

Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

Speak Your Truth or “They’ll Kill You and Say You Enjoyed It.”

ANDREA N. BALDWIN

Dear Higher Education,

My government name – as Black people say - is Andrea Natasha Baldwin. To my preteen son, I am mom – though recently, he has started referring to me as mother (in that tone that mothers of preteen sons can probably relate to). To my husband of 20 years, I am sweetheart. My maternal family has called me G all my life; my friends call me A or Ann; and my students call me Dr. B or simply Baldwin. I respond to all these titles because I am more than my work, and yet my work impacts all other aspects of my life and the lives of people I love.

I am an immigrant, a first-generation university graduate, and an associate professor of Gender and Ethnic Studies in the School for Cultural and Social Transformation at the University of Utah. My job helps pay for my son’s private school tuition since we live in a state where he cannot go to school in the district he is zoned for because there is an ongoing [Federal Justice Department investigation for racism](#) stemming from the [death by suicide of a 10 year old Black girl](#). Income from my job also supports my parents back home in Barbados, who, after working hard all their lives, cannot afford to live on their fixed retirement incomes in a region that is rapidly becoming unaffordable to its citizens as the Caribbean caters to the needs and tastes of Western tourists.

Before I became an academic, I was an attorney and then a trade policy specialist. I knew when I worked in those jobs that I didn’t want to keep doing them, simply because I wasn’t passionate about them. But academia, I loved it immediately. I love teaching, I love that I get to research the lives and experiences of Black people globally, and I love mentoring Black (queer) women. After over ten years in academia, I still love my job, but I am sick and tired of being sick and tired of how the lives, experiences, and scholarship of Black and brown people, particularly women and queer folks, are constantly being devalued by the university and used as fodder for politicians’ careers.

I am writing this letter because I feel like nowhere is safe for marginalized and minoritized people in academia. I have moved my family four times between 2015 and 2022 to take up positions in institutions when the position I held became untenable. And here now again in 2024, I find myself in a similar situation as the conditions for marginalized and minoritized faculty at public institutions have started to rapidly deteriorate in the state of Utah. I am tired of moving, I am tired of running, I am just tired!

In a deeply divided United States, where politics has historically played out on the backs of racialized people, from slavery to Jim Crow to the Civil Rights Movement to Black Lives Matter, the lives of the marginalized and minoritized have yet again become a highly charged political football. In this time of anti-critical race theory, everything about our lives appears to be up for grabs.

I took a position at the University of Utah in 2022 after a tumultuous time in the Department of Sociology at Virginia Tech. That year, all three Black women in the department left, feeling undervalued and unappreciated. People ask me all the time, why Utah? It is a deep red state with conservative politics. My response is always, I didn’t choose the University of Utah; I chose the School for Cultural and Social Transformation – or Transform

for short. As one of only three such schools in the entire country, Transform was born of student protest. It houses the Divisions of Gender Studies, Ethnic Studies, and the Disability and Pacific Island Studies programs and when I interviewed with Transform, I knew I had found my people: Black, brown, and indigenous feminist activists and community advocates, and outspoken queer and disability scholars. During my first year under the deanship of the incomparable Kathryn Bond-Stockton, who was responsible for taking the students' vision and building our school, I felt I had made the best career decision. And even though Utah culture is a bit peculiar sometimes, there is something about waking up to those mountains that just felt right. But like most things, this turned out to be too good to be true.

In the academic year 2023/24, Dean Stockton announced that after almost seven years of leading Transform, she thought we were now in a place where we were strong enough to grow without her. In July 2023, a new dean was hired who was not the top candidate for any of the faculty in our school. By February 2024, faculty and staff had filed a concerning number of Office of Equal Opportunity (OEO) discrimination reports. It should have been clear then that change was coming. The Dean decreed that we could not hang our trans flags in the Transform suite at a time when anti-trans legislation was making its way through the legislative session and the Young Americans for Freedom student group were openly targeting trans lives with their anti-trans propaganda and programming on campus. She was condescending to staff, made several of them cry, forced one to resign, and caused one to seek medical attention. She told staff that they could not attend a student protest about the genocide in Gaza, and hesitated to publicly support [MECHA](#) when their sponsorship was withdrawn by the university for engaging in student protest at a time when it was almost certain that anti-DEI legislation targeting Black and brown people and communities on our campus would become law. By February 2024, my colleagues and I had had enough and wrote a letter to the SVP that we could not work with this new dean. We were successful in our petition and currently have an acting dean. As my colleagues and I were experiencing this deeply intense traumatic experience, we were also watching the state legislature as their deeply [transphobic](#) and racist bills were closer to becoming law.

On January 30th 2024, Governor Spencer Cox signed into law the [H.B. 261 Equal Opportunity Initiatives bill](#), and two months later on March 12th the [H.B. 438 Higher Education Revisions bill](#). H.B. 261, in summary, prohibits so-called discriminatory practices on public campuses, that is,

“engaging in or maintaining a policy, procedure, practice, program, office, initiative, or required training that, based on an individual's personal identity characteristics” including but not limited to “engaging in or maintaining a policy, procedure, practice, program, office, initiative, or required training that: (A) asserts that one personal identity characteristic is inherently superior or inferior to another personal identity characteristic; (B) asserts that an individual, by virtue of the individual's personal identity characteristics, is inherently privileged, oppressed, racist, sexist, oppressive, or a victim, whether consciously or unconsciously; ... (H) asserts that socio-political structures are inherently a series of power relationships and struggles among racial groups; ... (K) considers an individual's personal identity characteristics in determining receipt of state financial aid or other state financial assistance, including a scholarship award or tuition waiver; or (L) is referred to or named diversity, equity, and inclusion.”

The University's initial response to the bill was to send out communication about what language employees should use. We were advised to refrain from using words like intersectionality, and that instead of using inclusion, we should use belonging. Faculty and staff with diversity, equity, or inclusion in their titles had their titles changed. The powers that be made assurances that faculty would be protected if their research and teaching required them to use prohibited words, and yet in late June, I was advised to remove the word activist from my Lab's website as a precautionary measure. It goes without saying that we were not only confused but mad as hell, and after a suicide attempt by a Trans student, the then-director of the [LGBT Resource Center broke his silence](#). Needless to say, he is no longer employed at the University. To add insult to injury, after signing all of

these bills including the bill that bans gender-affirming care for transgender youth during the last legislative session, Governor Cox opened Pride Month on June 1st, 2024, with more erasure as he proclaimed it [Bridge Building Month](#).

On July 1st, the [Division of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion was eliminated](#), and without consultation with faculty, the [University closed its student centers](#), including the LGBT Resource Center, the Black Cultural Center, and the Women's Resource Center, even though [Governor Cox stated that this was not necessary to be in compliance with the law](#). Most of us found out about the closures after the fact, and in a series of townhalls with faculty, we were informed of the creation of a new Community and Cultural Engagement Center, which will take on the functions of the three centers, disregarding the long historical legacy and importance of these centers.

With regard to H.B. 438, in addition to implementing a post tenure review by a committee that includes members external to the department of the faculty under review, states that "Beginning July 1, 2024, a tenured faculty member may be dismissed from employment at a degree-granting institution" for a number of reasons, including but not limited to "if the program in which the tenured faculty member works is discontinued by the degree-granting institution or modified to such a degree that the tenured faculty member's position is no longer needed." This particular section of the bill is extremely concerning when one considers the quickness with which the University got rid of the student centers and the wider national attack on disciplines that make up Transform, particularly [Gender Studies](#). Our experiences, our scholarship, our lives are at risk of erasure and we are actively working to document and archive the histories of Black, brown and queer people, organizations and programs, at the University of Utah before they are all gone.

At this point in this letter, I am expected to offer a solution, hope for a way forward, but as the pieces keep moving at dizzying speed, I feel like there is no ground beneath my feet. I am honestly not sure what the way forward looks like. Several of my colleagues in Transform have left for new jobs in more hospitable states. I don't want to move my family again. My husband just received his Ph.D. in management and landed a teaching position at the University of Utah's business school. The move from Virginia to Utah was difficult for my son. After therapy and finding a new friend group only last year, I can't fathom the emotional and psychological impact of moving him again. And yet, it would be irresponsible of me not to get back on the job market, knowing that with my job in jeopardy, other people's livelihoods would be negatively impacted.

As a Black feminist I am committed to speaking truth to power and will continue to publicly advocate for justice because as Zora Neale Hurston wrote, "If you are silent about your pain, they'll kill you and say you enjoyed it" (1937). This is all I have to offer: that we personally stay vigilant because currently, I hold out no hope that academia will do right by us. I anticipate that as the anti-DEI, anti-trans, anti-Black, anti-CRT, anti-feminist political climate continues to spread across the country it will get worse for marginalized and minoritized academics before it gets better. But as one of my mentors told me, the pendulum swings in both directions, and one day we will see change.

*With lots of care,
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About the author

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