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Mia Karisa Dawson

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This Movement Will Take You So High and So Low

Mia Karisa Dawson, Ph.D.

University of California, Los Angeles
mkdawson@ucla.edu

Abstract

I address this letter to myself on November 25, 2014, the day after the non-indictment of Michael Brown's executioner, when a resounding silence in my college physics class sparked a fire in me and a journey of awakening and action. Somewhere between a love letter and a condolence, a reassurance and a forewarning, these words serve to soften my stumble towards empowerment and insight as I grow as a young organizer in the Black Lives Matter movement.

Keywords

Black Lives Matter, abolition, community organizing, empowerment, youth, queer identities

To: Mia Karisa Dawson
Oberlin, OH
November 25, 2014

From: Mia Karisa Dawson
Sacramento, CA
July 25, 2023

Dear Mia,

I'm afraid this won't reach you. "Well,"—I hear you say—"not with that attitude." You're right. Not with that attitude.

You might ask why I write you this letter with so little faith that it will arrive. I'll tell you up front—I'm writing this for me just as much as I'm writing it for you. Because I struggle to be vulnerable and honest, even with myself—and I love you, so I must be honest with you. And I'm writing you this because when I write almost anything else, I am immobilized by a hostile audience that I imagine ominously over my shoulder. Unlike this audience, I know you'll listen—you hardly listen to anyone else.

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*Open this letter on the morning of November 25, 2014, after Physics 110: Mechanics and Relativity.*

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Last night they didn't indict.

You sat through Physics with your heart in your stomach. You felt the wrath of Ferguson inside you and you felt like an alien in the eerily placid lecture hall. Class began as usual. Your white male professor was in a disturbingly good mood.

Cry it out.

There is more wrath and there are more tears ahead. You will burn hot, and before long, you will throw yourself into this movement and this movement will change you. It will take you high and it will take you low. Writing this, I do not intend to fuel or dampen your flame. Instead, I hope to help you channel and protect it, and let you know how precious it is. I offer you—humbly—these thoughts for today and tomorrow.

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**You are not alone.** Today you feel alone. Your college was the first to integrate, as you are constantly reminded—this, unfortunately, does very little for you, in a predominantly white town, in a predominantly white institution, in an even more predominantly white major. As you will notice increasingly, your department's culture is at best ignorant and at worst hostile towards discussions about race. It is either irrelevant or it pollutes science with politics. I can't quite say it gets better.

You will work twice as hard. You will become more knowledgeable and well-studied than much of your cohort in your infuriating struggle to make this world make sense. You will watch others learn placidly as their worldview is confirmed and reproduced. You, instead, will reside uneasily in your education.

You will feel alone.

**Find your people.** You have friends who are fueled by the same fire. Talk to them. Listen and learn from them. Right now, they may be outnumbered by those who will meet your fire with blank faces. So, treasure each one as you make your way out of this bizarre institution.

Leave. Use this terrifying time to seek relationships with those who align with the person you are growing to be. These people will not only help you understand the world and what it could be, but will also open up incredible new possibilities of who you can be. And—bonus!—that person is unbelievably queer. You will begin to find chosen family and understand that the kind of love, understanding, and shared struggle that you seek will never be represented in mainstream images.

Joy James: *Our capacity to continuously define ourselves, to rebel, and most importantly to love . . . anchors us into the real world and changes the world simultaneously.*<sup>1</sup>

Defining and anchoring yourself in love, as such, you will find it in yourself to fight.

**Fight with your people.** The movement is made of people relating to one another. It is not made of you doom-scrolling on social media. It is not made of your sense of insignificance, overwhelm, or anxiety.

Mariame Kaba: *Everything worthwhile is done with other people.*<sup>2</sup>

There are groups of people fighting for the things you care about in your city—find them. There are organizations doing mutual aid and direct action; organizations advocating for and with the incarcerated, the unhoused, and those impacted by environmental injustices. If there are fights that have yet to be initiated, you will find others who care to join them.

The movement is made of people. You will learn your own power in relationship to others who know theirs.

Huey P. Newton: *The people and only the people make revolutions.*<sup>3</sup>

**People are your friends—organizations are not.** The movement is fluid, and no one organization has ever contained it. At best, an organization is a conduit. Organizations arise and become obsolete, they garner strength in numbers and they disband into smaller units. They dissolve quietly, agreeably, or they end with a corrupt bang. Often, they are infiltrated and poisoned from the inside.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Decolonial Feminist Collective (2021).

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Ewing (2019).

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Hilliard and Weise (2002, 161).

You are fiercely loyal and dedicated. You have faith. Practice this in your relationships with your friends and comrades and in your relationship with yourself. Do not practice this in your relationship to organizations. Instead, approach them with an open mind and with a healthy skepticism. Manage your relationship to them, as they have the tendency to take as much as you will give.

**Question leaders.** Ask: who is seeking the spotlight and the credit? What kind of moral authority are they calling to their command? Who is showing disregard towards the departed and their families? Who is becoming distant from the people that gave them a platform? Who is getting rich? This movement is exploitable, and the system leaves nothing unexploited. Keep your eyes open.

Seek individuals with experience who aim to help you and others recognize and harness their power. Seek individuals who build collectives and invest in the difficult work of democratic decision making. Seek individuals who can recognize and challenge hierarchies as they emerge.

Ella Baker: *Strong people don't need strong leaders.*<sup>4</sup>

You will find the most trust and resilience in small, horizontal affinity groups that adapt fluidly in focus and function, that link with other autonomous groups only towards clear and intentional actions, and that embrace impermanence and changes in circumstance. Organized as such, these affinity groups will remove pressure and will care for you in ways that formal organizations cannot.

**You are one person—and a person is a delicate thing.** People come and people go. People burn bright, people burn out. People are injured, people are traumatized, people rest, people recover. At its truest, the movement is forgiving, collective, alive, ingenious and resourceful. Take a break—it's not that serious.

**Choose your lane and stay in it.** You do a lot of things well—I love that about you! Please don't do them all. You will be your most powerful, your most fulfilled and your most peaceful when you focus on one or two efforts where your strengths shine through and you can be your own leader.

**Don't go to every protest.** Period.

**Say no.** To roughly 85% of the things that are asked of you.

**Notice cynicism.** Because yes—you will be burned. You will lose your bearings. You will swallow the bitter pill that no individual or organization is exempt from the insidious systems that lead us to harm one another.

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Payne (1989, 893).

**Reframe.** I can't tell you not to be cynical. Still, consider—if nothing else, you have made treasured friendships and learned priceless lessons about yourself—how to advocate for yourself, protect yourself, and love yourself. And you have made incredible progress in your struggle to make sense of this world in its beauties and cruelties.

When you are feeling cynical, shift your position. Seek alignment with yourself, your friends and comrades, and your organizations. Manage your intakes and outputs. Sit down.

**Chase joy and abundance.** Many have fallen, but you are alive. You do this work out of love for both the living and the departed.

At times, you will struggle with survivor's guilt. But you must enjoy your life. Recognize an abundance of love and joy even amidst heartbreak and struggle.

Life begins anew. And love is abundant— you will keep finding and finding it.

Forever yours,  
Mia

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