



## WHEN YOUR VOICE IS IMPORTANT

Imani Washington

As a black female, I was born with two strikes against me. My mother knew this and raised my siblings and me with the same basic idea: we must be above average to be considered equal. This is why I was reading long before I stepped foot in a classroom. This is why my mom corrected our speech, constantly telling us that *ain't* isn't a word.

In elementary school I was always two reading levels ahead of my class; in high school I was taking my English courses at the community college. My teachers applauded my papers, which in turn boosted my ego. In a country where people's ways of reading, writing, and speaking are perceived to be directly related to their intelligence, I reveled in my accomplishments. It took a group of juvenile offenders to make me question my reading and writing skills—and my own voice.

In the fall of 2014 I started a year-long program called *Gateways for Incarcerated Youth*. The program focused on the juvenile justice system, and we took weekly trips to a detention center to work alongside young incarcerated men in a seminar-like class. The nine men my class worked with ranged in age from eighteen to twenty, all but two of whom were something other than white. I didn't know what to anticipate during my first few classes, but my expectations weren't high when I was judging the young men solely based on how they sounded. They ended every sentence with *You feel me?* and *Know what I'm sayin'?* When they read from books in front of the class their voices were flat, they mispronounced words, and they paused often. Too quickly, I decided they needed my help, someone who would teach them the ways of the reading and writing world.

My views began to change when we started reading *True Notebooks* by Mark Salzman, a high school English teacher. The book followed Salzman over the course of two years as he worked and wrote with youth in a detention center. It's written well overall, but what made it stand out was the dialogue and actual essays from the young men. I've heard that dialogue is a hard thing to write down, that it can sound robotic or simply unrealistic. *True Notebooks* didn't do that—the guys speaking in the book sounded exactly like the guys I worked with week to week. They sounded real. As for the essays, Salzman says he didn't edit them, just typed them up. Had he made corrections, the book would've lost everything that made it unique. It wasn't dressed up as something it wasn't. As the title implies, the book was true.

Soon, we began doing writing prompts together at the beginning of class. Everyone had the chance to share what they had written, and I would often stay quiet, not wanting to take up the space meant for the young men. Week by week the guys would read, and week by week I was amazed. They read long freewrites about philosophy, they rapped poems about their childhoods and growing up. They told stories about their moms. While they spoke, I was transfixed, listening to the words they had written come alive off their lined paper. I could've easily pointed out grammatical mistakes the way I'd been trained to do my whole life, but it wasn't important. Just like in *True Notebooks*, they wrote with the kind of passion you can't put on a grading scale. Nothing I had written seemed as heartfelt or animated. They weren't writing to prove anything, and so it was beautiful. I was foolish to think I could be some sort of savior for them, because they don't need saving. They're smart enough to navigate their way through this world. But I know this isn't how they will be perceived. Their skin color will be seen before they are. And if people can get beyond that, the slang will be heard before what is truly being said. I know because I was guilty of this same crime.

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My mother was born and raised primarily in the South. For as long as I can remember, her voice has held no twang to prove this, but one phone call from a relative is enough for the *y'all*s and *ain't*s to slip back into her vocabulary, if only for a moment. When I was ten years old or so, my family took a trip to South Carolina to visit her side of the family. I met the most eccentric, lively, colorful, and loud people I'd ever seen in my life. Their faces alone held more expressions than I knew were possible, and when they told stories they spoke in a way that made me feel like I was there, like I too was experiencing my mother's childhood summers. I was enchanted by them. But when my cousins told me that I talked funny, I had no problem returning to the pedestal that I'd claimed at a young age. I confidently told them that *I spoke right*, as if I had the credentials to make such a statement.

During a conversation with my mom, I asked her why she was so adamant about how we talked. She explained that she knows how people with Southern accents are perceived as unintelligent. She said that the world was already going to look down on us and she wasn't going to give them another reason to. I consider my mom to be very successful. She works a job she loves as a high school English teacher. She owns the car she drives and the condo she lives in with her wife. She worked hard to get where she is. Sometimes, though, I wonder how much of her voice she gave up, both willingly and unknowingly, to get where she is.

In “But I Write The Way I Talk?: Inclusion and Exclusion in American Academic Writing,” Marissa Luck writes, “A certain type of English is accepted in American academia that is culturally and socioeconomically specific. This standard of English privileges and excludes certain groups of people.” Academic voice is the standard, the way of speaking and writing that everyone is expected to know. We are told that in order to get anywhere in life you must speak properly and write correctly. You must fit into a predesigned box.

Only recently have I begun to realize that you cannot judge a person's intelligence or writing skills based solely on how they speak. The way you talk holds your memories, your home, your scars. It holds everything that brings good art to life. It represents a part of you that should show in your writing. Your work should sound like *you*, not like what the world thinks you should sound like. Whether you are writing or speaking, your voice is always important—because it is you, and you deserve to be heard.