

# Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

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## The Academy Does Not Have the Capacity to Love You: An Unrequited Love with Higher Education

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*Dear Higher Education,*

You might not remember me... in fact, I am sure that you do not. That is ok. Deep down I always knew this was unrequited love; I just did not want to admit it. It pains me to think that you do not remember the long nights I spent bearing my soul, putting my Black queer pain on display in an attempt to get your attention, nay your approval. But look at me getting ahead of myself, let me explain and provide some background to who I am, who you are/were to me, how I mistook limerence for love, and why I am still here, battered, but not broken, going astray but never going away.

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### **A Curious Mind and A Desire for More**

Early on I met your earlier form, primary education. While she resembles you in statue, she is kind where you are cold. Even though I was not satisfied, I wanted more; I wanted to know how deep the depths of my knowledge could go but primary education could only take me as far as she had travelled. I wanted more, so she introduced me to you. She told me tales of intelligence, power, and status gained through dedicated hard work. She told me that if I wanted more, I would need to search for you, Higher Education, who lived within the Ivory Tower.

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### **Searching for the Ivory Tower**

I left my small house with stairs stained in red clay, to expand my horizons with you. I spent years looking for you and that grand Ivory Tower atop a mountain, which could only be accessed via the Ladder of Academic Success. So, I began the journey and I climbed your ladder, searching for the Ivory Tower to call home.

I met the first obstacle at the bachelor's level, leaving familiar dirt roads for busy concrete streets. I was a tiny weed who had sprouted on the Great Lawn, but still I was determined to find my place. It was here, I had a glimpse of what I could be, of who I was to become. I was introduced to the comet named Dr. Ronald E. McNair. His story and strength in the face of adversity encouraged me to command constellations when I was only expected to wish upon a solitary star. I committed to memory the grand story of two years of stolen data, four months of long nights, and a Black man who rose to the highest of heights and kissed the stars. Even still, I was given the warning that the higher I climbed the Ladder of Academic Success, the less my peers' faces would reflect the melanin found on my own. Indeed, the higher I climbed, the whiter the view.

Armed with a cap, gown, and a little more of both knowledge and debt, I continued my climb, until I reached the master's level of the ladder. Here, the air was cold, and my hands were numb as I sifted and winnowed in pursuit of your truth. It was here that I was told that in order to become a master at my craft, I needed to learn to work with "the other"; what they didn't realize, though, was that I was the other in this strange cold land full of others

othering me and my experiences. Many obstacles tried to knock me off the ladder at this step. Under the guise of constructive criticism, those who were above me threw down their disparaging remarks. Some were dodged, while others were a direct hit to my self-esteem and well-being. Bracing myself to brave blizzards, I held on tight to the piece of me that still had a desire to know more and to be better. I still held on to the vision of your warm embrace that I would receive upon arriving home, to the Ivory Tower.

Still, I persisted. Still, I wanted more. So, I continued to climb. I wondered if those ahead looked at me as someone who had pulled herself up by her bootstraps. They did not see that the magic lay in neither bootstraps, nor the boots themselves. The magic lay within the shoulders I stood on to reach each rung of your ladder, but they never saw that and you never cared. Knees weak, arms heavy, I still climbed your ladder. I was ready. As I got closer to the top, I looked around and saw less and less of my reflection on the horizon. I had reached the last hurdle but still had a long way to go to achieve our dreams. Enduring a years-long marathon (not a sprint), I consumed so much knowledge that I had no choice but to create something out of the theories that refused to stay theoretical. This creation of knowledge cemented me among the ranks of your most resolute disciples; we were the ones who PHiniseD. Donning a cap and gown, I finally reached the summit. The view was astonishingly beautiful, yet it revealed a loneliness I did not know I was carrying. The small house with stairs stained in red clay was so long ago and so far, away, and I still desired a home, your home. I desired to reside with you within the walls of your Ivory Tower, and to do that, I needed to not only climb to the top of the Ladder of Academic Success, but I needed to guide others as they took their journey on your ladder.

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## The Academy Does Not Have the Capacity to Love You

Walking into the Ivory Tower, I donned the new title of Professor. Among these ranks, I only had a 4% chance of seeing faces in familiar shades of Black and woman. Those voices from so long ago were right, the higher you climb, the more it gets white. A chandelier hung above my head, reminiscent of the Sword of Damocles, reminds me that even with intelligence, power, and status, I will always feel on edge, like an imposter who snuck in and disguised themselves among a crowd that never questioned their right to be seen.

While in your Ivory Tower, one of your disciples once told me not to disclose if I had been in an abusive relationship, lest I might be viewed as weak. Little did they know, the perpetrator of my abuse was you, Higher Education. I entered your house fully expecting to be welcomed and embraced by your loving arms. I entered your house with “I love you” ready at the tongue, unsure whether it was meant to be said or simply felt. Then, I remembered the whispers of sage advice I had been given from mentors long ago, “The university has no capacity to love you ...” (Ladson-Billings quoted in Arnett 2019). But surely, this was wrong. After the grueling odyssey it took to climb your Ladder of Academic Success in order to reach the Ivory Tower, I would be different, and you would love me. Right?

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## Keeping Watch from the Tower

Now that I have gotten your attention and perhaps even your approval, some might say I’ve “made it.” You might say it too, seeing as I now hold keys to the Ivory Tower, free to come and go as I please. But that is not how I see it. My ascent was never the end of the story; it was only the beginning of the work.

I have climbed every rung of your Ladder of Academic Success, and now, perched atop the Tower, I keep watch. From this height, I search for others who are leaving their small homes, their red-clay steps, their familiar worlds behind in pursuit of you. I look for the ones who mistake your cold brilliance for warmth, who believe, as I once did, that devotion might be enough to earn your love.

You may not have the capacity to love me. You may never have had it. But in surviving you, I learned to love myself with a depth you could never offer. And that love has given me the capacity to love them: the ones who dare to climb after me, the ones who carry their own stories, their own wounds, their own brilliance.

So, I stay. Not for you, Higher Education, but for them.

I stay to keep watch.

I stay to hold the ladder steady.

I stay so no one has to climb alone.

*With renewed capacity to love,  
Tangela Montgomery, PhD*

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## References

Arnett, Autumn A. 2019. "Black Women Academics Share Secrets to Success of Navigating the Academy." *The EDU Ledger*, Nov. 5. <https://www.theeduledger.com/demographics/african-american/article/15105725/black-women-academics-share-secrets-to-success-of-navigating-the-academy>.

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## About the author

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