

# Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

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## Roots and Ridges: Caregiving as Brown Asian Women Faculty

ASHMI DESAI & HOA N. NGUYEN

*Dear Higher Education,*

We write this letter as Brown Asian women faculty in higher education who are navigating the ascent of two summits: the rigorous climb for academic tenure and the unyielding demands of multigenerational caregiving. We write from the spirit of rehumanizing ourselves as whole persons by integrating who we are as carers with our scholarship. We also write from experiences deeply informed by the work of women of color faculty, from motherscholarship (Matias 2022), Black feminism (Crenshaw 1989; hooks 2015), Latina feminism (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983), and Indigenous thought on mutuality of care (Grande 2015).

In this letter, we share our stories as confidantes who embarked on an 8-year-long co-mentoring relationship. We have written, presented, and co-edited publications. We have conversed for countless hours on the trepidations and joys of academia and tenure. We have witnessed major transitions in each other's lives from Ashmi becoming the mother of two vibrant, rambunctious children while caring for family transnationally, to Hoa transitioning into caregiving for parents. We have grieved and celebrated along the way. While great work can be done solely, we maintain the best work for us has been born of our partnership. And we hope these stories will resonate with others who seek a sense of home and belonging within the academic community.

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### Ashmi's Story

University of San Francisco Associate Dean Collette Cann came to me as a mentor and voice of sanity. She said to me, "Academic life doesn't recognize motherhood and you must find a polite way to say no. Keep publishing no matter what and protect your family time fiercely."

I have long been aware of the gendered dimensions of academic service and domestic labor, particularly as they intersect with American productivity norms that conflate worth with output. Yet, with Collette's nudging, I came to recognize how easily these structures cultivate a persistent sense of precarity, of needing to compensate through over-service, of fears tied to job security and, for immigrant scholars, the threat of deportation. The internalized refrain of not being "good enough," or of having misspoken and displeased a colleague, does not disappear even on good days. I am learning not to appease through exhaustion or self-erasure, but to inhabit my strengths alongside my vulnerabilities, and to fully embody my Asian-American hybrid identity. In doing so, I move from performing temporary belonging toward claiming presence, as someone who is not merely passing through institutional spaces, but shaping and inhabiting them.

Over time, I am learning to decolonize and claim my hybrid South Asian-American identity not as a tension to manage but as a resource to inhabit fully. This has shown up in visible and subtle ways: in dressing without compartmentalizing, mixing and matching clothing that carry both histories; in speaking about my Indian experiences in the classroom as integral to the syllabus rather than digressions; and in recognizing

representation begins with me. I try not to apologize for childcare emergencies or inevitable burnout days that accompany caregiving and academic labor. This approach also shapes my commitment to policy and institutional culture, especially for international faculty and students, so that access for “outsiders” is designed from the outset, not retrofitted as accommodation.

Motherhood, immigrant life, and being a daughter have taught me that care is lived through simultaneity—through emotional and material dualities that resist neat categories. As a mother, I often inhabit joy, pain, and sorrow at once: delighting in my children’s growth while grieving distance from my own parents; feeling wonder and tenderness alongside the depletion of unmet needs like sleep. These are not contradictions to be resolved but coexisting truths that structure caregiving as both generative and exhausting. To mother across migration is to experience presence and absence in the same breath, to be anchored and untethered at once.

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In this layered terrain, I have come to understand imperfection not as personal failure but as reclaiming our humanity—a body in motion across geographies, histories, roles, and expectations. Embracing that incompleteness becomes an ethical practice: a way of honoring care as relational, embodied, and always unfolding rather than as a standard to be flawlessly performed.

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### **Hoa’s Story**

I immigrated to the United States with my parents and sisters at a young age as part of a refugee sponsorship program for families of post-Vietnam war soldiers. Pursuing my marriage and family therapy (MFT) degree inspired me to transition into training and educating the next generation of therapists. I have been fortunate in having mentors who supported my personhood beyond academia. My current colleagues are exemplars of understanding and kindness, holding space for the complexity of caregiving and life. Also, my doctoral advisor, Dr. Fred Piercy, often stated, “Don’t forget who you were before you started your PhD program.” This notion served as a reminder that before we became academics, we were whole persons, deserving of full and vibrant lives.

Even so, there were a few times in my career when I depleted myself. I realized this burnout was driven by a fear of not being good enough and wanting to prove that I belonged in academia. This sense of displacement was also rooted in feeling like a perpetual foreigner in the U.S. As the daughter of Vietnamese immigrants, I was taught to be grateful for what we were given as refugees and to view ourselves as guests and second class citizens in this country. While this mindset fueled my perseverance, it also taught me to tolerate unfair treatment and silence my own needs and expectations. I learned assimilation was the only way to succeed, a narrative I am still unlearning.

Stepping into caregiving also created a friction between the ideals of self-sacrifice (setting aside one’s needs for others) and self-preservation (holding space for one’s desires, wishes, and dreams). Choosing between either family or academia felt like a betrayal to both. By prioritizing my work, I fulfill the “American Dream” my parents set out to achieve but abandon the people who supported this vision. By prioritizing care for my family, I honor my family but squander the very sacrifices they made to give me these educational opportunities.

This is one of the many paradoxical binds that Brown Asian and Asian American women faculty face. Other dualities include navigating the tensions between bringing our whole selves to work, while concealing family struggles as to not appear unmotivated or distracted from work commitments; the demand to write and do research during “off-hours,” which are also likely the hours of intensive caregiving and family commitments; and the pressure to comply with model minority scripts along with pressures to challenge those same scripts

by asserting our voices as leaders in the academy. As women of color caregivers in academia, we continually negotiate these paradoxes rather than seek a perfect balance that does not exist (Perel 2017).

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## Collective Reflections

We end this letter with a few questions for higher education:

1. How do we dwell more in the duality of caregiving? How do we recognize the challenges of caregiving while understanding care as an invitation to connection and community?
2. What kinds of dualities and tensions do we carry as scholars?
3. How do we reclaim our humanity as relational beings in academia?
4. What is missing in the discourse and conversations around academia and caregiving?

Looking back on our experiences as academic caregivers, we realize academia isn't a sustaining space. As rewarding and fulfilling as our academic careers have been, academia functions on an endless demand for efficiency and productivity. In contrast, caregiving is finite. Children grow in the blink of an eye; parents fade and pass away. We cannot optimize or shortcut presence and connection. Relationships are messy, human, and sacred. In this vein, caregiving humanizes us rather than detracts from who we are as educators. Engaging in the mutuality and duality of care makes us more empathetic and expansive scholars.

Sincerely,  
Ashmi & Hoa

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## About the authors

**Ashmi Desai (she/her)** is an Assistant Professor of Conflict Management and Public Dialogue at San Francisco State University (SFSU) and directs the Conflict Transformation Certificate there. Ashmi completed her Ph.D. in communication from the University of Colorado, Boulder, where she received the International Student of the Year Award and the Provost Fellow Award in Information Science. Her master's degree is in Development Communication from Gujarat University in India.

With over 12 years of experience and professional certification in mediation, dialogue, and restorative practices, Ashmi is also a trainer who prepares students, professionals, and incarcerated individuals to earn certification in these transformative approaches. She is currently finishing a book manuscript on journalistic practices in Maoist conflict zones of central India, to be published by Routledge. With Dr. Hoa Nguyen, Ashmi has co-edited another book on global dialogue perspectives and published numerous journal articles and book chapters on dialogic pedagogy.

Through research, pedagogy and community engagement, Ashmi is committed to finding ways to make communication more just, inclusive and authentic across intersectional identities and contexts. In her free time, she enjoys film appreciation, yoga, podcasting, hiking, and cooking different cuisines.

**Hoa N. Nguyen (she/her)** is an Associate Professor in the Marriage and Family Therapy (MFT) Program at Valdosta State University (VSU), an AAMFT-approved supervisor, and a licensed marriage and family therapist in the state of Georgia. She joined the Valdosta State University faculty in July 2017, after completing her doctoral degree in Human Development and Family Sciences with an emphasis on MFT from Virginia Tech. She is the recipient of VSU College of Education and Human Services Excellence in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Award and received the Faculty Champion of the Year Recognition from the Office of Student Diversity and Inclusion.

Hoa's research focuses on dialogic pedagogy and cultural humility. She publishes research in family therapy education and has co-edited a book with Dr. Ashmi Desai, on *Global Perspectives on Dialogue in the Classroom: Cultivating Inclusive, Intersectional, and Authentic Conversations*. She also serves as a member of the American Family Therapy Academy Board of Directors and is dedicated to inclusive, intersectional, and collective practices. Valdosta, Georgia is home to Hoa, her husband, and their cat and corgi pup. They find joy in nature walks, cooking, crafting, films, and video games.