

Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

Care as Counter-Institution: Staying, Refusal, and Collective Survival in the Academy

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Dear Higher Education,

I learned how to stay by watching others do it quietly. Not through your official pathways or the structures you claimed were in place to support us, but through small, deliberate acts that made continued presence possible when clarity, recognition, or direction were in short supply. At some point, staying stopped being about ambition or belief in institutional promise. It became about proximity—about who was willing to read my work carefully, ask difficult questions without condescension, and remain present when the terms of belonging felt unstable. Staying was not a decision made once; it was a practice learned over time, shaped by relationships that existed largely beyond your view.

There were long stretches when the path forward felt thin and uncertain. Formal mentoring existed in name, but rarely in practice. Guidance arrived inconsistently, often too late to be useful, and sometimes not at all. What sustained me instead were conversations that unfolded outside official channels: drafts exchanged without expectation of credit, meetings with no agenda beyond honesty, and shared recognition of exhaustion that required no explanation. These moments were not supplemental to academic life; they were the conditions under which intellectual labor could continue. They emerged in response to absence—your absence—and they filled gaps your systems repeatedly left exposed.

Over time, it became clear that what might appear informal or incidental from the outside carried real intellectual and emotional weight. These relationships sharpened arguments, clarified stakes, and made room for thinking that could not easily survive within compressed timelines or narrow evaluative frames. They also absorbed labor that remained unnamed: translating institutional language, sitting with disappointment after stalled evaluations, and reminding one another that difficulty was not evidence of inadequacy. Staying, under these conditions, was not passive endurance. It was deliberate, practiced, and sustained through care that required time, attention, and sacrifice.

Persistence is often framed as an individual quality, as if it exists independently of context. But persistence, as I have lived it, has always been collective. It has depended on people who refused to let isolation complete the work that exclusion had already begun. It has relied on practices of care that were never formally recognized, even as they made formally recognized work possible. These acts of care carried cost—they demanded labor, vigilance, and emotional bandwidth that the institution rarely acknowledges—but they were essential to continuing meaningful scholarly work. Survival under these conditions has always been relational, echoing Black feminist traditions that situate knowledge, care, and survival as intertwined practices rather than abstract ideals (hooks 1994; Collins 2000).

What remains striking is how little room your structures make for this labor. The practices that sustained me do not appear in workload models, evaluation criteria, or narratives of institutional success. They are treated as personal choices rather than shared responsibility, even as they compensate for systems that repeatedly fail to hold the people who work within them. You benefit from this labor without naming it. You rely on it while insisting it remain peripheral. In doing so, you preserve an image of the academy that depends on care while refusing to account for it.

Even the moments of joy, accomplishment, and recognition are mediated by these informal networks. Conferences attended together, feedback shared in hallways or over video calls, guidance offered without reward—all of these became the scaffolding that allowed intellectual curiosity and rigor to survive where formal structures did not. They also reminded me that intellectual labor is never neutral. It carries relational, emotional, and social dimensions that metrics and promotions cannot capture. The academy measures, reports, and evaluates, but it often fails to see the conditions that make continued presence possible.

I am still here. Not because conditions improved in predictable ways, and not because staying became easier over time. I am here because others made room when none was offered, and because leaving was not the only form of refusal available to me. Staying has been a practice of care, a deliberate choice to cultivate intellectual and relational continuity in the face of systemic neglect. It has been costly and exacting, yet necessary.

If transformation is something you continue to claim as a goal, it may be worth paying attention to what already sustains the people you depend on. Not as inspiration, not as exception, but as evidence—quiet, costly, and already at work. What would higher education look like if care were treated not as a private resource but as foundational to knowledge production? What would it mean if the labor that sustains intellectual life were recognized rather than rendered invisible? These are questions that cannot be answered with policies alone; they demand observation, acknowledgment, and a willingness to reimagine the very conditions of academic life.

Sincerely,
Owoyemi D. O.

References

Collins, Patricia Hill. 2000. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. 2nd ed. Routledge.

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About the author

Dr. Owoyemi Deborah Oluwasola is a Nigerian academic and lecturer in the Department of Philosophy at Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti. Her academic profile indicates involvement in interdisciplinary philosophical inquiry, including contributions to discussions on cultural influence on democratic practice. She engages normative and conceptual analysis to interrogate structural issues in governance and identity politics in Nigeria and broader Africa.