

Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

Dear Higher Education: Winning Within the Margins Without Losing Ourselves

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Dear Higher Education,

I'm writing from a familiar ledge on your Social Justice Mountain: the narrow place where a woman of color can see the view clearly and still be told she doesn't quite "fit" the trail map.

In my world, "fit" rarely means scholarly alignment. It means cultural matching with a velvet glove. It means "We love your work," followed by a longer, quieter sentence: "We can't imagine you here." It means being asked to translate my life, my method, and my voice into a template that was never built to hold them (Crenshaw 1991; Collins 2000). When I refuse to shrink, the rejection is often polite. When I insist on clarity, the silence is often long.

I know this silence well: the month that passes after you submit a piece; the committee cycle that disappears into "we'll circle back"; the hiring season where weeks become weather. People call it professionalism. I've learned it as a kind of administrative fog, the kind that makes you doubt your own eyes, and a tempo that rewards speed over care (Mountz et al. 2015).

I have lived through multiple migrations on this mountain. Some were geographic: packing up what I could afford to keep, taking what I could not afford to lose. Some were migrations of identity: learning when my presence would be read as "too much," and when my quiet would be read as "not enough." I've migrated between fields, too, carrying a Black feminist framework across Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, Communication, and feminist criminology (Collins 2000). Each border crossing comes with a new passport control: different keywords, different expectations, different definitions of "rigor." The problem is not that my work lacks rigor. The problem is that the checkpoint was designed to misread anything that doesn't arrive in one approved uniform.

And then there is the work that rarely gets counted. The caregiving that has a calendar of its own: an elder's appointment, a child's needs, a family crisis that arrives without asking permission. The emotional labor of being the only one in the room who can name what just happened, and then being asked to do it "nicely." The salary differential wrapped in politeness and policy, the kind that makes you feel petty for wanting equity and reckless for speaking it out loud.

I want to say this plainly: imposter syndrome is not always internal confusion. Sometimes it is an accurate response to an institution designed to cast shadows, not reflect light (Lorde 1984).

Still, many of us stay. We keep building lives and careers in places that were not designed for our thriving. We keep teaching. We keep publishing. We keep mentoring students who arrive hungry for a language that tells the truth. We keep doing the labor of making the place better, even when the place responds with "Thank you" instead of protection.

I'm writing because I do not believe the solution is simply "be resilient." Resilience without infrastructure becomes a slow, respectable disappearance. What we need, instead, is a set of practices and protections that make survival less improvisational and more collective.

Here are three truths I have learned on this mountain, and three systems I built to keep moving without losing myself.

1. Make coherence visible, not smaller.

I've learned that "clarity" is often mistaken for "simplicity," especially when it comes from women of color. But clarity is not surrender. Clarity is a strategy; it is how we keep our work from being misread on purpose.

So, I build a one-page "method map" for every major project. Not a marketing blurb. A map. It names my questions, my evidence, my ethics, and my contribution in plain language that can travel across fields. When a reviewer says, "This isn't sociology" or "This isn't communication," I can point to the map and respond, "It's both, and here is how." The map does not ask for permission. It makes the work legible without asking it to become less.

2. Treat ethics as method, not decoration.

On this mountain, "ethics" is often reduced to a paragraph at the end of a piece or a line in a grant application. In my practice, ethics is the workflow.

Consent is ongoing, not a one-time signature. Context is not optional. Usefulness is not a slogan. Before I publish a story adjacent to someone's pain, I do an impact check: Who could be harmed if this travels? What details can I paraphrase to reduce risk? What do I owe to the people whose lives make this analysis possible? I've learned that "public" is not always safe or publishable, and that caution is not cowardice. It is care.

3. Build boundaries that don't require permission.

Higher education often treats women of color like elastic. Stretch us. Praise our flexibility. Then act surprised when we snap.

So, I use scripts. I don't mean scripts to be cold. I mean scripts to be clear. When a request arrives that will break my week, I don't improvise a "maybe." I say, "I can't take this on right now. I can revisit next month." When someone asks for unpaid labor wrapped in flattery, I ask about compensation. When a meeting is scheduled without regard for caregiving realities, I name my constraints without apology.

These are small practices, but they keep me from becoming a person who is always available to everyone except herself.

I've also learned that our classrooms are one of the few places on this mountain where we can redesign the terrain. I build courses with structures that widen participation and reduce risk: clear pathways for discussion, multiple ways to show learning, grace windows that treat students as humans rather than machines. I tell students personal disclosure is never required. I teach them the hidden curriculum explicitly: how to read a syllabus like a contract, how to ask for what they need, how to protect their future selves.

Some people call that "soft." I call it rigorous world-making (hooks 1994).

But here is the hard truth: individual systems can help us survive, but they cannot substitute for institutional responsibility. If higher education wants transformation, not branding, then it must build structures that make the “Lonely Only” less lonely, and less disposable.

So, Dear Higher Education, here is what I am asking for, not as a wish list but as a minimum standard for dignity:

- Transparent evaluation criteria and timelines, especially in hiring and promotion. No more fog-as-policy.
- Review standards that can recognize interdisciplinary and public scholarship without treating it as suspicious.
- Equitable compensation practices that close salary differentials and make pay transparency real, not rhetorical.
- Workload accounting that counts the labor women of color are asked to do: mentoring, diversity work, crisis management, community care.
- Caregiving supports that acknowledge multigenerational realities: flexible scheduling, real leave policies, and leadership accountability when policies are ignored.
- Protections against retaliation and harassment that do not require the harmed person to become their own investigator.

You already know how to build systems. The question is whether you will build them for the people you most rely on to keep your moral language alive.

I am not writing to abandon the mountain. I am writing to insist that the path can be remade. I’m writing to say that the brilliance you call “less, under, micro” is often the very thing that keeps your institutions honest. I’m writing to say that we are not errors in your equation; we are evidence that the equation is wrong.

And I’m writing to remind you that the goal is not to survive higher education. The goal is to transform it.

Sincerely,
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Los Angeles, California

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About the author

Dr. Tamanika Ferguson is a Black feminist scholar-teacher and public writer working across Women's and Gender Studies, Carceral Studies, Sociology, and Communication. She is the author of the forthcoming University of California Press book, *Voices from the Inside: Incarcerated Women Speak*. Her peer-reviewed articles examine carceral governance, abolition feminist praxis, and the infrastructures of testimony and public voice built by system-impacted people. She is based in Los Angeles.