginning when they told us that the style guide is a set of procedures “to which exceptions would doubtless be necessary, but to which reference might be made in cases of doubt” (Bentley et al., 1929, p. 57). For almost a century, perhaps in the name of standardizing and maximizing production, you have dismissed the idea that style guides like APA were designed for standardized referencing, not writing and

prose. Unfortunately, when you approach authorship so procedurally, the form easily becomes the end in and of itself, and “when form becomes the valued outcome, then it has turned into formalism” (Labaree, 2020, p. 683). You are the path by which we, the intelligentsia or academics, your most ardent followers, are anointed. So, for the most part, we will oblige, as I, to an extent, am doing so here.

Yet the issue I draw is the way in which you are able to elide direct address, as if you are something real only in a metaphysical and ontological sense. Yes, you are real in your constituent parts: primary schools, universities, academic conferences, journals, teaching, pupils, classes, disciplines, and tenure. But you nevertheless retain a certain fictitious amorphism that is sprawling and fluid. In any case, you still dictate who gets to write, where, when, and in what way. bell hooks (1999) had you pinned early on when she told us that “within an academic setting finding one’s voice” is “often made synonymous with choosing a specific style and genre” (p. 83). A style of writing and authorship that, ultimately, makes you real. Indeed, the rigidity with which you prescribe academic authorship “under the panoptic gaze of quality indicators” (Handforth & Taylor, 2016, p. 628) hasn’t gone unnoticed by we who practise in your houses of worship. As is the case with any form of religious dogma, hegemony always comes under suspicion. Scholars in fields ranging from feminism to rhetoric and writing have gone so far as to argue that the “phallogocentric hegemonic regularity of the ordered and rational” (Handforth & Taylor, 2016, p. 629) of academic authorship is simply just “A Kind Word for Bullshit” (Eubanks & Schaeffer, 2008, p. 374) and that “almost all academic writing, and surely that produced in the humanities and social sciences, stand accused” (p. 376) in part do to the formal and informal rules academic writing and the unquestioned or un-played with use of style guides like APA 7th edition.

Despite crass criticisms, even Eubanks and Schaeffer (2008) suggest that you and your formalism are beneficial to the development of writing. After all, how are we to pass on written language if there is no template to match and no rules to follow? I should state candidly here that your contributions to the development of knowledge are invaluable. You create a space that allows for the abstraction of complex ideas and the evaluation of ideology (Fang, 2021). Your rigid systems of formality, rigour, and discipline have created a continuous dialogue across time and space. The pioneering cosmologist and astrophysicist Carl Sagan (1980) went so far as to argue that books, like the ones made for you, “break the shackles of time, proof that humans can work magic” (p. 281). A truly beautiful and remarkable accomplishment indeed.

Sometimes, however, your rules of writing are subverted. Feminist scholars have long played with the textual layout of academic writing, presenting novel forms of “article-text-quilts” (Handforth & Taylor, 2016, p. 628) and poetic, stream of consciousness prose (Cixous et al.,

1976). To build on these arguments that stress the significance of stylistic unconventionality in authorship, I am going to break with form a little bit here.

I understand that you will not accept me if I completely abandon convention and provide my thoughts outside of “the academic conversation,” so I will retain a respectable amount of scholastic merit. What I will abandon, however, is the informal shape in which that merit is achieved. I will not give you a “flash point” or state a hypothesis/question. I will not draw from a niche body of literature so as to be buried in the field. Rather, this text will borrow and draw from an array of fields ranging from education to feminism, theories of academic writing, literary studies, critical race theory, cultural studies, and critical pedagogy, to name a few. I am borrowing disciplinary cues from these spaces so that I can address your form, not your content. As such, I will address you as I would any other subject, by name and with intent. The intention here is to abandon what Labaree (2020) calls the “paint-by-numbers approach” (p. 690) to writing where “the form becomes the valued outcome” (p. 683) in a drudgery of formalism. I should say that I am under no illusion that I am the only author to question the purpose of your structure. Your rigidity, dogma, and subjective superiority of conventional forms of delivery are quite a hot topic (Armstrong, 2010; Covarrubias et al., 2022; Handforth & Taylor, 2016; Labaree, 2020; Norris, 2023), as I think they should be. However, as much as we would like to see a shift, many of us understand that “although academic writing conventions do change, they change at a glacial pace” (Armstrong, 2010, p. 59).

What I would like to do here is use form as a creative expression. I would like to make the case for the open letter not only as something to be studied but also a study in and of itself. My goal is to sketch out what the boundaries are for academic writing (what it does and for whom) and make the case for how the open letter fits within the genre. My hope is that by making you the receiver of this letter, you (Academia, School, and authentic writing therein) can become the subject, and the open letter becomes legitimized as a form of academic writing. Please do not be dismissive of me too quickly; this letter is not to invalidate what you have built thus far. I greatly appreciate what you have provided for me as a reader and a learner, particularly in the form of academic texts. To substantiate my claim that the open letter is worth consideration as an academic text, I will adequately theorize later why I am writing to you like this, so as to satisfy your usual requirements for arguments and rhetoric. For now, however, I would like you to consider the possibility of an open letter to address how your systems “remain curiously conventional and resistant to change” (Armstrong, 2010, p. 55). In short, the issue at hand that I would like to address is the structural absence of a working method that uses the open letter in academic writing. I am motivated to remedy this absence to illustrate the ways in which power functions both in who has access to language and in how language is used, the shape it takes, and the rhetorical package, or envelop, in which that shape is delivered. As a result, by its very nature, this letter must be disruptive of both the formalities of academic writing and the

conventions of the open letter. Should this letter strictly adhere to all the conventions of the open letter and forge all formalities of academic writing, it runs the risk of irrelevancy in academia. Alternatively, if this letter strictly adheres to the conventions of academic scholarship while simultaneously neglecting the shape of the open letter, the method of the intervention cannot be conveyed. Instead, I would like to offer a solution to the proposed issue to show you that the form is just as important as the content. To borrow from the communications scholar Marshall McLuhan, although it may be a bit of a shock, both operationally and in practical fact, “the medium is the message” (McLuhan & Lapham, 1994, p. 1).

Open letters seem to be absent in your body of work. Outside of your oeuvre, I have learned that there is something intimate about the open letter that attracts readers. It is an effective methodological avenue that very clearly conveys meaning, in part because the open letter invites intimacy and draws a reader in, but academia has in some ways given it the cold shoulder. You have never outright rejected the format, but you haven’t really embraced it either—there is no open letter as methodology in any discipline or field that I’ve come across, at least. While you ignore the open letter as an appropriate form of creative expression and knowledge dissemination in academic writing and scholarship in higher education, it continues to leave a large impression in various spaces, particularly the public sphere, where much of what you have produced remains inaccessible, hidden behind paywalls that my friends and family outside of academia cannot access. So, why haven’t you adopted the open letter yet?

You’ve allowed the format of academic writing to be so vast and to be accessed through so many different avenues. Indeed, as you permit, scholarly inquiry and academic writing can take the form of story-telling through narrative inquiry (Bell, 2002; Coulter et al., 2007; Hendry, 2009) and data collection through reflections of lived experience in autoethnography (Couture, 2021; Laurendeau, 2011; Lillis, 2008). Qualitative researchers use autoethnographic forms of “narrative inquiry” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004), which informs the study of “stories, storied lives, and how participants come to understand their own story through retelling and interpreting their experiences” (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 93). Although I see the merit in erudite methodologies and approaches to academic writing, you’ve gone so far as to permit the use of arts-based approaches to academic research and writing (Barone et al., 2012; De Cosson & Irwin, 2004), an approach that “grasps our imaginations, grabs a hold of our souls, and unabashedly strives to affect our very ways of living, being, and co-being, as researchers, as social scientists, as people” (Finley, 2014, p. 531). I also understand that you have embraced writing similar to the open letter, such as Sameshima’s (2007) bildungsroman, but you have not allowed yourself to be on the receiving end, to be subject to the gaze, a testament to how your panoptic forms of power are concentrated—that is, on us and away from you. Unfortunately, you have not allowed us to flesh out the theoretical, rhetorical, discursive, and political implications of a very useful and impactful form of authorship. Suffice it to say that it seems almost impossible

for traditional authorship in academia to be communicative without phasing into common grooves: introduction, thesis statement, walk through paragraph (“In this essay, I first do this... then do this...”), present evidence, data analysis, and reframe central points in the conclusion.

So, I must ask, what do you make of the open letter as a medium of communication, research, and knowledge dissemination? What about the open letters outside academia that have gravitas? I mean the big ones. The kinds of letters that eclipse cultural conversations about race, sexual assault, and education that everyone seems to know about and have an opinion on even though they were not the intended receiver. The ones that bounce around the news, peer groups, and the social media sphere with the force of lightning. The ones that are taken up as vanguards of political and cultural movements are the ballistae of social justice. The ones where survivors of sexual assault directly address their abusers; where the inheritors of white supremacy, structural racism, and colonial conquest share the realities of life with their children and nephews; and where some members of the generation in line to inherit a warming world express concern about how inchoate media coverage of the climate crisis “must hold the people in power accountable for their actions, or inactions” (Thunberg & Nakate, 2021, para. 5).

Thunberg and Nakate (2021) warn the media that:

You are among our last hopes. No one else has the possibility and the opportunity to reach as many people in that extremely short timeframe we have. We cannot do this without you. The climate crisis is only going to become more urgent. We can still avoid the worst consequences; we can still turn this around. But not if we continue like today. You have the resources and the possibilities to change the story overnight. (para. 6)

Indeed, many are arguing that change is overdue and that “we need to reimagine and build new systems for research and academic writing, especially those that center on the experiences of minoritized groups” (Covarrubias et al., 2022, p. 126).

This is not to say that you have completely neglected the voice of the subaltern, the Other, and the marginalized. You’ve certainly established an appreciation for the postcolonial with all your studies in literature, subversions, and mimicry (Ashcroft et al., 2002; Burney, 2012; Shohat & Stam, 1994; Williams & Chrisman, 1994). But what are the alternative forms that this writing can take that can empower minoritized and marginalized groups? I suggest that the open letter is one of those forms. But why do they continue to use the open letter? You’ve been quiet on this front. Maybe it is because the open letter has a bad reputation, like a whistleblower exposing the crimes of the Empire. Maybe because it’s too political, too hostile, too raw, and lays bare your fundamental paradox and contradiction; the academy, Academia, School, are inherently political spaces despite your desire for neutrality. Like the impossibility of depoliticized and uncontextualized education, the open letter forces the reader to read through this faux neutrality and objectivity inherent to authorship. It is not interested in genre, academic

tradition, or engaging in a disciplinary conversation. It is a one-way message meant only for the receiver. It is prose that cannot be denied. The open letter is inherently political. In effect, the open letter is often used by the marginalized, the subaltern, and the Other. James Baldwin (1993) certainly showed us that. His seminal letter, "My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation," is earth shaking in its directness. Baldwin (1993) writes to his nephew:

You were born where you were born and faced the future that you faced because you were black and for no other reason. The limits of your ambition were, thus, expected to be set forever. You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you were a worthless human being. You were not expected to aspire to excellence: you were expected to make peace with mediocrity. (p. 7)

By outlining what it means to be Black in 1960s America and directing his attention only on his nephew, Baldwin's letter endures as an essential text in history, literary studies, philosophy, education, and African American studies (Farred, 2015; Ferriter, 2016; Hove, 2023), in part because its intimacy is the intention and the medium is the message. Even though it is referred to widely and discussed often by scholars in academia, the significance of the literary form of Baldwin's work and its importance as a methodology in academic writing remain unaddressed. The same can be said about Ta-Nehisi Coates's letter to his son, which, like Baldwin, was also published in the form of a book. Coates's (2015) *Between the World and Me* received numerous accolades and a tsunami of attention in the popular press and the public sphere, the effects of which we are still experiencing today (Alexander, 2015; Hamilton, 2015; Sandhu, 2015). Just a few months ago, in fact, a good friend of mine asked me if I had read it. Obviously, he had forgotten the recommendation I gave him in 2015.

Nevertheless, outside of the Black intellectual tradition, the open letter has also been a way to make sense of the brutalities and deplorable conditions many Indigenous people endure within what I refer to as a schizophrenic Canadian settler colonial context. Mitchell Moise's (2017) *Letter to Cody*, in which he wrote "for an audience of one—his son Cody" (Gerein, 2017, para. 3) is a vivid reminder of that. In his own words, Moise (2017) writes to his son:

I hope you use this story and these words as a way for me to metaphorically break a healthy trail for you, for you to use in choosing to take a healthy and positive path in life. I have laid the first few steps for you to follow, now I hope you may choose to lay the next, all for the following generations. ... I am sharing my story with you and hoping that by facing my own truth, that we can stop this systemic cycle of abandonment, neglect and abuse from taking root in the next generations' lives and bring this traumatic legacy to its final end.

We've also seen the open letter as a form of authorship that provides vocabulary for social movements for and about women and sexual violence. Chanelle Miller's victim impact statement is a good example of this. After being berated, humiliated, and dehumanized as nothing more than "Jane Doe" following her unconscious digital penetration and likely attempted rape, Chanelle Miller was able to address her abuser directly and openly. The victim impact statement Miller read out loud in court and later allowed to be published online (Baker, 2016) was especially potent and powerful. After first addressing the judge with "Your Honor, if it is all right, for the majority of this statement I would like to address the defendant directly," she afforded herself agency (Baker, 2016, para. 5). When she addressed her assailant with "You don't know me, but you've been inside me, and that's why we're here today" (Baker, 2016, para. 6), the subject of the address, in this case Brock Turner, became the subject of the author's directed gaze. As a result, the author is afforded power. Not only did Miller address Turner, but she also addressed girls everywhere when she surmised:

And finally, to girls everywhere, I am with you. On nights when you feel alone, I am with you. When people doubt you or dismiss you, I am with you. I fought everyday for you. So never stop fighting, I believe you. ... Although I can't save every boat, I hope that by speaking today, you absorbed a small amount of light, a small knowing that you can't be silenced, a small satisfaction that justice was served, a small assurance that we are getting somewhere, and a big, big knowing that you are important, unquestionably, you are untouchable, you are beautiful, you are to be valued, respected, undeniably, every minute of every day, you are powerful and nobody can take that away from you. To girls everywhere, I am with you. Thank you. (Baker, 2016, para. 74)

Although Miller later recounted her experiences in her memoir *Know My Name*, Miller (2019) herself recognized the significance of reading and sharing the direct address, which was very much kindle for #MeToo and the burgeoning feminist movement of our time. Moreover, she also has a hard time reconciling the role that you played in her ordeal. Less we forget that Miller's assault occurred in academia, on a university campus. You have a stake in this too.

It almost seems as if people are speaking and you, School, are not listening. That such works as Baldwin's, Coates's, and Miller's exist, that they can, for the most part, be taken up by scholars in academia, and that this very letter can exist, indicates that there is something missing in your repertoire. I think we are both coming to terms with the schism, an enigma, what Derrida (1985) might call the "strange cleavage" (p. 19) of "différance" (p. 18), which captures the ways in which the open letter poses a sense of difference that is not purely "otherness" but rather something in between. Derrida's theories of how difference-not-so-different occurs might be helpful for elucidating how the open letter shifts the valence of academic writing while maintaining the centre. For "différance," Derrida (1985) plays with letter signs—switching the

second “e” for and “a”—to unsettle the word “difference.” In doing so, “différance maintains our relationship with that which we necessarily misconstrue, and which exceeds the alternative of presence and absence” (p. 20). Although it is active and moving, *différance*, like the open letter in academic writing, produces something new while also retaining a likeness to its other meaning. Really, the intention of the open letter is not so different from the intention of all other forms of academic scholarship: to identify a phenomenon and provide an analysis of that phenomenon. The objective of what you, Academia, would like us to do with academic texts is to provide a space where discourse can be interpreted, where knowledge can help inform practice, and where power relations can be brought into question. The open letter is very helpful here and does exactly what you have set your writings out to do. The main difference is that the open letter’s directedness results in textual and contextual authorial empowerment.

An authorial empowerment reduces merely to a rhetorical power, perhaps, but nonetheless a power. A power that comes to life linguistically through authorship and writing that makes the subject “other” and out of place. As Foucault (1995) reminds us, “power exists only when it is put into action” (p. 219) and that action can only result from a relation of power. Relationally, the receiver of the letter is “‘the other’ (the one over whom power is exercised)” who is “thoroughly recognized and maintained to the very end as a person [or entity] who acts” (p. 220). This relationship breeds “a whole field of responses, reactions, results, and possible interventions” to open up (p. 220). Foucault is useful for our purposes here because he provides a framework for how power is something that can be directed discursively, linguistically, and, of course, materially. In other words, the open letter lays bare how power relations exist rhetorically. Because it does not engage in a dialectic, to follow its narrative and imposition requires following the sender’s rhetorical path. This is not to say that the open letter is indefensible and that it cannot be read critically; all readers have the capacity to be critical of all texts, academic or otherwise. Rather, the process and intent of the open letter follow a similar path of encoding and decoding famously mapped by Stuart Hall (1999).

Hall (1999) provides us with a sound theoretical model for how messages are produced and disseminated. He wanted us to understand that deriving meaning from technically sophisticated processes like film and television requires understanding breaks in the system of generating meaning and receiving meaning through discourse. Most important to Hall (1999) is that meaning can change from the site of production to reception, from the various stages in a film’s production to the moment it is received by audiences, for example. Like the chain of meaning we use to analyze media, the open letter follows a specific line from production to reception—from sender to receiver. Unlike the model for media production and reception, however, the open letter leaves no room for multiple meanings. There is no room or space for meaning to be intercepted by discourse. The open letter is what Hall (1999) might refer to as “degree zero in language” (p. 511). Power relations at the point of production are guaranteed to

fit at the point of consumption and in the interstitial space in between. Discourse cannot be interpreted or changed. There is no polysemy here. Just by addressing you, School, the boundaries of our relationship (between Academia and author) are confined to our subject positions (“you” and “I”). By making you subject, the parameters and relations that constitute this academic work are forced to be renegotiated.

The use of the pronouns “I” and “you” is of the utmost importance here. They are what separates the open letter from other formal pieces of writing like the memoir, the autobiography, the op-ed, and the positivist ontologies of much of the writing produced in your name because of the two subjects enclosed within the address. Still, you, Academia/School, dictate what constitutes real academic vistas and take for granted what the open letter offers as a form of academic pursuit: a rupture from an enforced scholastic interpellation. By enforced scholastic interpellation, I am referring to the Althusserian dictum of “hailing” the subject (Althusser, 1970, 2006). He is worth quoting here at length:

I shall then suggest that ideology “acts” or “functions” in such a way that it “recruits” subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or ‘transforms’ the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: “Hey, you there!” (Althusser, 2006, p. 174)

I understand that academic writing is not a universal monolith and that there are various styles comprised in the genre “academic,” many of which you might be able to find in this special issue. Nonetheless, a constant that does run the gamut of academic writing are the ways in which you structure the process to be just as ideological as it is stylistically and disciplinarily linguistic. Academic writing is, after all, a form of labour production and a requirement for promotion as much as it is a pursuit of knowledge creation and dissemination. Therefore, it does not exist outside of political economy and ideology (Armstrong, 2010). Yes, ideas grown from academic writing are imports that generate surplus value to be sold on the market. We do this (I do this act now) so that you can continue to function under capital and so that I can fit within that function. Nevertheless, you are not without subjectivity here. You are a superstructure, and you reproduce relations of production and equip individuals to respond as subjects through academic authorship, thereby constituting a forced “objectivity” by means of ideological and social subjectivity. You “hail” us—academics, authors, scholars, and workers—as subject forms that pre-exist our individuality, and you succeed, for the most part, in reproducing existing relations of production through the taken-for-granted “normal” forms of academic writing. You have clearly taken notes from the machinations and governance of capital. Please do not assume that adaptation has gone unnoticed.

I am not alone in my positioning you as subject and suspect. There is a paradigm shift occurring right under your feet, and I am unsure as to whether or not you are equipped to handle it. Your “academic manifestations of colonial governance” (Morgensen, 2012, p. 806) are becoming increasingly unstable and denaturalized. How are you going to deal with what Thomas King (2013) refers to as the “inconvenient Indian” lurking within your various departments? How are you going to make room for Indigenous methodologies of stories, relationships, and ceremonies (Rigney, 1999)? How are you to make sense of “Indigenous epistemologies and the specific beliefs and practices of the communities which they originate and which they sustain” (McLerran, 2023, p. 456)? You have done a lot of damage to a lot of people, communities, and cultures to become what you are today. You have to come to terms with your colonial roots, your racist roots, and your sexist, homophobic roots. I don't proclaim to know the prognosis, but I hope you can get there.

* * *

I will digress and say that there is incongruity to the arguments presented in this letter. I have used “the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house,” as Audre Lorde (2007, p. 112) writes. That I am able to use your tools to illustrate your gaps and shortcoming shows promise on your part to the possibility of your vistas. By your very nature, you are not static and fixed, and you provide the very conditions necessary for your own growth. I hope this letter shows you that.

The open letter is married to the intimate and personal process of language acquisition, curation, and mobilization inherent to the development of authorship. I see authorship as an essential link in the chain that connects theory to praxis in any educational setting. I have written in this fashion so you may be able to reconcile how the convoluted process of academic authorship occurs with some alternative spaces where it should continue to be examined. The pace at which you evolve and adapt is no longer sufficient for the purpose that you serve. The world is moving very fast, and I am afraid you may get left behind in the shuffle.

I assume it seems strange that I address you directly. The process of writing this has felt quite unnatural, something I have never really experienced before. But I think it has to be done. There are places to be explored and works that are not yet real that need to be produced. There are voices that are speaking that have not yet been heard. Perhaps by engaging directly and with intent, the results of this letter can help create the conditions to materialize academic authorship currently waiting in the queue of creativity—authorship that can bring about a paradigmatic shift for you.

I have written this letter to you in an attempt to paint your silhouette and see your contours because I desperately want to understand you, but every step of the way, you are becoming increasingly difficult to comprehend. Are you the rising tide that raises all ships, or are you a

force that elevates the few at the expense of the many? Are you the place where we can grow as creative intellectuals, or do you stymie differences in favour of hegemony? Why, in order to be legitimate within your traditional conventions, does my voice and my words, or anybody's voice and words for that matter, need to be moulded and crafted around established theories, methodologies, and structures, many of which, as I have addressed above, are the legacy of brutality and the machinations of capital? Would you prefer my words and sentences to be more formulaic, my syntax more robotic? As if they were built on an assembly line and spit out by an AI, ChatGPT?

... Insert a prompt [the changing landscapes of academic writing]

... copy response ...

... submit for publication.

This can very easily be done, if it hasn't already. Such an approach would, without question, make my life substantially easier because the product that you allegedly desire would be readily available to you, like a warm cheese burger at a fast-food joint. But I don't want to feed that to you, and I honestly don't think you want to eat it. However, if you continue to sequester individual voices and real human creative expression in your quest for formalism, that very well may be what you get: simulacra and simulation, a copy of a copy of a copy of a copy of a copy of a copy, ad infinitum.

I so desperately want to wield you, but I can't seem to do it the right way. You tell me that in order to be welcomed in your ranks, I have to create new knowledge, but I have to do it the same way it's been done before. So, newish knowledge? I so desperately want to master you and share you with others through teaching, but I have to be obedient to established orthodoxy and structures of hierarchy in education in order to do so. Where is the room for difference? Where is there space to expand and grow? This, School, is a defining characteristic of your internal contradictions. These contradictions keep me up at night. These contradictions have brought tears to my eyes.

Not all is lost, though. I think we are getting somewhere. Reconciliation happens in many different ways. We are going to have to come to some kind of agreement because we cannot have this standoff indefinitely. Something is going to have to be given. Me writing this to you is, quite simply, enigmatic, and perhaps shows promise for alternative ways of knowing, writing, conveying meaning, and sharing knowledge.

That my voice may be heard and shared through one of your esteemed channels is a testament to how social change can be the result of small, incremental shifts that occur both intentionally and by accident. In truth, I wasn't supposed to be here. I was told by many of your gatekeepers

that these words were an unlikely outcome of my sojourn through primary and secondary education; you know this. We are going to have to reconcile how a struggling kid of colour, criminalized as a youth in school, would go on to be gainfully employed in that very space, publishing work using the language he was unwilling to access on your terms (Rickards, 2020, 2021, 2023). I have learned during my time under your guidance and in your service that you deal in favouritism. I was never at the top of your list, and I still don't think I am now. The truth is, I wrote this letter because I have a profound respect for you, for what education stands for, and for what education has the capacity for. But I also wrote this letter to prove to you that I have agency within you.

I have attempted to show you how authorship confers power and that the subject position of the sender–receiver matters. In this chain of sender–receiver relations, power is conferred and directed and cannot be subject to interpretation. This rhetorical relation is why critical pedagogy remains such a staple of your scholarship in education (Darder et al., 2017). It's as if you've prescribed critical pedagogy for us (readers, teachers, and scholars) so that we can help you with something that you (or we) can't necessarily do alone. Tangible change in education is why the work of Paulo Freire (2000) is so revered and continues to endure. It should come as no surprise then that the open letter can be taken up as a legitimate form of academic writing but also a ballista of social critique. The open letter democratizes power. As a result, anything can be the recipient of its address. Even you.

With love,

Nicholas Rickards

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