

Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

Born Twice: A Letter from the Crossroads

KENNIA DELAFE

Dear Higher Education,

My letter will be short. I want to begin by saying, we are together in this. It may sound cheesy and colloquial, but it is true; I will support you all the way to the end because I believe in the power and essence of education. Education is *freedom* (Martí 1884/1975).

I have been born twice. Once in Cuba, under a sky that taught me to be silent, and then again in the United States, in pursuit of freedom, only to find that the silence had learned a new accent. Two decades later, I am still here fighting to know who I am, why I am here, and what it means to belong in a place that was never built with me (us) in mind.

I know you're fighting too. I've watched you grapple with your contradictions: your mission statements full of justice, your hallways echoing exclusion. You ask yourself who you are, what your purpose is, and whether change is truly possible. I keep asking myself the same questions; we share that restlessness. So, hear me out. Maybe, and just maybe, there's a place at the tip of a mountain or at a crossroad where our journeys meet, not in assimilation or accommodation, but in recognition, resistance, and reciprocity.

I am a first-generation Cuban immigrant. I grew up in a country where the regime reshaped education into an ideological apparatus that trained us not to think out of line, but to memorize. Not to question, but to comply. Household traditions became shamed, and knowledge outside the party's acceptance was a threat. Religious practices vanished from schools and homes. History was rewritten into a single story; the old one survived minimally, only among those who resisted silently or left soon enough. Identity was assigned. I remember my classmates and I repeating slogans we barely understood; a practice that persists today. We were expected to recite unity while taught to distrust each other in silence, and in silence, become informants for "the good of the order." My very existence was shaped by an epistemology of fear. But even within that system, I learned to dream. I learned to ask quiet questions. I learned that my spirit did not match the identity the regime gave me. I wanted out; not just out of Cuba, but out of the imposed way of knowing, of being, of surviving.

Coming to the United States felt like a rebirth; a chance to breathe as myself and learn anew. The American dream. The land of opportunity. The promise of freedom. And yet, that promise was wrapped in fine print.

It took me a while to realize that here, "freedom" often means choosing from a list of pre-approved options. That "opportunity" demands mastery in the implicit norms of belonging: speech, dress, conduct, and deference. I reentered classrooms as an adult with multiple given identity labels (ESL, Latina, mixed-race, female), hungry to learn, only to find my knowledge was either exoticized or erased. My accent, my writing, my frameworks, my sources, and my way of knowing were "interesting" but not "rigorous." I was asked to translate not just my words, but my worth. The message was clear: your knowledge is conditional. Your belonging is temporary.

I remember the moments I understood this most clearly; not one moment, but hundreds. The final paper returned with feedback that read "pretty good grammar and punctuation," as if syntax were the only measure of scholarly thought. The colleague at a TESOL conference who told me I was "so brave" for presenting to English teachers, as if my expertise were performance rather than profession. The question in graduate seminars: "Where did you go to learn English?", as if my accent disqualified my argument. The meetings where coworkers said, "I'm having trouble understanding what you mean," then changed the topic entirely, or restated my idea in their own words, and received credit for it. The decisions made on my behalf, "because you are an ESL learner"—a label that follows me like a shadow, reducing decades of bilingual intellectual work to a deficit requiring accommodation.

It wasn't any single comment that disrupted me. It was the pattern. The realization that I was being measured by metrics designed for monolingual journeys, evaluated by rubrics that couldn't account for the cognitive complexity of living, thinking, and creating between languages. Where on the assessment does it measure the intellectual labor of translating not just words, but entire frameworks of knowing? How do you score the resilience required to rebuild your epistemology after it's been dismantled twice? The answer: you don't. These metrics cannot see *bibrilliance*—a term I have coined to describe the cultural, intellectual, and emotional power of hybrid identity; the ability to resist boundaries and illuminate paths between worlds. They can only mark its absence.

I persisted; I had no other place to go. Failure was not permissible, and I could not let down the people who depended on me back home. I've spent half my life trying to unlearn and relearn; to teach, to grow, to find language for a life that was never meant to fit into binaries of native/foreigner, educated/uneducated, acceptable/unacceptable. I have navigated a landscape of coded expectations while trying to recover what has been stripped from me—ancestral wisdom, cultural memory, and the right to define myself on my own terms.

I watched students who reminded me of my past self—immigrants, first-gen, speakers of other worlds—try to find their place in a system not built for them either. They, too, felt displaced and abandoned. What I began to see in those students, I had lived myself. The same markers of "less" that followed me through undergraduate and graduate seminars, the raised eyebrows when I cited scholars from the Global South, the "helpful" editing of my syntax that erased my voice, the assumption that my passion was "personal" rather than rigorous, were structural, not individual. They were the metrics of a system that measures brilliance only in its own image.

My research now documents what I survived: how educational programs continue to assess English Language Learners through frameworks that cannot capture linguistic dexterity, cultural navigation, or the cognitive complexity of living between worlds. These students are marked deficient by the very measures that fail to account for their strengths. They are scored on monolingual rubrics, advised toward remediation rather than acceleration, and told their success requires leaving parts of themselves behind. I see myself in every "underperforming" multilingual student whose transcript tells a story of deficit while their lived experience screams *bibrilliance*. This is not a coincidence; this is by design.

I began to understand that epistemic injustice was not just a relic of my past, but an active structure in my present. As Miranda Fricker (2007, 27) observed, this form of injustice "travels, adapts, and thrives". It remains hidden yet permanent within institutional policies and syllabi, often masked as merit-based gatekeeping. It resists change. It's polished.

And yet, I am not afraid! I left everything behind not to escape, but to evolve. I refuse to be ashamed of that decision, who I was, or who I am becoming. I have spent half my life educating others while intensively trying to recover the parts of me that were erased. I have worked hard to make spaces for me and my students to speak from where we stand, not where others expect us to arrive. I refuse to be quiet about what I've learned.

My new identity, what you may call “integration,” is a mosaic made of knowledge, resistance, and resilience. This identity was not freely given; it was "carved out in the margins" (Anzaldúa 1987, 77). I’ve earned it!

Now I am watching my children navigate the same system. They are bilingual, bicultural, brilliant. I've fought for them to carry our history and hope—to know their grandmothers' prayers, to taste the food that survived immigration, to speak Spanish without shame. But even as I fight, I watch them migrate through identities not of their choosing. At school, they are "heritage speakers" tracked differently than "native speakers," a distinction that marks them as less than monolingual peers despite their cognitive advantage. Their bilingualism is measured only by what they lack in English, never by what they carry in Spanish. They learn quickly which parts of themselves are welcome in different school contexts and which must stay home. I see them translating not just language, but once again, their worth, while learning to code-switch not as brilliance but as survival. They are becoming fluent in a third language I never wanted them to learn: the language of making themselves smaller, quieter, more palatable to resist. And I wonder: will Higher Education receive them as brilliant? Or will it, too, measure them by metrics designed for monolingual, monocultural lives—metrics that are unable to recognize the intellectual labor of living between worlds, the resilience required to hold multiple truths, the creativity born of translation itself?

Higher education, will you receive them differently than you received me?

Will you resist the urge to mold them into someone else’s idea of excellence?

Will you listen—not just with ears but with intention—to the stories of immigrants, our descendants, and our contributions?

Will you see them not as diversity quotas or retention rates, but as carriers of wisdom you may not yet understand?

We are not yours to claim, but we are here to co-create something better. And let us stop pretending that justice is achieved through polite invitations to tables never meant for us. Let us stop asking students and faculty of color to shrink themselves into “inclusive excellence.” Let us resist the normalization of assimilation as a symbol of success.

I’m not asking for a seat at your table. I’m asking you to question the table itself. To recognize that success doesn’t have to mean sameness. That justice cannot be measured by inclusion in systems designed to erase.

There is a high mountain, a crossroads before us. I do not come with a perfect plan. I come with a lived truth, a calling, and an invitation.

To listen. To unlearn. To remember. To reimagine.

I was born twice. And I hope that in this space, we can all be reborn, not as teacher and student, host and guest, but as co-creators of something freer.

*With fierce hope and open hands,
Kennia Delafe*

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About the author

Kennia Delafe is a first-generation Cuban immigrant, educator, and a PhD candidate in Higher Education Administration at Syracuse University, where she serves as assistant director for the Syracuse University Project Advance. Her scholarship employs Critical Quantitative methods to examine Hispanic Caribbean students' success at the intersections of epistemic injustice, identity development, and assimilation pressures in U.S. higher education. Drawing from her lived experience navigating different educational systems, Kennia challenges deficit-based frameworks that render multilingual, multicultural students invisible. She coined *bibrilance* to name the intellectual, emotional, and cultural power of living between multiple worlds—a framework that reframes hybrid identities as generative knowledge rather than deficiency. She is also a mother, mentor, and lifelong learner, committed to educational transformation that centers rather than erases marginalized voices.