

Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

Silent No More: Toward a New Modus Operandi in the Academy

TANIA ROMERO

Dear Higher Education,

This letter is a love-demon. *Un demonio* festering to be written for decades. As you laud associate professorships and tenure thrones, published research accomplishments, and fully funded intellectual communities, I wanted to take the time to remind you of the students who came late to class. Late to the classroom, late assignments, late to student events, late to an outsider consciousness like me.

As a Latina undergraduate born in Central America, finding my way in an Ivy League university, I was told that if I wanted to be a filmmaker, I had to enroll in that *one* film class with “so-and-so professor” who worked for “so-and-so” Hollywood studio to learn the “ins-and-outs” of the industry. *I had to stand out among the professor’s followers and make a good impression.* One evening, trying to get to campus after work to attend his screenwriting class, I waited for two city buses during inclement weather. Feet soaked from hiking in the snow, I reached his locked classroom door.

I didn’t knock because from day one, that revered professor made a point to teach students “timeliness” by locking them. In the film industry, he said, to be on time was to arrive 10 minutes or more before call time. So I sat on the floor for almost two hours, listening to his muffled beratement of student scripts on the other side. I recalled his feedback on my first script the week before: *Is your dialogue written in Spanish? What does that word mean? Choose a language,* he scolded. I began to wonder if I could even cut it as a filmmaker since I couldn’t even make it to class on time. Suddenly, a gust of cold wind hit my face as the door flung open. The professor—white, male, standing like a 6 foot gatekeeper blocking my Hollywood dreams—glanced down and saw what I could only imagine looked like a clandestine Central American migrant wrapped in a hooded poncho. I looked up and he blasted me, saying, “Class is already over. What are *you* still doing here?” I remained silent, as students exiting the classroom looked on, and threw shameful looks that felt like daggers in my heart.

What am *I still* doing here? That is still a question that reverberates in my mind. More than two decades later, this question has transformed into, *how did I get here?* Now, I am a full-time assistant professor of media production *and* work as an independent filmmaker outside of the Hollywood model. I made it, despite being late. But as a Latina professor, Centro-americana at that, I still operate outside locked doors, listening in. I am part of less than 3% of full-time professors in U.S. degree granting institutions and the 1% of Latina directors in the film industry. *What am I still doing here?* The only answer I can think of is I resist. I resist the ideological remnants of ivory towers and institutions that I was taught, the old colonial methods of instruction that chain human creativity and deconstruct the longstanding indoctrination we were given for success; the *white-way is the right way.*

I resist with stories. Documenting marginalized voices, amplifying the work of women in society, bearing witness to events with my camera to counter the longstanding patterns of historical erasure in textbooks.

In my college classroom, I implement an open-door policy and orchestrate a curriculum with student-centered activities. In an era where most classrooms remain locked for safety reasons, I build communities and safe spaces. I resist by adjusting to the diverse realities of my students and let them dictate the tempo of their learning style. When most syllabi reject DEI policies and dodge anti-racist dialogue, I elevate learners to embrace their differences so they never have to ask themselves the same question I asked many years ago, *what am I doing here?*

Academia often uses timeliness as a tool to implement violent conformity. If you're late, you don't learn. If you're late, you don't get the job. If you're late, you don't succeed. Although being timely is a good professional practice, sometimes the room we are trying to be on time for doesn't even acknowledge we belong inside. Some students, like me, were conditioned to not matter in learning spaces and our spirits were dimmed when we crossed the demoralizing gates of systemic industrial educational models from an early age. We walked school hallways unperceived, carrying the weight of first-generation privilege, stripped of our cultural identities, in-betweenness, and home languages. We were the shell-walkers who were the first-graduates in our families, aspiring storytellers who self-funded our own education for a more secure future, conforming academically to survive. We followed the American-debt dream and paid expensive tuition to sit in rooms where we didn't even see ourselves and no one heard us: *twisting our mother tongues to sing the tempo of imposters who came before us.*

So this letter is to recognize the ones who remain outside locked doors. *Ursurpadores intelectuales.* We rise, by constructing new systems that advocate for no more indoctrination, no more silence, no more domination over multicultural storytelling styles, nor rejecting hybrid languages we all call our home.

*Yours kindly, but never truly,
That One Latina Still Standing Outside The Door*

About the author

Born and raised in Nicaragua, **Tania Romero** is a freelance cinematographer and camera operator based in Philadelphia and New York. As a world traveler and multilingual artist, she commits to stories that explore border cultures, immigration, the work of women in society, and human rights issues affecting marginalized communities. She is an associate member of SOC and the Television Arts Academy. She is currently an assistant professor of media studies and media production at Villanova University.