Dear Higher Education
LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

Do I Belong: Being the Lonely Only in Higher Education

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Dear Higher Education,

I have been asking you a question for most of my life, though the language has shifted with time. The question is simple, but the weight of it is not: Do I belong?

This is not a question rooted in doubt about my ability. It is a question shaped by the conditions in which I have been asked to learn, to lead, and to remain.

I learned early that this question was not mine alone.

I remember sitting eagerly, waiting for an interview with Michelle Obama as she spoke about growing up on the South Side of Chicago and navigating spaces where her identity was constantly challenged. When she spoke about being ridiculed for using proper English and socially punished for being intelligent, I recognized myself immediately.

Belonging, I realized, is not only contested in predominantly white environments. It follows us into our own communities, our classrooms, and our careers.

What does it mean to be considered out of place in academic spaces and out of reach in the communities that raised you?

Even now, as a doctoral student preparing to advance further into academia, I continue to confront that question. I know I am capable. I know I have something to contribute. Yet belonging often feels conditional.

Fluency in both standard English and the language of my community is often treated not as an asset, but as a liability. I question whether my work will be valued in my lifetime or only recognized once I am no longer here to claim it.

What does it mean to be considered out of place in academic spaces and out of reach in the communities that raised you?

These tensions are not simply personal. They are structured. Black women are rarely afforded the space to be uncertain, tired, or vulnerable. We are labeled strong because weakness is not permitted. We carry burdens that were never meant to be ours alone, and when the weight becomes visible, we are told we should have been able to hold it quietly.

This is not just emotional.
This is historical.
This is inherited.

I am keenly aware that my pursuit of education is tethered to a history in which Black women were denied learning, legitimacy, and access altogether. What I carry into these spaces is not just ambition, but inheritance.

That inheritance includes aspiration, but also loss, relational fractures, misrecognition, and the quiet estrangement that often accompanies Black women's pursuit of higher education even within the communities we come from.

The work demands a great deal, and the costs accumulate in ways that are rarely named, even as we are asked to be grateful for access to institutions that continue to reject us.

I first put language to this tension in my poem "Angry Black Woman," written long before I had academic terms for it and later published in *Feeln' Sum Type of Way*:

> *I'M EXASPERATED for having to explain myself and then apologize for who I am.*
> *I don't have the freedom of expressing my dissatisfaction without "having an attitude."*
> *I can't challenge you as a man without "wanting to wear your pants."*
> *I shouldn't embrace my sexuality lest I be considered "loose."*
> *I mustn't speak my mind. After all, "A woman should be seen and not heard."*
> *Be submissive.*
>
> *No, be less than human.*
> *Be unresponsive.*
> *Be accommodating.* (Cooper 2019).

I have learned that belonging and inclusion are not the same. Being invited into academic spaces does not guarantee acceptance. Sometimes, even when we are present, our presence is treated as symbolic performance of diversity rather than a recognition of intellect.

Our brilliance is scrutinized, our originality questioned, and our legitimacy constantly evaluated. Acceptance, when it comes, often feels provisional.

I have moved between worlds my entire life, from under-resourced neighborhoods to academic institutions that pride themselves on excellence. In each space, I am asked in different ways to prove that I belong. In some places, education makes me suspect. In others, my Blackness does. The question remains the same, even as the context changes.

Over time, I have come to understand that this question is not evidence of my inadequacy. It is evidence of systems that were never designed to reflect me back to myself with clarity or care.

What is often named as imposter syndrome is, in truth, a rational response to environments that demand excellence while withholding affirmation. The harm is not always enacted by individuals, it is produced and sustained by institutions that fracture relationships, reward assimilation, and call the resulting isolation resilience.

And still, I stay.

I stay not because the path is easy, but because leaving would mean surrendering space that matters. I stay because there are students watching, searching for someone who looks like them and sounds like them, wondering what is possible. I stay because my presence is not incidental—it is necessary.

I no longer ask whether I belong to seek permission. I ask it to name the cost of remaining and to affirm my decision to do so anyway.

I am prepared to stand alone, if necessary, to be the first, to grow through discomfort, and to contribute to a future of higher education that is more honest about who it has excluded and what it continues to require of those who remain.

And if Black women continue to arrive, persist, and contribute despite histories of exclusion and ongoing constraint, then the question is no longer whether we belong here.

The question is whether higher education is willing to reckon with what it demands, what it fractures, and what it must change to become worthy of those who stay.

Sincerely,
Teianna D. Cooper

References

Cooper, Teinna D. (2019). *Feeln' Sum Type of Way.* Adept Publishing.

About the author

Teianna D. Cooper is a doctoral candidate in Leadership of Organizations. Teianna's work centers on Black women's experiences in higher education, organizational life, and leadership under conditions of constraint. She has more than two decades of professional experience across healthcare, public service, and community-based systems, where she has worked at the intersection of care, accountability, and institutional practice.

Alongside her scholarly work, Teianna maintains an active creative practice as a poet and cultural worker, using storytelling to surface questions of belonging, inheritance, and cost that often go unnamed in academic spaces. Her scholarship and artistry are deeply informed by lived experience and a commitment to examining how systems demand excellence while withholding affirmation. Through both research and reflective narrative, she seeks to bridge intellectual rigor and embodied truth, contributing to conversations about what higher education requires and who it asks to remain.