

WHO SPEAKS, AND WHEN?

Documentary and the Disruptive Authority of Subjugated Voices

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Approximately 30–40 minutes.

Embrace yourself and surrender to something beautiful.

Every decision to speak — whether standing before you now, or making a movie because my sister decided to speak at a funeral — is an act meant to transform an injustice. We live in a world of inequality, and those forces of unequal power infuse what I am about to say. What follows involves gender violence within a family, spoken from the position of one who contends with the risks of the speaking.

Every word and every frame is deeply felt and meticulously made with violence as spoken, never shown. It is powerful.

So here is your warning, and here is my invitation. I hope for a world less oblique, less distorted — a world able to care for those impacted by the persistent ramifications of violence. I invite you to feel, to understand, to connect, so that together we can transform society through the power of knowledge —

through learning how to speak so as to be heard, and how to listen so as to speak.

Imagine actualizing that theory of speech in a conference called “Who Speaks?”

[0:00] OPENING — THE PHOTOGRAPH

When I landed in my homeland of the Philippines at this time last year, forty-two years after I left at age 13, I took a picture of myself.

Do the math of 42 years: the teen girl who left returns as a ragingly self-accepting woman who presents herself in an offensively tall fedora, oversized sunglasses, and black and purple priestly-long vestments of silk, punctuated by very expensive loafers bought as a prize to commemorate dropping off her son at his ivy league school. Thump thump thump goes the woman freely owning herself, with a mom flex too.

I took this selfie for one reason: I needed proof of standing strongly in powerful magnificence at the very place where I was hurt as a girl. The place where my parents left me at age eight to live without them for over a year. The place I then fled from, with them, as a teenager under a dictatorship. The place I swore I did not need to return.

The picture is included in my new film PIRANHA SISTERS as fortifying evidence — poof, here is the proof — a measure of my endurance, a still here, a standing tallness even at five-foot-two.

In the poem “A Litany for Survival,” Audre Lorde, who proudly called herself a Black, lesbian, woman, warrior and poet, wrote: “it is better to speak / knowing / we were never meant to survive.” I invite you to spend our time together this morning inside that line of girl to woman moving from Asia to America and back. The question I have carried my whole life — as a girl, as a refugee, as a woman of color, as a filmmaker, as a scholar, and now as a dean — is the question in the conference title, “Who Speaks? Authorship, Authority, and” — I struggle with the word “Authenticity,” (which can be faked) so I replaced it with a phrase, a historical one: “And When?” which means: who is permitted to speak, who survives the speaking, and whose testimony is granted the status of truth which must be understood always within context. This is why documentary comes in.

My keynote today is structured as a talk, a Q&A then a sneak preview of my new documentary PIRANHA SISTERS (which I am finishing and will premiere in 2027). The film tells an intimate story of my sisters and I—all feminist professors at Ivy League or Public Ivy universities, reckoning with the death of our father in order to emancipate ourselves of a history of violence, a restitution of our mother’s wishes and an affirmation of our bond as a path for the future. The significance of the film exceeds our family to comment on our historical moment when archives are rewritten, media defunded, higher education targeted, factual history denied, and documentary itself producing untruth. The lesson I wish to impart in my documentary is what it takes to undo one abusive patriarch turns out to be exactly what a democracy needs to name what is

happening to it. Film can emancipate by asserting its truth to the world especially when it captures subjugated voices speaking.

[3:30] WHO CLOSES THE RECORD?

At 19, I founded a woman of color magazine at Berkeley called SMELL THIS. The title was deliberate: the sordid reference to genitals and smell, an embrace of the very otherness reserved for women of color. The magazine made a splash on campus, drawing laudations from June Jordan, Cherrie Moraga and more — and we celebrated the women we published with raging parties. I already knew how to take up space even when they called me, my sisters in the editorial group, and our writers and artists, angry, crass, brown, undeserving and somehow beneath. I believed then what I believe now: *I matter, and what I say must be heard, because I mean to disrupt the systems that exclude and subjugate — structures that limit our knowledge of the world and each other, and our ability to speak and participate.* That is why I battle through cultural production.

Here is the cultural worker: I wore big hats even then. The hat announces a head that lords over the crowd. The sunglasses decide who gets access to my eyes — or maybe I am just cool and wear shades inside and at night like the song. My billowing vestments claim the authority of the priest and appropriate the church's bellowing. The loafers and my favored combat boots cross distances like a period, then another, to become ellipses that open previously non-existent roads.

Here is the film in one line: girls who get hurt by patriarchy grow up to demand the abuse stop — by telling what happened, and by undoing the lies that blame young girls for their assault.

A 56-year-old Filipina walks back into the country as the site of her harm to refuse being spoken for, being swallowed. She claims her story as the truth as an undrowning, a vomiting, a breathing! What we know in popular culture as a “waiting to exhale” in the classic movie scene of Angela Bassett flicking a cigarette to ignite a car burning while walking away defiantly.

The question of who speaks can never be pulled apart from the institutions that govern speech at every stage. I love being in the before, during, and after any encounter involving speech because it is a big moment that can transform self-perception, relations, institutions and nations. I will speak a personal truth, you will rethink our engagement, rules rise to govern entities better, and people stand up to undo their bondage. Who is permitted to speak becomes who survives the speaking. That is what speaking feels like to me from my role as a leader of a premier institution in the world. Only certain testimony gets stamped as truth, then there are those largely disbelieved and invalidated — so that we need stickers that say: I believe her. I am with her. What I know from leading hundreds of people—in a hierarchical institution—is that a leader has to walk in ready for the resistance that her change brings if I am serious about transformation. I wake up every day ready for that rumble.

Your conference call invokes theorists Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, who taught us that the author is never a stable, solitary origin — that meaning is made in the encounter, which is why every battle matters for the potential it has to change everything—a community and all of its members feeling worth, value and respect from self and others—what Dr. MLK, Jr calls “beloved community.” A critical person to evoke is my advisor Trinh T. Minh-ha who trained us to speak nearby rather than

about, to understand the ‘I’ as plural, porous, made in relation. My film and this talk enact her theory.

In my movie, the eulogy my sister decides to give for our abusive father has one voice at the lectern and many authors in the crowd, who are never merely listeners. The sister who speaks is in public communion with the sisters who lived the declared story as its actors and its primary audience — we were there for the beatings; we received them and witnessed them. We recall them and analyze them so as to stop them.

At the church, our caregivers came back to see us — the women who raised us, the ones who flanked me when I got my period in white shorts with three stripes, bloodied red. They returned to corroborate the truth of our version of the world as girls, and to show how our mother's secrets travel through her daughters. The camera carries them all to you, here today, you who will complete its meaning in your watching.

As a filmmaker and as a scholar, I assert that authorship is never the possession of a sovereign individual. It is a crew, a team, an orchestra, a school — and an audience who leave the room thinking and talking, so the film enters the vocabulary of our shared frame of reference and helps compose culture itself. That is the big goal of this film: to make dissecting patriarchy speakable, legible, recognizable. A feminist story emerges as the new and needed narrative inside the funeral — an appropriate place, it turns out, to reorganize society.

Every institution tells an official story and holds a ceremony to make its story official. In a family, the funeral: the community gathers, the priest blesses, a life is summarized, and whatever

gets said at the lectern becomes the dominant narrative. In the university: the syllabus, the prize, the tenure file — the documentation of whose knowledge counts is in the library, whose lives are worth studying is in the archive, who gets to lead is in the executive suites with many hierarchical rungs to climb for access. In the nation: the monument, the presidential library, the platform of the elected official erects the machinery that decides how citizens live. My film takes place at the moment all three ceremonies are underway at once: a funeral prepared to bless a philanthropist, a professoriate my sisters and I entered against our father's will, and a nation rewriting its history so we already barely recognize it. The film's central act — a eulogy of truth, delivered in a church, on camera — interrupts the ceremony, revises the story before it hardens into community truth and becomes feminist disruption, insurrection even by a cackling group easily dismissed, until you see our ranks and pedigrees as well as our outfits. The eulogy is a documentary event of truth-telling as fighting words worth the battle.

[7:00] THE FUNERAL AS ARCHIVE

Whoever holds the lectern at a funeral gives us the words that compose our comprehension. The record begins to sediment and enshrine as a cultural and social ritual that matters in memory of that experience. This is why the memorialization of an abusive father in a eulogy became a public matter for me and three of my sisters. It is the moment a false record must be interrupted before it achieves permanence. My father's memorial was prepared as exactly as church as recorder and attendees as witness. His institutions stood ready to certify a philanthropist, a kind man. It would be a false truth enshrined if unchallenged!

Postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak asked whether the subaltern can speak, and her answer was never simply no. Her answer was that the conditions of speaking and hearing are rigged and impossibly unfair — that speech from below arrives at institutions with no protocol and no ears to receive it as legible. So, consider how my film rigs the conditions back. Authority: the testimony is delivered by a daughter carrying an endowed chair at Princeton, standing beside a dean and a prize-winning professor, three authoritative women with rank. Witnessing by these sisters as the primary audience becomes a way to dissect it with our education later in the film, community as the secondary one in witnessing us, and the camera as the third to bring audiences into the space. Spivak's interlocutor Sneja Gunew — cited in your conference call — gave us the auditing questions: what is left out, what is covered over, whose ideas are privileged, and “what questions can't be asked?” A funeral is the genre where those questions are forbidden in the name of propriety. The eulogy in my film defies the acceptable norm and asks every one of them, out loud, from the lectern — forbidden speech daring to utter its curse, its spit, its dirty names, from daughter to father. Girls grow up enraged, spitting and cursing, and laughing the laughter of liberation.

The risk. To speak this way gambles safety, respect, and propriety in a single utterance. Feminist testimony at a funeral violates the deepest scripts assigned to us: filial piety, Catholic reverence, feminine gratitude. I have learned to meet the accusation of impropriety with an analytic question: inappropriate for whom? Who, exactly, is being protected by propriety? Let me know what you think in Q&A.

[11:00] EMANCIPATION AS METHOD

So where do three girls acquire the authority to reopen a record their parents aimed to close? Here is the film's central proposition, and the proposition of my work: rigorous analysis, historical knowledge, postcolonial, feminist and ethnic studies — are instruments of emancipation. We undid our father's legacy through the methods of higher education: analysis names the power dynamics organizing our experience, our structural location, our subjugation so as to tell our own different story. And this is precisely why higher education is under scrutiny and debilitating review because it refuses mediocrity and docility.

Feminist theory let us see one man as an expression of structures — patriarchy routed through Filipino Catholicism, through migration, through the family form itself. Ethnic studies handed us the history that explained our displacement and our immigrant low-wage labor living in the projects during the crack and AIDS epidemics after our exile. Sociology gave my sister the tools to make Filipino lives legible to a canon that called them too small a sample. And film school gave me my method: if the record of your life has been written by someone invested in your silence, learn to read records and write your own. Then learn to make them with the highest caliber of aesthetics— the proof of our distinct perspective, such as in my Cornell professor sister whose work says rationality and emotions are both forms of knowledge.

The word my film reclaims is emancipation, and my sisters and I ask you to hold its double meaning. In American law, emancipation is the procedure by which a minor is legally severed from her parents — a document of neglect, which my sisters had to obtain as teenagers in order to survive. In history, emancipation means freedom from bondage. My sisters and I

hold both meanings at once. What was imposed on us as abandonment and abuse we converted, through education, into liberation.

One more piece of the theory of voice, because it refuses any easy story which my film embraces wholeheartedly. My father trained me in elocution, making me memorize epic poetry from ages three to eight, so that by second grade I dominated auditoriums, beating high school students who resorted to making faces in hopes of distracting me. They did not know I held the power of my emotions to inform how I opened my mouth — so you can feel what I feel. My father, in teaching me this power, also punished me for speaking. I maybe remember one conversation with him the entirety of my life. What a complicated man.

For years I tell the story that I lead despite what was done to me. I have banned that word in my storytelling. I call “but,” “despite,” and “regardless” erasure words: they vanish the ongoing operation of the forces we survive incessantly, and they vanish the daily labor of surviving them relentlessly. Racism and sexism never go away. Patriarchy never goes away. The honest sentence is that I lead within these forces and against them, every single day, and that the joy of my leadership is the resistance towards the removal of obstacles for others.

[15:00] CHANNEL THE RIVER

You have already met my hat. Now let me tell you why I wear it. I wear the biggest hat in the room because the room was not built to see me coming — people do not look down to look for the unstoppable power coming their way to create a compassionate community that will be their source of safety and

power. They do not see me coming to take up space, to ask questions, to say when I do not understand, to tell you when you are stealing my ideas as if I did not just say them clearly, to ask you to explain yourself when you are violating the rules designed to keep us from hurting each other.

When I walk into a hall as dean, I am usually the first person who looks like me ever to hold the role. Asian American women remain statistical anomalies at the top of the university, our numbers thinning at exactly the ranks where the direction of knowledge gets set. The women of color called into institutional leadership right now are holding the last bastions of critical thought while simultaneously fighting to be recognized as legitimate holders of them. That double labor is the condition of our speech. Part of the crisis of higher education is exactly the dearth of leaders who look like and lead like me.

My governing principle: do not wait for the flood — channel the river. The flood is coming whatever we do: the defunding, the surveillance of curricula, the coordinated attack on the university as such. Waiting for it, bracing for it, grieving it in advance — these are postures of defeat. Channeling means courageously directing the force already in motion: choosing to speak, gearing up one's moral courage and compass. It is the eulogy principle applied to administration: act at the moment the record is closing, with rigor, with corroboration, with witnesses in documenting your decisions to lead, to face resistance as worthwhile for change.

And this is why I insist on making films while I am dean, writing books while I am dean, standing before you as an artist while I am dean. The simultaneity is the argument itself: I hold

knowledge production in such awe and reverence that I will always make the time to do it no matter how tired. The joy in knowledge, the power, the pleasure should be available to share. The separation of leader from artist from scholar is itself a silencing mechanism — it tells women of color that authority comes with the surrender of voice. I refuse the purchase. My leadership philosophy is one sentence, and I say it to my students, my faculty, my staff: *I am me so you can be you*. Full presence as methodology for leadership. We all need to be in the room, otherwise it is not the best in terms of the problem-solving. It is only at best partial knowledge. It is what my sister performs at the lectern in the film you will see. It is what I perform in the dean's office, as I make films, write books, articles, poems, speeches — and when I call you out with the hope of your doing better. The film exists to show the importance of claiming your power and wielding your authority to fulfill the best version of yourself in building the institution we need to serve all of us.

[18:30] THE CONVERGENCE — WHY THIS IS ABOUT DEMOCRACY

Now the widest frame. I grew up under the first Marcos regime in the Philippines. Martial law — among the first phrases I ever uttered, and had to decipher — made my family refugees, and we left with no photographs of my childhood. Sit with that: the first archive I ever lost was my own. One month after we settled in Boston, Ninoy Aquino was assassinated on the tarmac of the airport that now bears his name — the airport where, four plus decades later, I took the selfie I began this keynote talk with. The Philippines taught the world that ordinary bodies in the street can end a dictatorship, moved by the emotional dramas of

protest and the cinema that taught a people to feel together. The decades since have taught the harder lesson: what is won can be unwon.

The journalist Maria Ressa documented the mechanism under Duterte — the systematic use of media to destroy shared reality. In *How to Stand Up to a Dictator*, she tells us that without facts there is no truth; without truth, no trust; and without all three, no shared reality, and no democracy. I never imagined the country of my childhood would become a living lesson for the country of my citizenship. In the United States today, archives are being rewritten right now: the histories of Native Americans and African Americans deleted from parks and libraries, offices for our communities swept from official websites, records re-curated so that dominance looks natural and struggle looks like it never happened. Public media is being defunded.

Documentary itself — the form whose entire authority rests on its association with evidence — is being hollowed from inside, as subject-funded portraits, financed at scales no independent filmmaker will ever see, use our aesthetic codes to polish an image and erase complexity and critique. And AI now stands ready to manufacture footage of events that never occurred and to delete the record of events that did. Media literacy is waning. What is real, what is made up? Who is speaking?

Here is the convergence I never anticipated, the discovery that reorganized my film in the edit room: my family and my former country run on the same operating system. Both depend on controlling the record, owning the story, and suppressing analysis. The remedy is the same: Testimony. Corroboration. Analysis. The camera. The courage to speak inside the sanctuary

itself. The tools that undid one abusive patriarch are the tools a democracy needs to name what is happening to it.

This is why documentary that centers the voices the official narrative excludes is democracy itself — deserving of protection and defense. It is why I stand in the tradition of Third Cinema, of the L.A. Rebellion filmmakers whose legacy I steward at UCLA TFT, of the women of color feminists who trained me — including Trinh T. Minh-ha, who asks: from where is a story told, by whom, and at what risk? And it is why the university matters so fiercely right now. When experts are replaced by loyalists, when public broadcasting is silenced, when the algorithms prefer dangerous clowns, when the histories of entire peoples are deleted from public institutions, higher education becomes one of the last places where critical thought is protected, practiced, and passed on to the citizenry that democracy requires. Understand what the attacks on our campuses are actually aiming at. Follow the attacks on the record — and on our ability to analyze what is happening all around us. Do not succumb in docility and accept mediocrity.

[22:30] CLOSING — THE CHARGE

So: who speaks, and when? You. Now — precisely when you feel, palpably, that your voice is least welcome and most necessary. Every one of you is a custodian of your own personal record of what happened to you and to your community — as artists, educators, archivists, administrators, students.

Somewhere within your reach, a false version threatening to become the final draft is being prepared. I think of family stories with locked rooms that never open, of untruths waiting to be transformed through analysis and close reading as forms of love.

Our own subjugated knowledge may be the most valuable thing we carry. The conference call names authorship as a practice of care, and I wholeheartedly agree. What we gain in speaking about our constraints is freedom, and it is worth the risk.

Speaking wins us custody of our future. As Audre Lorde says, we were never meant to survive. We were certainly never meant to speak. We were absolutely never meant to hold the pen, the camera, the deanship, the endowed chair. And here we are. When we speak from the location of our subjugation, we make better art — document your truth, go on the record, into a new song and a new dance on screen to lead lives of freedom you can make happen.

Thank you for listening to me.