Dear Higher Education
LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

Being the Lonely Only: The Strange Fruit of the "Model Minority" in Rural Academia

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Dear Higher Education,

I am writing to you from a place of transition. For years, I approached you as a scholar of psychology and leadership, studying how Black women navigate crucible experiences (Chance, 2021a). You once taught me that if I worked twice as hard, I could claim the low-hanging fruit of your model minority status. I believed you. I played the game because I believed there were protective factors in that performance. I thought I was securing the easy wins, only to realize I was being lured into a trap of conditional visibility. I served on your committees, advised your students, compiled your awards and recognitions, and tirelessly worked to expose and break down your concrete ceilings.

> But I have learned how quickly you discard the skin of strange fruit when it no longer tastes of compliance.

You have a way of making me hypervisible when you need a face for a brochure or a content expert to speak on belonging. Yet, the moment I show up as my full self, the gaze shifts from celebratory to predatory. When a student uses an evaluation to weaponize my ethnic pride, labeling my cultural attire as "unprofessional" or my pedagogical transparency as a threat, I am suddenly the problem. In those moments, my Ph.D. and my years of service are discarded like the skin of strange fruit. I am reduced to a caricature of the angry Black woman who made someone feel "uncomfortable" simply by existing in her own skin.

This is the hyper(in)visibility paradox that plagues Black women in academia—the simultaneous experience of being tokenized for diversity optics while rendered invisible in matters of equity and protection (Chance, 2021b). I am seen clearly enough to be critiqued for my jewelry, but I am invisible when I ask for the structural protection you owe me. Empirical research underscores this duality that Black women faculty often face, such as heightened scrutiny and marginalization, exacerbating burnout and isolation in predominantly White institutions.

Now, as I watch you relentlessly roll back DEI initiatives and dismantle the very foundations of belonging, the betrayal is complete. From state-level bans in places like Texas and Florida to federal executive orders under the Trump administration, these rollbacks have proliferated since 2023, stripping resources from cultural centers, affinity programs, and equity offices, often leaving women of color even more exposed. You wrap your salary differentials and your biases in politeness and political correctness, expecting me to perform double the labor for half the peace of mind. Data reveal the stark reality that Black women in higher education earn significantly less than White men (e.g., often 61 to 64 cents on the dollar), compounding economic disparities and reinforcing systemic inequities (Tubbs & Fuesting, 2024).

The classroom, once a space of intellectual liberation, has become a site of surveillance and risk. Under the watchful eyes of groups like Turning Point USA and governmental entities deputized to police "divisive" content, I no longer feel safe. These external pressures amplify internal threats, turning honest discussions on race, identity, and justice into potential flashpoints for backlash. Yet, this does not mean I am abandoning higher education entirely. I remain committed to its transformative potential, but my engagement must evolve. I love working with and influencing the development of young adults, as their curiosity, resilience, and hunger for authentic mentorship fuel my purpose. In the foreseeable future, this work will look different: perhaps through community-based workshops, online platforms, or independent consulting that bypasses institutional constraints while still fostering growth.

I am done being your scapegoat. Across this nation, Black folks are taking a collective step back from the performative activism that only serves to keep your institutions comfortable; a phenomenon akin to "quiet quitting," where disengagement stems from unaddressed inequities rather than laziness. I have stepped away from your classrooms because I am no longer interested in proving my humanity to a system that is actively erasing the programs meant to protect it.

> This is my quiet rebellion. I am leaning into the rage you are so afraid of, but I am using it to fuel my own fire rather than burn out for you.

I am finding my reflection in Sista/h Circles and other relevant affinity and identity groups; the spaces that offer Black women scholars safe havens for support, mentorship, and collective healing, proven to reduce anxiety, build resilience, and foster professional growth amid isolation. I am choosing my community and my mental wellness over the hollow accolades of your administration. I am the outsider who refuses to be broken by your rollbacks. My brilliance is no longer for sale to a system that views me as a carcass the moment I stop code-switching and masking.

I am reclaiming my time, my voice, and my right to exist outside of your narrow, exclusionary standards. Transformation is possible, but it will not happen through your metrics. It will happen in the spaces we build for ourselves in the shadows you created, such as the parallel communities where women of color reimagine scholarship, resistance, and solidarity. These withdrawn spaces can ripple back, forcing institutional change by modeling equitable practices that expose your shortcomings, inspiring policy shifts through collective advocacy, and sustaining our scholarship in ways that influence broader discourses, whether through publications, consulting, or public engagement that outlives your walls.

In Rage, Authenticity and Hope,

Dr. Nuchelle L. Chance,
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About the author

Dr. Nuchelle L. Chance is an Applied Social Psychologist and Global Leadership scholar-researcher-practitioner dedicated to dismantling systemic injustices through evidence-based inquiry. Her research program employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative analysis of social cognition and identity with phenomenological investigations into the crucible experiences and resilient leadership of Black women in higher education. She has served as a scholar-practitioner bridging research and community advocacy, including founding affinity spaces to support women of color in predominantly white rural settings. Her work, which has been supported by American Psychological Association (APA) funding, centers on fostering equity, mental wellness, and authentic mentorship. Through both independent and community-based pathways, Dr. Chance continues to advocate for the holistic development and empowerment of young adults and marginalized populations.