

To the Field of Psychology: What is our Pledge to Injustice?

UCSF Department of Psychiatry 2nd Annual Diversity Celebration

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I'll start by simply acknowledging, I don't like public speaking. I'll follow that acknowledgement recognizing my Great Grandmother Maggie Brewington Mays for sitting in the front row at church during youth shows and mouthing, "S L O W - D O W N," to me the entire time and my Great Aunt Emma Nee for being within peripheral vision exemplifying the correct posture she expected of me when addressing an audience. Clearly they were preparing me for something.

I've made a commit to myself that when someone asks me to speak publicly regarding the topic of diversity, multiculturalism, equity and inclusion, I will always say yes. It is a privilege to have the opportunity and I believe in maximizing any platform that I'm given. I have so many things I want to share and so many points I want to hit. I won't promise to be quick, but I will promise to take my time.

For the past two and half weeks, my body has taken quite the journey. An emotional sensory-based journey. It started off with a numbness I couldn't shake. Initially, this numbness would not allow me to watch the videos of Alton Sterling's and Philando Castille's murders. I said no, I can't, I'm full, and I'm done. Once you've seen one, you've seen them all. I didn't want to take in anymore for this year. I was tired. So I avoided, repressed, ignored, and redirected attention and focus into other things – trivial day-to-day concerns – wake up, go to work, come home, etc. I attempted to partake in the privilege of ignorance, the privilege of being oblivious. But there was no escaping it. Everywhere I turned all forms of media would not

allow them to be dismissed. So I caved. I watched the first one. Alton Sterling. I squirmed in my body trying to reject the horror that I had just watched. I remember the first word I blurted out was, "Execution!" Clearly. That was an execution.

I could feel rage rising in my body, so I quickly picked back up avoidance, repressing, and redirecting. It's been a skill set I sometimes negotiate mastering because it's what I see the rest of the professional world doing. Let's call that skill set '*business as usual*'. The negotiation includes an internal dialogue of thoughts and questions, "Being conscious about these things hurts too much. I have to protect myself. I have to survive – I'm not sure if consciousness is supposed to be a tool of survival. Maybe it's the antithesis of survival?" So back to numbness I went, but it didn't last long. Before I could get in a full twenty-four hours worth of distance, IT happened again. This time LIVE. IN THE MOMENT. IN THE CURRENT. IN THE PRESENT. THIS TIME, there was 4 year old little girl whose voice was heard saying, "Mommy it's going be okay, I'm right here." As her father, Philando Castille was slumped over in the front seat dying from four bullets the officer put in his body. At that moment, at the sound of that child's voice, my numbness disintegrated. It hit me that this was the child I was trained to do treatment with. I'm trained in Child-Parent Psychotherapy, a dyadic model that treats children, from birth to five and their caregiver who experience trauma. She had just experienced a trauma that would forever be etched in her brain, in her memory, and in her body. This little girl had witnessed the murder of her father by a white police officer. I was shattered. Brokenness. I felt brokenness and it was scary. This sound emerged from me. A cry that came from some internal depth that felt like a call from my ancestors. They

knew this feeling. This sound had too emerged from their bodies. It is a timeless cry and it has yet to escape us. It still lives in us. It's upon these surreal, cultural collective experiences where I've been amazed at how historical trauma lives in my body and the true power of intergenerational transmission.

Completely overwhelmed, I walked around a few more days, feeling hopeless and helpless. But even those couldn't sit comfortably in my body. I equally became scared of their weight too. One of my greatest fears is depression – because as a collective, my people are trudging through depression as they battle with the cycle of wake up – survive – sleep. My clients show me every week, to LIVE is a privilege. Survival is the state we know best. My grandfather always tells me, “Markita, everyone can't make it out of the jungle,” and while I struggle with that and many other words of wisdom he shares with me, including, “Racism is alive and well and it's not going anywhere,” I've committed my wake up – survive – sleep cycle to alleviating the conditions of the jungle while simultaneously fighting everyday to not be sucked into the dark hole of the jungle. In order to do this, I access one of my greatest motivators – the emotion of anger. Black anger has been the target of many projections. It is often perceived to be scary and yet it's hard to mitigate a justified feeling I need to express. My anger fuels me to be courageous. My anger fuels me to no longer accept excuses. My anger fuels me to demand accountability. But how does one aspire for accountability in this country when America is racism? Racism was the machine used to build this country. All of it's morals, values, traditions, systems, and infrastructures – nothing about this country has escaped the smog of racism. So I have to tell you, when I hear, “Let's make America great again,” I get

nervous and I am genuinely worried. 'Again' implies repetition, one more time, and/or the return of something. As a Black citizen of this country, what part of "again" should I be looking forward to?

This year's impending election has exposed the handwriting on the wall. An unspeakable has been spoken and our country is now engaged in a past due dialogue. W.E.B. DuBois foreshadowed, "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line." One thing I've learned about trauma is that it will keep rearing its ugly little head if not dealt with head on. It's 2016 and the trauma of racism is rearing its ugly head, again.

I'm a social worker by training, and therapist by trade - I'm grounded in an ecological - psychological knowing of life. So in the midst of our current climate, I asked myself, "Where is the field of psychology in the conversation regarding black lives matter, police brutality, and routine state violence? How about the terror of ICE Raids, the lack of inclusive and safe spaces for the LGBTQ, and the generalizing and stereotyping of those belonging to Islamic faith? Are these matters of concern we should have a voice for? To endure injustice is to engage in psychological warfare? Is it not? I've learned that getting something done is not always about having the answers, but asking the right questions. So let's think together. Where does the field of psychology and departments of psychiatry across the nation take ACTION against injustice? An action that requires us to get out of our offices and from behind closed doors? An action that requires us to use our power as intellectuals, researchers, and practitioners? An ACTION that involves us taking a

risk in order to seek change. An ACTION that causes discomfort to become an expected and normative feeling when dismantling oppression.

By no means am I foolish to think our field alone will be the only muscle needed, but are we even in the ring? Are we holding our moral responsibility as a field and a system? Do we have a social orientation to address inequalities? Or do we simply replicate injustices and oppression and play a blind eye to the harm we cause because we rely on our good intentions?

I don't have a well fleshed out idea (but if given the dedicated space to do so, I will) around a change that can be addressed, but one thing did cross my mind. Does a liberation social psychology framework have a place in our department? This framework aims to actively understand the psychology of oppressed and impoverished communities by conceptually and practically addressing the oppressive sociopolitical structure in which they exist. Are we engaged in learning, researching, and practicing forms of treatment that seeks to transform our clients into self-conscious agents of their own mental and political liberation? Maybe we can do more than just alleviate symptoms, medicate, and change and manage behaviors. Maybe we can begin to provide intentional and explicit forms of healing that help people carve their paths to sociopolitical consciousness.

I was working with a young, African American mom, 22 years old, and her son 3 years old. Mom self referred for treatment after her son witnessed a domestic violence altercation between his grandparents in the home. Mom noticed his

behaviors changed instantly and she knew I was a home visitor in the neighborhood that worked with families and children. We had been working together for almost a year and I remember when she came into session one day excited to share with me a conversation she had on the back of the bus with an elder, "Markita, did you know that we used to be Kings and Queens? I was talking to this guy on the bus and he was telling me about how black people in Africa, before we were slaves in America, were Kings and Queens!" I smiled and my heart felt a warmth as I responded, "Yes, I knew that and we still are. Our crowns have been taken from us and we're working to find them and put them back where they belong." She then asked me why no one ever told her this and how come they don't teach these kinds of things in schools. She said, "We need to know this. This is important stuff!" I looked over to her three year old son and asked him if he knew what his mommy and me were talking about. He looked up at me and shook his head yes. I said, "You do! Well your mommy has just realized that she is raising a King."

This is what I aspire for, a collective awakening. Conscious and intentional direction.

I used to be upset about being born in the wrong era. I've always desired to belong to the Harlem Renaissance Era, the Civil Rights Era, or the Black Panther Era – because I've wanted to be apart of a collective action. Now, I am thankful for the #BlackLivesMatter Movement because longing for is no longer needed. A collective voice has arrived for my generation. There are many opinions and perceptions about the #BlackLivesMatter movement so I'll end my remarks sharing with you

directly from the source - its founders – their words to better inform about our growing collective voice.

WE ARE THE MOVEMENT FOR BLACK LIVES.

Guided by love, we continue to stand together for justice, human dignity and our shared goal of ending all forms of state violence against Black people. We organize, occupy, demonstrate, march and chant for a new future: A future we can be proud of. We stand on the shoulders of our ancestors, who fought for their freedom and ours. Like them, we want a world where our lives matter.

We want an end to the war being waged on Black people, in all its forms. Some people fear change, and that's ok. Many will attempt to halt our progress. That is not ok. Some will continue their attempts to undermine us, but we will remain undeterred.

For far too long, our unjust deaths have meant business as usual in this country. No more.

Our work remains undone until our lives are free of violence. That is the future we imagine.

Until that day comes:

We pledge togetherness--- we will not allow ourselves to be divided.

We pledge to allow our thinking and actions to be guided by love.

We pledge to bring courage and power into our communities, and stop their flow out.

We pledge not to be controlled by fear, but instead by our dreams.

Desmond Tutu, a bishop and South African social activist stated, "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor."

UCSF Department of Psychiatry, "What is your pledge to Injustice?"