

Down to the Basement: Finding a Voice Against Social Injustices

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Abstract

Certain texts, practices, and experiences have transformative effects within our lives. They contribute in part to who we are. I had the privilege to experience some of this under Ms. Jeanne Chambliss, who, after 41 years of teaching, retired. Reconnecting with her a few years later, I was presented with the opportunity to interview an individual about the natures of their literacy histories and experiences. Over brunch, among the hustle of a small diner, Ms. Chambliss shared with me a story of growth and discovery. She discussed her experiences and confusions she had growing up. Her strict education/homelife is what prompted her to question her status while living in a privileged white household in the segregated South. She later came across the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" which validated perspectives she had had growing up all along--providing her with a voice for her opinions where she didn't have one. The letter stayed with her, becoming, in part, an extension of her own beliefs. The culmination of all the above affected her sense of self and played a part in the eventual construction of her own identity, as a writer, a teacher, an advocate, and an individual.

"A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law, or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas, an unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust."

—Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail"

My junior year of high school, I had the privilege to learn AP Language and Composition under Ms. Jeanne Chambliss.¹ She is someone with a profound love of higher learning, great literature, and the art of writing. With a sharp wit and lively enthusiasm to match, she taught me a lot in that short year. After 41 years of teaching, Chambliss retired shortly after I graduated, but the wisdom she imparted to me remains prominent in my academic career. As her student, however, I learned more than just writing techniques. I had the opportunity to hear stories about her life from the anecdotes she wove into her lessons...stories of travel, life lessons, and activism. Despite the years of experience, her continual zest for life always kept me eager to listen.

Naturally, when I was presented with the opportunity to interview an individual about their literacy histories of reading and writing she was the first person I thought of. During the semester the interview was conducted, I had grown increasingly curious as to how literacy histories might play a role in the formation of identity. Drawing upon Melanie Kill, Virginia Crisco mentions in her work on activist literacy and civic identity that “identity forms in negotiation with other people, other texts, and other Discourses” (38). This relationship becomes apparent, then, if we study how certain literacy practices or texts might influence an individual’s identities or social positions. Crisco goes on to assert that social positions such as race, gender, or social class create the conditions for identity formation. These positions, in turn, also affect the (activist) literacy practices of a person. (39). With this in mind, I chose Ms. Chambliss, because I believe she had much to offer on these topics (literacy and identity) given her social positions and experiences growing up.

Over brunch, among the hustle of a small diner, Ms. Chambliss shared with me a story of growth and discovery. Through the course of her life, her experiences led to a solidarity and eventual resolution of the confusion she had growing up in a white, well-off, Southern, Christian household. Ms. Chambliss’ strict education/homelife is what prompted her to question her status while living in a privileged white household in the segregated South. Her rigorous education, coupled with the high standards she was held to, led to a desire within her to question the legacy of white supremacy. This developed her interest in social justice (especially for African Americans like the women employed by her well-to-do family) as she endeavored to separate herself from a harshness she witnessed growing up. She later came across the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” in college. That encounter later served to validate the perspectives she had had all along – providing her with a concrete voice for

1 Per Ms. Chambliss’ permission, I have used her actual name.

2 Discourses refers to what James Paul Gee defines as “a socially accepted association among ways of using language and other symbolic expressions, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and acting, as well as using various tools, technologies, or props that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group...” For more information about Gee’s work see *Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideology in Discourses*.

her opinions where she didn't have one before. The letter has since stayed with her, becoming, in part, an extension of her own beliefs. The culmination of all the above has subsequently affected her sense of self and played a part in the construction of her identity.

Ms. Chambliss was the youngest of nine children. She and her family lived in a three-story, 28-room house in the now historic neighborhood of Riverside, located near downtown Jacksonville, Florida. In describing the environment in which she lived, she recalls a very strong atmosphere of punishment and obligation, which made things difficult for her. There were expectations and certain ideals to be upheld, the pressures of which often led to internal conflicts. The basement, which served as the living quarters for the two African American women who Chambliss' family was privileged enough to employ as live-in maids, provided sanctuary from her family's dogmatic mentality. The racism in her house made no sense to her, because, as Chambliss told me, "those two black maids comforted me more than anyone else. Downstairs in the basement, they were protective and kind." Ms. Chambliss much preferred spending her time down below, stating that "the place to be, in that house, if you wanted hugs or somebody who was really sweet to you, was in the basement." This classification is a common trope we see in the representation and portrayal of white/black relationships. Chambliss' relationships demonstrate the ways in which she was both resisting racism, and, nevertheless, still steeped in the culture of white supremacy. During these trips to the basement, Chambliss let her guard down, and she questioned the harshness³ that was demonstrated from her family's privilege. She cannot remember there ever being blatant instances where her family degraded their two maids, but she could still sense that her trips to the basement were heavily frowned upon.

During the interview, I was interested to see if her educational experiences had any similarities, because they too would have been foundational in shaping how she viewed the world. These practices had to have affected her in some way, which spoke to her position as a "literate" individual. When I had the chance to ask her, she said, "[my experience] was to do whatever you had to do to meet the expectations that everyone had of you. There was this intense pressure to conform." In her schoolwork, she recalled that one teacher forbade the use of an eraser, that all students were expected to learn penmanship/print, and when called upon, recite the rules of grammar, participles, etc. On her schooling practices she said, "We all learned to become little grammar Nazis because of those classes, and from what they expected from us." There were a number of skills to be checked off as the teachers drilled the curriculum. Her rigorous home life expected even more of her. According to her, "We were expected to read every night, all of the Harvard Classics, which was interesting because my home had such a strong

3 For the black maids, there existed a harshness which stemmed from living in a dark basement with few windows or air circulation. Although the memories are from her childhood, Chambliss remembers the conditions in the basement as being starkly different from the conditions upstairs.

influence from my parents' interpretations of the Bible...nevertheless, the pressure to read those classics was always there. And since I had older brothers and sisters, I was anxious to learn to read because they were reading. So, that gave me the incentive too." It was in these various practices, both at school and in the home, where I saw a sort of "power struggle" develop. The "harshness" Chambliss faced from various parts of her upbringing seemed to ignite within her a desire to turn away from the rigidity of them. This served to make her hyper-aware to the injustices that others faced when they too experienced such harsh practices. This later drove Chambliss to turn away from prejudiced views while she developed her own sense of self in the process.

Congruently, as she experienced the pressure to be "literately" successful (both in school and at home), she grew increasingly rebellious, as she, in her own words, "rejected most of everything [that they taught me]." ⁴ The collaboration of both these different spheres of influence affected the decisions that Chambliss made. At every turn, one wrong move meant punishment (usually in the form of a spanking with a bamboo stick). This, coupled with her experiences as a child, furthered her resolve. On this, Chambliss said, "The goal was supposed to be that you do what you were told and that you[d] pay the consequences for [it] if you didn't...I didn't...The time I befriended an octoroon⁵ is a good example. Society was still segregated then, and he was not another student at JU. I don't recall any-one of any color being enrolled there when I was a student. Anyway, my family demanded my car to be taken away, which was ridiculous...I certainly didn't have to pay the same price as most blacks did though...It's a very complicated story, but still – that was just one brief example of the kinds of punishment we faced if we went against the 'norm.'"

These kinds of experiences were a catalyst for Ms. Chambliss in questioning her own background and the blatant social injustices of her time. It was in these discussions that she turned to the literacy artifact I had asked her to bring: King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." According to Chambliss, "years later when I read 'Letter from a Birmingham Jail,' and thought of all King had gone through... and what I had experienced, it was...I guess a moment in my life when a lot of things started coming together." I continued to listen to her express her opinions about King's piece and witnessed just how much that text truly meant to her. She recalled finding within it "a declaration from the confusion of my upbringing...of the privilege on one floor and servitude in the basement... and the two worlds I was caught between." The power of this statement speaks to the effect this artifact has had on her. King's letter, through active internalization, became a part of Chambliss' identity, as a writer⁶, a social advocate, and ultimately,

4 This is reminiscent of Moje et al.'s "identity as position," on which I say more about later in the paper.

5 A term to describe a person who is one-eighth black by descent. This term is now considered offensive and dated but it was included to keep the authenticity of what she had experienced. *This is the friend Chambliss was with when she later met Dr. King.

6 In terms of her writing, and King's letter, she spoke: "I walked away with an ap-

an individual. It provided her with an opportunity to fully realize her opinions towards humanity, providing her the language to express what she had felt all along. It gave her a safe place to articulate the dissenting beliefs she had in regard to what society kept telling her, freeing her from the narrow-minded mentality she faced growing up.

For Ms. Chambliss, the artifact became an extension of who she felt she is. This letter spoke to her in a number of different ways, contributing to her sense of identity. In the interview, Ms. Chambliss established who she was through the narratives she shared with me. This process, in turn, effectively demonstrates what Moje, Luke, Davies, & Street refer to as “identity as narrative.” As they define it: “identities are not only represented but also constructed in and through the stories people tell about themselves and their experiences” (427). As Ms. Chambliss shared her experiences growing up, she described how she saw herself, both as a child, and how she saw herself now. She said, “I suppose at an early age I became addicted to narratives... They, like King’s, captured my imagination... (people’s stories) ...His writing was alive...and it resonated with me. I feel a kinship with him...” Even as we spoke, I was watching her actively construct parts of her identity through her recollections of the significance King’s letter held for her. The stories she told centered around the artifact, which acted as a sort of “gel” that “allowed for a sense of coherence, holding the narratives together.” This in turn led to a “coherent sense of self [through the past, present, and future]” (Moje et al. 427).

Ms. Chambliss also constructed her identity through her discussions of, attitudes towards, and approaches to certain positions society was presenting her with growing up. They, along with the constant “harshness” (described earlier in this paper)—which, as Chambliss recounts made things so difficult for her—compelled her to reject the various social positions of a privileged white woman in the segregated South. Instead, she took up positions towards advocacy and social justice, which she continues today. Moje et al., drawing upon the work of others, explains this phenomenon, “identity as position,” quite succinctly:

The social positioning of person and groups, whether through everyday discourse, spatial arrangement, text, or other media is now considered a primary means by which subjects are produced and subjectivity forms. Power relations, in particular, are thought to shape a person’s self through acts that distinguish and treat the person as gendered, raced, classed, or other sort of subject...A person or group is “offered” or “afforded” a social position when a powerful body proposes a particular sort of subject and calls on an individual to occupy them. Faced with the offer, the person may either accept the position in whole, or part, or try to refuse it. (430)

An individual’s social positioning affects their understandings and acquisitions of literacy. The positions they occupy, influenced by race, gender, class, etc., preciation for parallel structure, and the necessity to repeat certain things because it stays with the reader more. The use of metonymy...It is all very sophisticated writing. She later began using some of these techniques in her own writings.

play a vital role in the formation of identity. In turn, the various literacy practices one might occupy serve as a way to assert, take up, or reject these identities.

While growing up, Ms. Chambliss was faced with accepting or denying numerous positions that society dictated she should be a part of, particularly as a white woman in the segregated South. This contributed to an inner turmoil—a motif that is prevalent throughout this paper—as these positions clashed with the opposing opinions she had in regard to what was going on around her. At one point while reminiscing, Ms. Chambliss confided in me how frustrated she had felt with the blatant double standards she faced growing up. She asked, “how could we preach the Bible, which talks a great deal about love[ing the other], and then treat and degrade those women who were different from us with such... such...I remember writing [in her essay “A Fine Christian Home”]⁷ over and over ‘it’s not fair, it’s not fair.’” The emotion within these words reveal the turmoil Ms. Chambliss felt in seeing the unfair power relations established between her family’s position and the position of the women who took such good care of her.

Consequently, when she had the opportunity to renounce these relations/positions in life, she did. For Ms. Chambliss, King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” became what Deborah Brandt describes as a “literacy sponsor.” In her work, Brandt defines a sponsor(s) as “any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy-and gain advantage by it in some way” (166). While Ms. Chambliss had many experiences with reading and writing growing up, King was perhaps the first work she had to model her own activist literacies. In this way, King’s “Letter” also represented a cause “into which people’s literacy usually gets recruited” (Brandt 167). Discussed earlier, reading King’s work became a moment in Chambliss’ life where a lot of things started coming together. It supported her in developing her own voice against injustices she had seen growing up. It was a medium that enabled her to articulate firmly held beliefs about fairness and equality. And, ultimately, King’s work became the sponsor which recruited Chambliss into the realm of activism as she took up her own identity as an advocate for others.

In the subsequent years, Ms. Chambliss continued to develop her own voice and outlook on life, which I had the distinct pleasure to hear about that one spring afternoon. It was so rewarding to share in the journey of someone so full of life and character. “Once you become aware,” she told me, “you continue to pursue information, and education, and be outspoken...I still am.” Later, Chambliss shared a brief story with me about her work against voter suppression, hoping to provide a way for everyone’s voice to be heard. With new requirements concerning licensing and identification, she and her friends helped people in a mainly black neighborhood secure necessary documentation to be eligible to vote. While this is only one example, it illustrates the resolve of a woman who made the deliberate decision to support all walks of life, however she can.

7 She wrote a short essay in the 1990s chronicling some of the experiences she had growing up in a strict, conservative, southern, Christian household. Here she references some of what she wrote...

Long after our conversation, her story continues to resonate with me, as I reflect on the kinds of texts and/or practices which are so significant to my own sense of self. Of course, that is an exploration for another time. Still, all of this speaks to the transformative power certain texts, practices, and experiences have within our lives. In some way, they contribute in part to who we are. They can supply us with language where we may have been previously mute. They can provide us with validation where we were previously rebuked. They can open for us doors where paths were previously closed. For Ms. Chambliss, her experiences compelled her to question the legacy of white supremacy in which she was born. The high standards and harsh pressures she faced developed a sensitivity which made her hyper vigilant to the dogmatic mentalities she encountered. Later, when she was actively searching for resources that validated her own beliefs, King's letter became an extension of who she was as she advocated against social injustice. Through it all, there is something uniquely inspiring about her story, and I am reminded once again just how mighty the "written word" (and our practices with them) can be.

Convergence Rhetoric

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Christian Tabet is a Senior undergraduate student majoring in Writing and Rhetoric with a minor in Legal Studies. He is currently working on an honors thesis dealing with the topics of civic engagement and service learning, and has a publication forthcoming in the UCF's Undergraduate Law Journal. His writings typically reflect his academic interests, which include: writing and identity formation, social change and advocacy work, and the intersection of rhetoric, social justice, and the law. "Down to the Basement" is dedicated to Ms. Jeanne Chambliss - Thank you for sharing an inspiring story and never-ending zest for life. You are a wonderful soul.