

Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

Reflections From a Mothering Scholar

BAO VAAJ NCHAIV TXAB

Dear Higher Education,

I write to you first as a single mother. I am a first generation HMoob (Hmong) daughter from my clan, HMoob Vaaj - Moos Pheeb, to earn a PhD. I write to you as the oldest graduate student from my cohort. To put it into context, my lived experience as a single mother raising children and navigating higher education was never on my bucket list. Now that I've "earned" a PhD, I'm not sure how to feel about it.

Higher education is not designed for someone like me. An example of this is that I was told by my committee members that I could not hold a job outside of the university while I was in the program. I have been working for a trucking company for the past 16 years because I needed a flexible job to allow me to take classes in the middle of the workday at the community college. Unfortunately, class schedules at the community college are not scheduled with working parents in mind. I worked full time from 8:00AM to 5:00PM; it was always difficult to leave and take a class from 10:00AM-11:20AM two days a week. Because I was at the trucking company for so long, an opportunity opened for me to take an early shift working 4:00AM - 12:00PM. This opened the afternoons for me to take more classes. I spent five years at the community college as a part-time student and finally earned enough credits and the rite of passage to transfer.

From Community College to the University

I completed my undergraduate degree within three semesters at the local university and pursued a Masters of Arts. The white liberal professors in the master's program created a condition that I didn't know how to name until I completed the program. Later, I realized it was their maternalistic and paternalistic actions that led to my trauma. I remember one of them saying to our seminar, "You think I got you by the balls? Professor XXXXXX will rip them off." Reflecting on that statement, I realize that the professor was literally seeking and reinforcing her power as if we didn't already know. I completed my master's program and applied to a PhD program at the local "research" university.

At least my mentors were honest with me about needing to write my dissertation a "certain" way if I wanted to attract certain jobs. However, in the end, I chose to privilege the voices of my ancestors in the writing of my dissertation. This is why I haven't landed an academic tenure-track position yet. I never had the desire to attend academic conferences; after the first couple of conferences, it wasn't a space I wanted to be in. It was also difficult for me to leave my children and get away for three days for a conference. I never had funds for that. The university was selective with their funding. My CV reflects my intention and lack of desire to publish and present at conferences because these processes function to gatekeep. I have less than a handful of publications and they are not in mainstream journals. This is an intentional choice. I don't want to be a part of an elitist self-promoting project. That's never been the way I moved. I did everything white/right, but it's still not enough. I'm no longer invested in upholding violence and erasure of my own people.

As I'm on the job market now, I realize there are so many gatekeepers who look like me. This is something we don't talk about. These are the moments that both administration and tenure-track faculty won't name. Why? We know it's happening; we'll whisper it to each other. To our students, we preach that "transformational change requires action" but we, as scholars, as tenure-track, as lecturers, as administrators, won't name it, and won't act on it. I currently know four of my HMoob colleagues who identify as ciswomen, who have been seeking a tenure-track position in the Northern California area for over a year since they earned their PhDs. There are three University of California colleges and universities, approximately five California State Universities, and approximately 10 community colleges in the northern California area. However, my colleagues and I aren't as aggressive as we should be in applying to tenure-track positions. Why is this? Are we not using enough buzz words during interviews? We are overqualified. I know this because I've seen my colleagues in their classrooms. Our credentials qualify us but we don't know how to perform. Performance requires its own pedagogy. We are rooted in our communities. We came here, attended school here, and never left.

Unfortunately, community colleges don't want to hire anyone from the community. I'm the only educator from the community yet I'm just an adjunct. How do we call ourselves "community colleges" and how do we bridge the community to higher education if we don't hire anyone from the community? This is important because it is really up to the faculty members in these departments to leverage our power and challenge the administration to serve our students. How can the administration possibly understand students when they make almost half a million dollars a year while many of our students are living in their cars? Our students deserve more. We can do more. Let's do better.

I still believe in the magic of higher education. However, we need to stop playing gatekeeper. We are the gatekeepers; we are the ones who are reproducing the same outcomes. We need to confront this at all levels. Stop assessing students, stop setting up criteria to fail students. Who benefits when we gatekeep? Certainly not our most marginalized students, our mothering, parenting students, the students who work full-time to help their parents and attend our classes. We've been trained, therefore, we should know better than to play by the rules of the institution. Or perhaps, we refuse to get off our own high horses. It starts with us. Who are we waiting for?

Earning a doctoral degree doesn't really feel like an accomplishment to me. I don't feel doctorly because I'm not sure what that that looks or feels like. The most important thing I learned throughout this entire process is, mothering is sacred. As a mother, I am a creator and that is more meaningful than what is inside this institution. So, for now, I'm going to focus on mothering. I am forever grateful to all my comrades who had faith in me, both CST and NAS. You know who you are. Cheers!

*Sincerely,
Bao Vaaj Nchaiv Txab, PhD*

About the author

Bao Vaaj Nchaiv Txab is a mothering scholar. She teaches Ethnic Studies and Women and Gender Studies at the community college where she was a student. She holds a PhD in Cultural Studies with a concentration in Native American Studies and Feminist Theory and Research. When she is not teaching, she is trying to earn back all the time she lost with her adult children when they were growing up. She is deeply invested in breaking barriers in HMoob "cultural" contexts and cares less about representation to the white gaze.