

# Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

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## Dear Higher Education: On Memory, Staying, and the Refusal to Disappear

LESLIE K. MORROW

*Dear Higher Education,*

You have tried to make us smaller.

There were moments when I believed you. Moments when the culture of this place made me question whether I belonged, whether I was capable, whether I was worthy of occupying the very spaces that recruited me. I learned quickly that inclusion could be offered with one hand and withdrawn with the other. I watched you celebrate diversity in glossy brochures while quietly exhausting the very people who made those images possible. I watched you applaud justice in mission statements and discipline it in practice.

You did not need to shout. The message traveled through silence, through omission, through the raised eyebrow in a meeting, through the subtle recalibration of tone when I spoke too directly. I learned that excellence, for someone like me, required stamina beyond scholarship. It required self-surveillance. It required translation. It required swallowing the instinct to name what was happening in real time.

And still, we stayed. I know all too well what it means to be the Lonely Only.

As a Black queer woman in the academy, as someone whose commitments to race, gender, and sexuality are not theoretical but lived, I have learned how quickly difference is welcomed symbolically and disciplined structurally. Our presence is strategically celebrated in brochures and diversity statements and then excluded when policies are drafted that would make campuses livable for those most targeted by anti-Blackness and the policing of gender and sexuality. My scholarship is invited to diversify syllabi and then scrutinized when it unsettles the foundations of the field, reframed as advocacy rather than scholarship, as politics rather than intellectual rigor.

I know what it means to sit at tables where my presence is symbolic, but my voice is negotiable. Where I am asked to mentor, to advise, to diversify, and to repair climates shaped by anti-Blackness and heteronormativity that I did not create. Where I carry the informal labor of care because students recognize something in me that the institution refuses to name as essential.

You call this service.

You call it leadership.

You call it opportunity.

Rarely do you call it what it is: the labor of survival.

Survival labor is answering emails long after the workday ends because a student confides that they are afraid to exist openly in classrooms structured by racism and the regulation of gender and sexuality. It is pushing back

against campus policies that gesture toward inclusion while ignoring what belonging actually requires. It is sitting on committees where the same harms are described year after year, while the individuals who name them are labeled difficult.

Survival labor is monitoring your tone so that urgency is not misread as anger. It is calculating whether to speak and risk being labeled confrontational or remain silent and risk betraying your own values. It is mentoring students who mirror your own early isolation, aware that your visibility will be weaponized as evidence that the institution has already done enough.

It is the quiet arithmetic of deciding how much of yourself to reveal, how much truth the room can tolerate, how much energy you can afford to expend correcting what should already be understood.

This labor is rarely compensated. It is routinely surveilled. The institution extracts it, depends on it, and refuses to recognize it as legitimate work. The institution is sustained by this labor while pretending it does not exist.

There were semesters when the weight of it nearly broke me. When the constant negotiation of my tone, my appearance, my research agenda, and the convenient labeling of my intellectual and ethical convictions as “political” whenever they exposed entrenched systems of power and exclusion felt like a second job in addition to the one I was hired to do. When I wondered whether the exhaustion I carried home each night was evidence of dedication or evidence that I was trying to survive in a space that was never designed for someone like me. When I questioned whether excellence required erasure, whether staying meant becoming smaller than I knew myself to be.

And yet, I remained.

Not because the culture was kind. Not because the metrics were fair. Not because the salary differentials wrapped in politeness did not sting. But because leaving would mean conceding ground that was never freely given in the first place.

You are asking us to forget.

Forget the histories that complicate national myth.

Forget the intellectual traditions that exceed Western canon.

Forget the violence that built the endowments.

Forget the students who come to us seeking language for what they already know in their bones.

Across the country, books are banned. Curricula are narrowed. Words like race, gender, and queer are treated as contagion. You respond with statements about neutrality. You speak of balance. You remind us to remain civil.

But civility, in these moments, becomes a leash. It is invoked not to cultivate dialogue but to contain critique. We are told to moderate our language, to avoid being polarizing, to remember that both sides deserve respect. We are asked to be careful not to alienate donors, not to attract unwanted attention, not to jeopardize the institution’s reputation.

Neutrality becomes the highest virtue. Not truth. Not justice. Not care. *Neutrality*.

Neutrality in the face of erasure is a position. It sides with the status quo. It protects comfort over clarity. It demands that those most affected by harm present their realities in tones deemed acceptable by those least impacted.

We are asked to be measured when the policies are not. We are asked to be calm when the legislation is not. We are asked to be patient when the harm is immediate.

For Black women, women of color, and queer scholars, whose authority is already contested, this demand for composure carries specific weight. Our anger is read as threat. Our clarity is read as aggression. Our refusal to soften is read as unprofessional. Civility becomes a mechanism through which race, gender, and sexuality are regulated in the name of institutional order.

And when we refuse to temper our language, our commitment to justice is reframed as lack of objectivity. The consequences can be subtle but unmistakable. Invitations slow. Opportunities narrow. You call this professionalism. We recognize it as containment.

Forgetting is not passive. It is curated. Structured. Incentivized. It moves through policy language and budget lines and strategic plans. It is embedded in the polite suggestion that perhaps this research agenda is too narrow, or that this course title might attract unnecessary attention. You call it risk management. We call it organized amnesia.

I write this while learning to navigate another form of memory loss.

In my family, memory has become fragile. I have watched a loved one struggle to retrieve names, to piece together stories that once flowed effortlessly. I have seen how disorienting it is to lose access to one's own narrative. In those moments, memory feels sacred. Precarious. Tender.

So, when the state mandates forgetting, when laws instruct educators to erase, when histories are sanitized, when communities are told their pain is divisive, the violence feels all too familiar.

There is a difference between forgetting that arrives uninvited and forgetting that is engineered. One is an unfortunate medical reality. The other is a political strategy.

In my family, we respond to memory loss with patience. We repeat stories. We hold photographs up to the light. We become archives for one another.

But in the academy, forgetting is rewarded. The past is deemed inconvenient. The archive is edited or erased. The syllabus is sanitized. The communities most harmed are told their memories are too disruptive for the classroom.

In one context, forgetting is a loss we grieve. In the other, it is a mandate we are expected to enforce.

But we refuse. The violence is deliberate. It mirrors the erosion I witness at home, except this time it is plotted, legislated, and directed toward communities that have long been asked to doubt what we know.

You ask us to forget what we have survived.

You ask us to forget what we have built.

You ask us to forget ourselves.

For women and queer women of color in the academy, forgetting often begins with self-editing. We learn which parts of our speech are palatable. Which aspects of our research can be framed as neutral. Which community commitments must be softened to appear objective. We are encouraged to professionalize ourselves into invisibility, to become legible only when we are nonthreatening. The Lonely Only is not simply alone; she is continuously controlled.

But again, we refuse.

The educators who entrusted me with their stories understand this. They teach in classrooms marked as radical. They design assignments that connect students to community archives and oral histories. They collaborate with cultural centers and grassroots organizers. They insist that knowledge does not originate solely within institutional walls.

You, Higher Education, often stand at a distance from this work. You benefit from it. You list it in reports. But when political pressure mounts, you retreat.

We will not.

We remain with our students. We create spaces where marginalized knowledge traditions can breathe. We carry memory forward when institutions would prefer it be erased.

We are not naive. We know the institution will abandon its stated commitments when expedient. And still, we teach as if another world is possible.

That is not idealism.

That is worldmaking.

You will not erase us.

Not through legislation.

Not through professional codes that police tone more aggressively than injustice.

Not through salary compression.

Not through the quiet suggestion that we should choose safer topics.

You have underestimated what it means to stay.

Staying is not compliance. It is strategy.

Staying is learning the terrain well enough to navigate it without surrendering yourself.

It is building networks of solidarity that extend beyond departments and titles.

It is refusing the lie that excellence must be detached from justice.

It is mentoring students who will one day rewrite the rules you cling to.

It is teaching the student who reminds you of who you once were and refusing to let them navigate the terrain alone.

It is remembering aloud when forgetting would be easier.

For those of us who have been the Lonely Only, staying has never been about comfort. We know that our presence alters the terrain. It offers students a different horizon. It exposes contradictions the institution would prefer to remain unspoken. Staying is not self-sacrifice. It is deliberate disruption.

You have tried to make us smaller.

We have learned how to take up space.

You have tried to silence us.

We have learned how to speak collectively.

You have tried to erase us, but we are still here. Not by accident, not by permission, but by insistence.

*In solidarity and unapologetically,  
Leslie K. Morrow, PhD*

### **About the author**

**Leslie K. Morrow** is a postdoctoral scholar whose research focuses on equity, inclusion, and the experiences of Black queer educators in higher education. Her work explores how race, gender, sexuality, and intersecting identities shape academic labor, belonging, and institutional change.