

Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

“Not You, of Course”: A Letter from a Lonely Only

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Dear Higher Education,

When we immigrated to Canada, to Welland, a small city in Ontario, my Indian father was a respected local pediatrician who probably treated most of the kids in town at one point or another. His colleagues would speak disparagingly of immigrants and minorities, South Asians included. But if my father happened to be present, the speaker would look at him and say, “I don’t mean you, of course.”

And maybe they didn’t. But did that mean they would defend me against their friends, their families, or against strangers who did, indeed, mean me?

I have been thinking about that phrase for most of my life. And I have come to understand that you, Higher Education, have been saying it to me for over thirty years. You hired me. You invited me in. You created positions with words like “equity” and “inclusion” in their titles, and you handed them to women who look like me. But being invited and being heard are different things. Being hired and being supported are different things. Being given a title and being given power are very different things indeed.

I am writing to you now as a woman of color who spent three decades inside your walls, across four institutions and two countries, trying to do the work you said you wanted done. I am writing as someone who was, at every institution, the Lonely Only — the woman of color hired to fix what the institution would not name, to carry what the institution would not hold, and to absorb the hostility that the work inevitably generates. I am writing as someone who eventually had to leave you in order to continue doing what you hired me to do.

The Migrations

In 1991, I became your Race Relations Officer at Western University in London, Ontario. I was eager. I had studied social anthropology at McGill and Cambridge; my fieldwork focused on twice-migrated Indians expelled from Uganda and living diasporic lives in the U.K. I had been an activist in the anti-apartheid movement. I thought I was ready.

What I failed to consider was the reason the job was available. Instead of an institution striving to prepare for the future, I found one where faculty members were conducting racist research straight out of the eighteenth century. A psychologist had presented work at the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) arguing for the racial superiority of whites and Asians over Black people. His colleagues formed an organization to defend this under the banner of “academic freedom.” Several had documented ties to white supremacist groups and to the Pioneer Fund, associated with eugenics since 1937.

The idea of a Race Relations Officer was anathema to this group. Those in power — in your hallways, your senate chambers, the media — closed ranks to protect their own. You did not protect me. You did not even try. Unwilling to lend legitimacy to measures that would whitewash the use of academic freedom to shield eugenics, I

resigned in 1994, publishing several articles about the trauma of this first foray into changing the academy from inside.

Western issued a public apology in 2020 — twenty-six years later. Your psychology department acknowledged the research was “deeply flawed” and “fuels systemic racism” (University of Western Ontario, Department of Psychology 2020). However, Black alumni were not satisfied, and rightly so. By 2020, I had long since moved on, though I carry the repercussions still. What I later recognized as PTSD shaped how I entered every room in your institutions after that.

I escaped to Michigan State University — a relief to stop fighting scientists advocating for actual white supremacy with your full institutional support. But my time there confirmed a nascent realization: institutional change regarding diversity comes at a snail’s pace. If it comes at all.

Then came sixteen years at the University of Redlands in southern California. Sixteen years, Higher Education. I pushed for us to consider what it would mean to be a campus that embraced equity in everything we did. But you were more comfortable with conversations about “culture” than about race. In your countless Multicultural Festivals, the cultures on display belied the racism and privilege the individuals performing them encountered daily. You were happy to have “food and fiesta” but scuttled from any dialogue that posited structural change.

Faculty recognized the work — the bridge I built between student life and the intellectual life of the campus, the Disability Working Group I founded that brought the vibrant culture of disability to our conversations, the close mentoring relationships with students of color and LGBTQ students. But when I presented at national conferences with titles like “Beyond Food and Fiesta: 16 Years of Injecting Equity Into Redlands’ DNA,” senior administration gave me no traction. I resigned as attempts were made to move my position into Student Affairs — a ploy you use to reduce the impact of these roles.

At its heart, equity involves giving up power and privilege. This will only happen within your walls to the extent that leadership reaps some benefit but feels no loss.

I returned to my roots in southern Ontario, to a position as Executive Director of Human Rights and Equity at a local university. Initially a revelation — change can come about with the right leader — but not surprisingly, you also spat out senior administrators seen as supporting an “equity agenda.” Then, the same roadblocks. The same entrenched interests. The same pattern, repeating across decades and borders.

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Each of these migrations — geographic, institutional, and of understanding — taught me how you metabolize the work of women of color. You ingest us. You extract what is useful. And when the work disturbs your deeper structures, you expel us. It is something like an immune response. We are the foreign body. The antibodies are the committees, the bureaucratic delays, the silence of senior leaders, the “not you, of course” that really means not now, not here, not even this much.

The Invisible Body

There is another dimension to being the Lonely Only that I did not understand for a long time, because it was happening inside my own body.

I have rheumatoid arthritis, an autoimmune disease that can make even walking a deeply painful trial. I also live with fibromyalgia, degenerative disc disease, and tinnitus. In 2017 and 2018, I survived a bleeding ulcer that produced the lowest hemoglobin levels the hospital had seen in someone still alive, followed by peritonitis and emergency surgery. For a time, it was a victory simply to be upright.

Because RA is often invisible, it took years and patient education from disability rights activists for me to understand that I am part of the disability community. But the invisibility of my disability taught me something about the invisibility of equity work. You could not see my pain, just as you could not see my labor. When I used a wheelchair, people treated me as someone with a deficit — the medical model brought to life. When I walked unaided, the pain didn't exist. Be visible and be diminished, or invisible and dismissed.

I was diagnosed with migraines at ten. One day in high school, a migraine struck and I needed to go home. Teachers and friends couldn't understand: "It's just a headache," they said. "I get headaches all the time." I was in no state to explain pain so severe that moving an eyelash felt like a knife through my brain. That phrase — "it's just a headache" — is the institutional version of what you say about equity work. It's just diversity. Everyone has challenges. Why is yours so special?

My mentor, Dr. Victoria Lewis, a post-polio survivor and pioneer in theatre and disability, made sure I knew the ancestors who fought for space in the conversation — those activist pioneers who rejected the tropes of disability as tragedy or as the basis for what the late Stella Young called "inspiration porn" (Young 2014). As Judy Heumann said, "Disability only becomes a tragedy for me when society fails to provide the things we need to lead our lives" (quoted in Shapiro 1993). The same is true of equity. It only fails when institutions refuse to provide what is needed for it to succeed.

The Outsider Who Stays

In the end, I left you. Not out of defeat, but out of an understanding that changing the system from within is blocked by too many institutional conflicts of interest. Power and privilege may shift, but they might as well be built from titanium for all we can do to twist them into new shapes from the inside. And so LMR Human Rights and Equity Consulting was born — the freedom to offer the honest perspective your internal politics never allowed.

But I did not leave the work. I could never leave the work.

In 2021, Atlas, a Siberian Husky rescue, came into my life, and walking took on sudden urgency. Atlas is only happy when he walks at least ten kilometers a day. Pain be damned. Every morning around six, we are out on the Canal Trail, and the walking gives me ninety minutes on weekdays and nearly three hours on weekends to think. I compose arguments as dawn breaks and "write" pieces as I walk. It is almost meditative — "almost" because I must remain alert to cyclists, other dogs, and animals Atlas will regard as prey.

Recently, the RA in my feet worsened to the point where walking was threatened. My podiatrist gave me hope. She understood that the goal was to keep moving. She was blunt — the fused toe, cut tendons, and arthritic ankle didn't offer much hope. But she was clear there would be a future for walking within limitations. She told me what was possible and what I needed to do.

I left her office feeling seen, heard, and believed. I rarely feel hopeful, but that day I did. And the next day, and the day after that, when Atlas jumped on the bed to remind me it was time for his walk, that hope persisted.

Higher Education, that is what you could be. You could be the practitioner who sees clearly, speaks honestly, and commits to working within limitations while refusing to accept them as permanent. Instead, too often, you are the colleague who says, “it’s just a headache.”

What I Would Say to You Now

After thirty years in your halls, I am not bitter. Bruised, certainly. Carrying a body that has borne both the literal autoimmune attacks and the institutional ones. But not bitter. I still believe transformation is possible — not because you have shown me evidence, but because the students, colleagues, and activists who came before me have shown me the work is bigger than any one institution’s failure to embrace it.

I have been the Lonely Only at every place you sent me. But I was never truly alone. I had the ancestors — a great-grandfather who, when asked why the Indian Constitution needed to be so long, replied that it had to be inclusive, capable of accommodating citizens from every walk of society; my mother, whose activism began at the age of two at the Battle of Cable Street, watching ordinary people beat back fascism; my grandfather, who ensured I read Nelson Mandela’s writing from prison at the age of seven to become part of the anti-apartheid movement.

You taught me, Higher Education, that neutrality in matters of justice is not neutral at all. That “saris and samosas” will never substitute for structural change. That the business case for diversity was always one market downturn away from abandonment. That the work of equity is, by its nature, disruptive, and that institutions will always resist disruption.

But you also taught me — inadvertently — that the outsider who stays is the one who changes things. Not from the inside, perhaps. Not on your timeline. But on the long arc that bends, however slowly, toward justice.

In the words of Arundhati Roy, “Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing” (Roy 2003, 75).

I am still listening.

Sincerely,
Leela MadhavaRau

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About the author

Leela MadhavaRau is a Canadian British South Asian, born into a family that believed everyone needed to do their best to make the world a better place for all. She has depended on the wisdom of those ancestors and more recent mentors to develop a practice based on valuing each person's cultural and social wealth, honoring the earth on which we live, and working to acknowledge and rectify past wrongs committed in this world.

Leela has an inherent curiosity about what makes it hard for humans to understand the Ubuntu concept "I am a person through other people. My humanity is tied to yours." Leela's academic background is in Social Anthropology, with a specific focus on the transmission of culture across time and space. Her degrees are from McGill and the University of Cambridge.

Prior to the pandemic, she served as the inaugural Executive Director of Human Rights and Equity at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ontario. Before that, Leela spent 16 years in southern California as the Advisor to the President and Associate Dean for Campus Diversity and Inclusion at the University of Redlands. She served for six years as the President of the California Council of Cultural Centers in Higher Education (CaCCCHE). Earlier in her career, Leela undertook similar work at Michigan State University and Western University in London, Ontario.

Leela left higher education in 2022 to establish LMR Human Rights and Equity Consulting based in the Niagara Region of Canada. The basis of the firm's work is a model that incorporates elements of anti-oppressive decolonizing practice, culturally relevant gender-based analysis, and an understanding of cultural safety and cultural humility to move organizations to a place of equitable and inclusive transformation.