

# Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

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## Monsters We Know: A Letter from the Flesh

LATRINA M. JOHNSON

*Dear Higher Education and Architect of Dismemberment,*

I do not like monsters, even those I know. My spirit and flesh refuse your monstrosity and my heart does not allow me to abide as if familiarity somehow precludes the anxiety and exhaustion of existing in a constant state of escalation and then, ultimately, undoing.

In what Hortense Spillers (1987) names as the “zero degree of social conceptualization,” I do not believe that you view yourself as you are — a system that dismembers while claiming to embrace — and I am convinced that this has been and will continue to be our undoing, ours because I recognize that in this writing I am choosing to appeal to a side of you I have never seen: regard. I have witnessed the more genteel parts of your animalism, what Sylvia Wynter (2003) names as the coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom — a system where even academic language becomes a tool of dismemberment, where inclusion itself serves as a sophisticated form of violence. As Christina Sharpe (2016) reminds us, this institutional violence, while perhaps less searing, still works to unmake us through its methodical drudging pace.

I write without illusions — neither about your capacity for self-reform, nor about what I consider to be the misplaced faith of those who deem you worthy of transformation.

As Black women, we know our own worth exists independent of your structures, and our power to change lies in our hands alone, not in your hollow promises of institutional evolution. As Derrick Bell (1992) reminds us, to face our lived reality requires abandoning such institutional fantasies. I write to be a voice for those of us who ignore the call to “resist,” but instead we “remain” — what Katherine McKittrick (2006) names as the spatial practices of Black survival, a way of holding ground rather than fighting for it. I am committed to the informed action of praxis, what Barbara Christian (1987) calls “the philosophizing of doing,” in that we might fully divest from monstrous activity in higher education in favor of a more communal and public way of making meaning for ourselves and others.

Our theories, and papers, and philosophical stances do not mean much if we are unable to rid ourselves of the monsters that terrorize us.

When I speak of remaining rather than resisting, I name a different way of being in these monstrous spaces — one that refuses the institution’s demands for performative battle. As Tina Campt (2017) theorizes, this is “refusing the future as future,” choosing instead to inhabit time and space on our own terms. To remain is to acknowledge what Christina Sharpe (2016) names as “the wake” — living in and with institutional violence while refusing its claim to inevitability. Within your halls, the monster expects resistance; it feeds on it, transforms it into evidence of its own benevolence: “See how we welcome critique?” But remaining — this quiet, knowing presence — unsettles your monstrous certainty. We remain not as passive observers but, as McKittrick (2006)

reminds us, as creators of our own geographies of survival. Each day we choose to remain becomes an act of Black feminist place-making, carving out spaces where we recognize each other, hold each other, teach each other how to live with and through these institutional hauntings.

This is not the resistance you can commodify or celebrate. It is the deeper, more disturbing truth of our refusal to make peace with your monstrosity or grant you the power to define our worth.

I am not committed to hope.

Hope is dangerous for people who look like me in a time like this. I also believe that hope should be reserved for the individuals who do not know how this State will turn out. In this empire, Black women who are striving to be critically conscious know how this goes on and how it ends. We know that our voices will be accommodated and “invited” in, yet taken with levity as if to suggest that we do not know the depth and breadth of what your animus towards us has done. We are content to know that our work will fall into the right hands at the right time because our theoretical devotion pales in comparison to our connection and our faith to ancestors — all the women who have come before us, and all the work. While we may be thankful for the place in your tower, it is because we have been taught to be thankful for it all — not just because we have been granted favor to enter by your gatekeepers. The communities that love us just do. The sum of our value to them resides with what we have been able to weave together from the scraps that you have left on the table. As Katie Geneva Cannon (1988) reminds us, this transformation of scraps into sustenance is both our inheritance and our practice — a moral wisdom born of necessity and dignity. Our scraps were knitted into salvation, what Emilie Townes (1995) names as the fusion of spiritual witness and practical resistance.

That salvation pours forth in the form of our words, our songs, our prayers, and our willingness to love in abundance in spite of the cold indifference of the world around us.

The monster is fed by our willingness to believe in its ferocity.

As critics of both the architect and the architecture, we are fearful when it is wise to be and we know that the monster represents a greater oppositional force that we are familiar with. The monsters that we know are still monsters — not a lineage to be protected. If the monsters we know are the only constancy that can be offered, we still must not settle because in that acceptance we give consent to our demise; the destination does not matter if the traveler arrives in pieces. The tendency of monsters is to forge ahead with encroachment until met with an equal or greater amount of force. In my lifetime, consciousness has been one of the single greatest catalysts to prompt people to action. The work of being steadfast in our “remaining” instead of focusing on the reform of a 389-year-old monster is a better use of the sacred time that the Creator has granted. We give of ourselves to each other and to the students who are thirsty to make sense of why the world is so unjust; this is our message to Higher Education.

We remain.

Here.

Rooted.

And wedded to the foundations of decency and human concern for our future in the way that others were for us — women they would never meet, but who they saw in their nightmares and their dreams.

Warmly,  
LaTrina M. Johnson

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## About the author

### LaTrina Johnson

A child of central Georgia's red clay and first in my family to graduate college, I walk in the tradition of Fannie Lou Hamer, James Baldwin, and Audre Lorde. My journey from rural Southern roots to doctoral candidacy in Education Policy and Leadership at American University's School of Education has been shaped by years of teaching Literature in K-12 classrooms and sociology in higher education spaces. My research, anchored in Black Feminist Thought, Critical Race Theory, and Afropessimism, examines how Black women navigate and resist systemic barriers in the Deep South. Beyond the academy's traditional metrics, I measure my work's value through its contribution to Black women's liberation and to the communities that nurture my intellectual and spiritual growth. As an educator and emerging scholar, I remain committed to creating and co-creating pathways for Black women's freedom.