

Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

We Were Never Meant to Be Invisible: Black Womanhood, Resistance and Reclamation in Higher Education

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Dear Higher Education,

“We were never meant to be invisible ... we were only waiting for our moment to arise.”

We write this letter as Black women faculty in higher education. We write this letter to Black women in higher education. We write as and to Black women in a space that often erases us. Like the blackbird Beyoncé (2024) lyrically invokes, we, Black women, are singing in the dead of night, having taken our broken wings and learned to fly. And we write this letter paying homage to our Black womanhood — an identity that resists, remembers, and redefines itself within spaces designed to extract our labor and deplete our spirit.

We are the mothers of movements, the keepers and dispensers of wisdom, the ones who cradle the future in our hands while carrying the weight of the past on our shoulders. And in this moment, we name ourselves: five Black women working, breathing, and existing, each with a story, forged in the crucible of a predominantly white institution. Moving through systems and spaces that attempt to tokenize, silence, and render us invisible, even as they cloak their violence in the language of professionalism. Diversity is performance art here. Performance that praises ideas while ignoring the voices that dared to birth them. And yet, we persist, offering brilliance to an academy that rejects our truth, pouring every bit of ourselves into its walls, only to face the bitter irony: a nation that suckles at the breast of our labor will too often turn its back when we seek its nourishment in return.

Still, our truth insists on being told. Our lives have become the syllabus. Our breath, the research. Our stories, the footnotes of resistance and scholarship. They are the epicenter of our shared humanity, carrying the echoes of our mothers' whispers and the weight of our children's dreams. We offer them here not as confessionals, but as scholarship. As syllabus. As truth-telling.

And so, our first breath begins here, in the charged space between being seen and being safe, between endurance and emergence. This breath, this story, is not singular. It is a pulse in the larger body of our knowing.

I was born into the blur of assimilation. At home, we played Motown, jazz, and blues. We read books with Black faces and studied the Black Encyclopedia. At home, I had a voice. Outside, the world was white — rock music, white-centered textbooks, and the constant reminder that I did not belong. I learned early how to step lightly, how to modulate my voice to sound “correct,” and how to tame my curls into something palatable. My parents, well-meaning and protective, taught me how to survive the gaze. They believed that if we dressed well enough, spoke carefully enough, achieved highly enough, we might be safe.

Decades later, with a doctorate in hand and a seat at the table I thought I had earned, that gaze remained. It followed me through faculty meetings, shadowed my syllabus reviews, shaped how I composed my emails, and corrected my tone in classrooms. The tension between being seen and being watched never loosened its grip. I came to understand that assimilation had not saved me, it had only made the mask harder to remove. The tension between being seen and being watched never loosened. But she dreams of something different. A higher education that not only accepts, but affirms. A space not of survival, but of becoming.

Having pressed against our skin, curated our tone, audited our joy, the white gaze is no stranger to us. It is ever present as it distorts, making us spectacle denied the substance of self. As W.E.B. Du Bois named it, we live caught in the tension of double consciousness, at every moment, in both mirrors: ours and theirs. Reflected through a gaze never meant to hold our fullness. From us, a wellspring of exhaustion flows from being interpreted but not heard, watched but not known. Yet still we rise. Not to prove our worth — we know our worth — but to exist on our own terms. Fully. Freely. Without explanation. With mended wings — ascending. Embodying a radical truth: our authenticity is not something to edit. It is something to exalt.

We cannot be confined to the margins.

We are the marrow. The mind. The pulse.

In our radical, divine fullness, we embody justice, vision and intellectual prowess, not as performance, but as presence.

We carry myriad identities — of race, gender, class, sexuality — not as burdens, but as beauty. As Patricia Hill Collins (1999) reminds us, we are the outsider within. And from that position, we see more clearly. We know more deeply. Demanding the depth of what we know be honored, held sacred — as sacred as the women who taught us to speak truth under breath, to learn even when denied the classroom, to remember even when history tried to forget.

Our truths are not distortions of dominant narratives. They are the rivers beneath them — older, deeper, ancient as blood memory. What we craft does not echo a canon of white memory; it moves through it like water through stone, reshaping what once claimed permanence. We have known rivers. Deep, knowing, wide as longing.

And still we flow.

Ushering in another breath, to rise not as answer, but as testimony. A meditation on skin, nation, and the long ache of belonging.

I am beautiful in my own skin — aren't I?

Growing up, I was shaped by the way the world saw my Black skin and the fears projected onto it. I lived in liminal spaces, present, but never fully embraced. Raised in a Mexican household where adults fought for safety in America, I learned early that proximity to whiteness was often mistaken for refuge. That pursuit was its own kind of grief.

What does it mean to belong to a country your grandparents gave everything to reach, chasing opportunity? What does it mean to belong to a country your ancestors were forced to build, their

labor and legacy buried beneath someone else's wealth? What does it mean to come of age in a place that was never meant to embrace you?

School was never safe. It brought stomachaches, silences, and the sting of being called a distraction. I was labeled long before I could define myself. Academic spaces taught me to see myself through the eyes of those who believed in America's lie about who I was and what I could be. It took years to unlearn those reflections. To see beyond the singular lens Du Bois calls double consciousness.

I rebelled, not with noise but with becoming. I walked an unmarked trail, and in doing so, uncovered a quiet, illustrious strength. My belief in myself took root in something deeper than recognition; it came from those who walked before me. Their dreams, their endurance, their faith in a future they'd never see. I carry that inheritance.

Today, I know I will always occupy the space between belonging and exclusion. My sense of self is forged from the lives of those who carved out a place for me in rooms that still hesitate to acknowledge me. I am a familiar stranger. Familiar because my lineage made this space possible; stranger because it still doesn't always want me here. Yet I stay. This space is mine.

It is precisely this double consciousness that gives me vision. It allows me to move through structures unseen, transforming them from within. I am underestimated often, and that, too, is power. By the time those who sought to erase me notice what I've done, the change will already be rooted, blooming wild along the trail. And those who come next will call it home.

We are not asking to belong. We are building what has not yet existed. New rooms. New rituals. New ways of knowing. And we are filling them with light.

There are moments, sharp, unforgettable, when the mask slips for a slight breath. When the performance we've perfected to survive fractures under the weight of truth. Paul Laurence Dunbar (1913) reminded us: we wear the mask, not by choice but necessity. And yet, even behind the mask, we carry fire.

In the stillness and by the light of the fire, between performance and presence, another breath emerges, unfiltered and firm.

Each month, I sit in a recurring committee meeting where I'm often one of the only Black women in the room. These meetings are meant to foster collaboration and drive institutional progress, yet they often feel like spaces where I can't bring my full self.

One meeting still lingers in my mind. We were discussing changes to a procedure, and I had concerns. But before speaking, I filtered. I softened my tone, added qualifiers and chose diplomacy over clarity, not because I wanted to, but because I've learned how easily a Black woman can be labeled "aggressive" or "too passionate" for simply disagreeing.

The version of me that showed up that day was carefully curated. I nodded, kept calm and used neutral language, even as I knew this procedure wasn't working — especially not for people who

look like me, or those our institution claims to serve equitably. What I wanted to say was: We're missing something critical here.

A while later, a colleague circled back to the conversation and said, "You were very passionate about this, so I wanted to check in." That word, *passionate*, hit hard. Despite all my efforts to temper myself, I was still seen as emotional. That's when it landed: even my filtered self was being misread.

The toll of this is real. Physically, it's a tightness in my chest. Spiritually, it feels like betrayal, leaving parts of myself outside the room, month after month. Code-switching doesn't just exhaust you; it chips away at your authenticity. It makes you question whether being yourself is too much or somehow never enough.

I started wondering if I should even keep my seat on the committee. After so many meetings in which I edited myself to be heard, I was tired. But then came a shift. We were reviewing an evaluation tool I found inequitable, especially for people like me. This time, I didn't filter. I spoke plainly. I named the harm. I didn't cushion my words.

I felt the room tense. But I also felt something in me settle. For the first time in a long while, I felt aligned. Speaking truth wasn't just a risk, it was a reclamation. A moment of clarity. Code-switching may help you survive the space, but authenticity helps you survive yourself. And that, too, is necessary.

To walk in two worlds and speak both tongues is not contradiction, it is craft. A deliberate choreography. We are fluent in every dialect of power. We listen beneath the language; we speak between the lines. This is not adaptation; it is composition.

And still, another breath. This one speaks of tongues split by expectation, of language policed and pride reclaimed.

I learned early on that code-switching was how others would perceive me as intelligent, polished, and professional. Those subtle shifts sent a clear message: sounding "proper" is how you gain respect. In my neighborhood and community, though, I never felt the need to switch. I was surrounded by people who understood and respected my dialect. It wasn't until I entered academic spaces that I began to feel pressure to present myself differently. I'll never forget the moment I realized just how deeply my dialect was devalued in higher education. I was completing my master's degree at the Erikson Institute and, as part of my internship, I had the opportunity to co-teach a child development course at a junior college. This was my lane. I knew this content. I poured days into preparing my lecture — doing the research, creating activities, crafting my delivery. I was excited and nervous, but mostly ready to share what I knew.

Afterward, during the feedback session, my mentor gave me one piece of criticism that has stuck with me ever since: "You need to watch your dialect. Once you got comfortable, you slipped into the way you naturally speak." And in that moment, everything else she said — any praise or encouragement — was overshadowed. I had never been directly told that my natural

way of speaking, a reflection of my culture and identity, was not welcome in academic spaces. It was jarring. It made me question everything. When I attempt to code-switch, it isn't just about changing how I sound. It becomes a full-body experience — hesitating in conversations, searching for “acceptable” words, feeling disconnected from those around me. The performance takes energy. It fractures my confidence. I find myself second-guessing everything: Am I saying this the right way? Do I sound educated enough? Will they respect me?

I am a Black woman with dreadlocks and an undercut — not the traditional image of “professionalism” seen on faculty web pages or business cards. But this is how I show up. This is how I resist.

My hair is an expression of my Blackness. It's not up for debate or approval. I wear it this way because it is mine, because I am proud, and because I want my daughters to see me loving myself fully.

This, too, is curricula: the politics of speech, of hair, of presence. These are the embodied pedagogies they fail to see, and we never forget.

We gather not just to endure, but to remember. To breathe together in the presence of what cannot be taught but must be felt. When Beyoncé dropped *Cowboy Carter*, it wasn't just an album release; it was a reckoning, a revival, a ritual. Her reclamation of country music became our reclamation of space. We communed, dissecting lyrics, humming refrains, whooping and laughing between the lines. In those moments, the academy fell away. We didn't need peer reviews or footnotes; we had mirrors of self. Her words, our pedagogy. Her resistance, our prayer. Her music, our medicine. This is collective effervescence, the sacred current that rises when Black women gather. Our hallelujah. The breath between burdens. The sanctuary we build in the gaps institutions cannot fill. The knowing nod. The slow clap. The raised brow. The inside joke acknowledged without words across a crowded room. The echo of our grandmothers' prayers wrapped in the rhythm of our shared resistance.

Émile Durkheim named it; we live it.

And still, another breath, quiet, awkward, searching. A breath that knows the solitude that came before communion.

“You don't fit in because you were born to stand out”
might sound affirming to an adult,
but to a lanky, awkward 9-year-old who preferred adult conversation to playground games,
it felt like a consolation prize.

It was the thing your mother had to say to keep you from crying on the first day of school,
when you wandered alone on the blacktop, watching others find their people.

You were, in fact, awkward.
And while you hadn't embraced it yet, you would.
Eventually, you'd come to see yourself as your mother did.

But first, there would be longing —
for a friend group as wide and warm as the after-school specials you raced home to watch.

“You talk proper. You use big words.”
Even family said you “talked like a white girl.”
So you spent years shape-shifting
polishing your speech, softening your edges, learning which version of yourself fit the room.
Most people only ever met fragments of you.
Even you weren’t always sure which version was true.

It took over 40 years to find her
the self who is an amalgamation of every phase and fragment.
The self who now finds joy in gathering Black women academics to discuss
Beyoncé’s first country album.

An invitation to pause, to marvel, to just be.

We listened. We sang. We shouted her genius.
And for a moment, the awkward Black girl didn’t have to code-switch, didn’t need a label.
She didn’t need to perform.

In that room,
we reclaimed our wholeness in the lyric and rhythm that felt familiar — ancestral.
The music gave us back to ourselves.
And in the sacred communion of laughter, lyric, and layered truths,
we remembered that joy is not a byproduct.
It is the practice. It is the power.

We weren’t professors. We weren’t performing.
We were present.

Our collective joy is sacred text.
A testimony written in harmony, in homecoming, in hallelujah.

Amen.

And still, we rise — together.

As Black women in higher education, we recognize that while our work is often unacknowledged, it is essential to the health of the institutions we carry and nurture. Our presence in meetings, in classrooms, in hallways, and in our communities is sacred political action. Navigating darkness, we call forth light.

“Blackbird fly / Into the light of the dark black night.”

In this letter, we are defining ourselves for ourselves, not through the lens of institutional approval or validation. We refuse to perform gratitude for inclusion in broken systems. We recognize that while forces are poised to burn it down, starting with the elimination of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, followed by defunding, silencing, and control, we are designing higher education from the mud. We are no longer just preserving what exists. We are building something that you may not be able to imagine, something rooted in justice, care, multiplicity, and truth. We refuse to diminish our tone, truth, or tenderness. We do, however, reclaim rest, rage, and language. We reclaim our joy as a form of protest and pedagogy.

Just as our ancestors built schools in brush arbors, created freedom libraries, and taught each other to read in secret, we are blueprinting a new academy, one that centers Black life, Black knowledge, and Black futures. And we don't do it alone. We do it through collective effervescence, the sacred surge we feel when Black women come together and remember that we were never meant to be invisible

We are not asking for seats at burning tables.

We write this letter as and to Black women. We write this letter to higher education. We write this letter to Whiteness. We are here reimagining the academy. We call all our melanated sisters to keep singing, keep writing, and keep remembering each other.

“You were only waiting for this moment to arise.”

*In truth, power, and unapologetic Blackness,
The Beyhive
Shawntay King, Juanita Marquez, Keisha Rembert, Jolene Taylor, and Dr. Thera Tilmon*

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About the authors

Keisha Rembert is a lifelong learner, award-winning educator, and author committed to equity, justice, and transformative education. She currently serves as Assistant Professor of Educational Foundations at National Louis University, where she helps prepare future educators to lead with cultural responsiveness and critical consciousness. Prior to entering higher education, Keisha spent more than 18 years teaching middle school English and U.S. history in the Chicagoland area. Her passion for antiracism and educational equity is reflected in her leadership, advocacy, and service on numerous national and state committees. She was appointed by Governor J.B. Pritzker to the Illinois Holocaust and Genocide Commission in 2021 and currently serves on the Educator Advisory Board of the Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center. In 2024, she was named Co-Chair of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Committee Against Racism and Bias, and Chair of the Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Committee for the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of NCTE (ALAN). She also serves on the Advisory Board of the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History. Keisha's work has been nationally recognized: she was named the 2019 Illinois History Teacher of the Year and received the NCTE Outstanding Middle-Level English Educator Award that same year. Her deep commitment to advocacy and teacher development includes co-authoring Illinois' Culturally Responsive Teaching and Leading Standards and leading professional learning as a Master Teacher with the Gilder Lehrman Institute. She is the author of *The Antiracist English Language Arts Classroom* and a co-author of "Critical Race Theory in Education: The Hero's Journey" in *Resisting Divide-and-Conquer Strategies in Education: Pathways and Possibilities*, the 2025 Outstanding Book recipient from the Society of Professors of Education. Her additional publications include a chapter on "Media Literacy" in *The Big Fat Middle School English Language Arts Notebook*.

Dr. Thera Tilmon is a dedicated educator, scholar, and leader in the field of teacher preparation and elementary education. She currently serves as the Elementary Department Chair and Assistant Professor at National Louis University, where she supports pre-service teachers through coursework, clinical experiences, and faculty development. Dr. Tilmon holds a bachelor's degree in elementary education and a master's degree in curriculum and instruction, and she earned her doctorate with a research focus on how Black teachers navigate whiteness in K-12 educational settings. Her work centers equity in education, culturally responsive pedagogy, and faculty belonging in higher education. With years of classroom experience, Dr. Tilmon has taught in general education, accelerated/gifted programs, and African-Centered Curriculum (ACC) settings. Her expertise spans literacy instruction, inquiry-based learning, and interdisciplinary unit planning. At National Louis University, Dr. Tilmon is known for her passion for educational justice, mentorship of emerging educators, and innovative use of instructional technology, including AI tools for curriculum design. She plays an active role in shaping equitable assessment practices and building inclusive learning communities for both students and faculty.

Juanita E. Marquez is a bilingual educator, program director, and community advocate with a deep commitment to advancing educational equity and social justice. As a double alumna of Northeastern Illinois University and a first-generation college graduate, she brings lived experience as a non-traditional student, English language learner, and single mother. Currently serving as Project Director of the DHSI Diverse Teacher Pipeline and Title V Grant initiatives at National Louis University, she designs and leads programs that support the retention and success of diverse future educators, particularly those from Latine, immigrant, and first-generation backgrounds. Her leadership is informed by a passion for culturally and linguistically affirming education, collaborative partnerships, and supporting students to navigate and transform systems not originally designed for them. Ms. Marquez is dedicated to building inclusive, transformative learning environments where all students can thrive.

Shawntay King serves as Assistant Professor and Chair of the Early Childhood Education Department at National Louis University. With over 20 years of experience in the field of education, she is deeply committed to culturally responsive pedagogy, child development, and equity in early learning. She holds an MA in early childhood education from the Erikson Institute, a bachelor's degree from Kendall College, and an associate degree

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Shawntay's pedagogical approach centers on honoring the cultural, linguistic, and developmental strengths of all children. Her areas of interest include social-emotional learning, trauma-informed teaching, family and community engagement, and the integration of innovative tools to support inclusive and intentional early learning environments. In addition to her academic work, Shawntay spends her summers supporting early childhood programs through mentorship and guidance, partnering with educators and leaders to strengthen practices, enhance classroom environments, and promote continuous program improvement.

Jolene Taylor is an Assistant Professor at National Louis University, where she leads the Infant-Toddler Studies program in the Undergraduate Teacher Preparation Program. She holds a Master's of Education in early childhood administration from National Louis University. With over 20 years of experience in early childhood education, Jolene specializes in infant and toddler development, responsive caregiving, and educator preparation. She is deeply passionate about strengthening and developing agents of change in the field, empowering future educators to lead with equity, intention, and a commitment to high-quality early learning for all children.