

Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

Staying Without Becoming: Notes from a Woman of Color Inside the Academy

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Dear Higher Education,

I came to you clear-eyed. Not innocent. Not unaware. Clear.

I understood you were shaped by power, history, exclusion. I did not expect neutrality. What I expected—what I trusted—was design. I believed institutions responsible for shaping knowledge and futures would have systems sturdy enough to hold the people tasked with doing that work.

What I did not expect was how lonely it would be to remain inside you once I understood how you actually function.

That loneliness did not arrive as sadness. It arrived as a pattern.

As a woman of color in the academy, loneliness is not an accident or a mismatch of personalities. It is produced. It emerges where responsibility is assigned without authority, where visibility is mistaken for protection, where praise substitutes for material support. It takes shape when institutions rely on individual endurance to compensate for systems that were never designed to hold equity work safely.

I didn't recognize it all at once. At first, it felt like professional dissonance—small, easy to rationalize. Meetings where my analysis shaped decisions I could not make. Roles where I was accountable for outcomes I could not structurally influence. Compensation conversations where inequity was explained through timing, policy, or process—always polite, always reasonable, always immovable.

Over time, it became clearer. Loneliness is not a feeling problem. It is a governance signal.

I learned something earlier, though—long before the patterns fully revealed themselves. I learned it in college, not as a formal theory, but as a kind of survival knowledge you absorb when you realize you will have to work inside systems that were never built with you in mind. If you want to change the game, you have to enter it—but you also have to stay vigilant enough not to let the game change you into what you're trying to fight. That understanding taught me to learn rules without mistaking them for truth, to study power without revering it, to recognize how institutions reward compliance, soften resistance, and slowly invite you to trade clarity for belonging. It taught me that transformation requires proximity, but survival requires discipline—and that losing yourself is often framed as growth.

You call it professionalism when we don't name it. You call it resilience when we survive it. You call it leadership when we absorb impact quietly so the institution can remain unchanged. This is how the Lonely Only is made—not through exclusion alone, but through proximity without power.

We are brought in as evidence of commitment and positioned as translators across difference. We are relied upon to hold tension the system refuses to resolve. Our labor becomes relational, emotional, interpretive—essential yet rarely protected. When outcomes stall, scrutiny sharpens. When harm surfaces, responsibility concentrates. When we speak plainly, tone becomes the issue.

Politeness becomes policy.

I have watched salary differentials justified as historical artifacts rather than present decisions. I have watched authority disperse while accountability tightened. I have watched institutional breakdowns reframed as individual deficiencies—especially when the individual stands closest to equity work.

And I have watched what staying requires and sacrifices.

Staying is not passive. It is an ongoing calculation. It means learning how to speak without triggering defensiveness. It means choosing silence strategically, not because it is ethical, but because it is survivable. It means carrying the quiet awareness that leaving would confirm narratives you did not write, while remaining requires holding burdens you were never meant to carry alone.

The academy often misunderstands why women of color leave. It assumes fragility, burnout, lack of fit. It asks less often why staying requires so much unpaid labor, or why departure is treated as personal loss rather than structural indictment. Many of us are not pushed out.

We are worn down. And still, some of us remain.

We remain because we understand the promise embedded in higher education, even when its architecture fails to support it. We remain because students need to see intellectual authority embodied in forms that look like them. We remain because we know transformation is possible—but only if institutions stop confusing commitment with design.

Equity cannot live on values alone. It must be built into governance. Into decision rights. Into accountability pathways. Into compensation structures. Into protection mechanisms. Without this, the academy will continue to rely on the moral stamina of women of color to absorb contradictions it refuses to resolve.

Listening to us is not enough.

Hearing us is not a posture or a sentiment. It is an action. It is structural. It shows up in who decides, who is protected, who bears risk, and who is blamed when systems fail.

This letter is not a plea. It is not a warning. But it is a record.

It documents what staying has required.

It names what has been normalized. It leaves behind evidence.

What higher education chooses to do with that knowledge is its responsibility.

*Sincerely,
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About the author

Dr. Shaniquè Jazmine Broom is the founder of Shaniquè Broom LLC, a governance design consultancy for high-capacity leaders of color inside complex institutional environments. She holds a Ph.D. in Higher Education from the University of Denver and serves as Instructional Design Manager at Palo Alto University.