Dear Higher Education
LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

Woke*ish*: On Being the One Who Speaks When Silence Is Safer

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Dear Higher Education,

I have learned your language. I have learned how to say just enough about equity to be palatable and how to gesture toward justice without ever disrupting the systems that make such gestures necessary. I have watched how fluency in this language—measured, polite, non-threatening—opens doors, builds alliances, and sustains reputations. I have also watched who is rewarded.

I call it "woke*ish*."

Wokeish is not a commitment to justice; it is the performance of proximity to it.

Because wokeish does not threaten institutions, it protects power.

It is the careful calibration of language and action so that one appears aware, but never disruptive. It is knowing when to say the right words in the right spaces to the right audiences while ensuring that nothing fundamentally changes.

I offer wokeish as a term for naming the space between performative awareness and meaningful institutional change.

And still, those most invested in preserving the status quo will call it “woke.” They use the word as a pejorative, a critique, a warning. In doing so, they offer something unexpected: validation. If even the most minimal gestures toward equity are labeled as excessive, then doing just enough becomes not only safe but strategic. Wokeish thrives in this tension. It allows individuals and institutions to appear aligned with justice while unjust systems remain intact.

To be wokeish is to master the art of looking like you are doing the work without actually doing it. Or, as we say in Dominican Spanish, amarrar la chiva—appearing engaged, especially when someone is watching, while the real work remains untouched.

As a Dominican woman, I was not raised to confuse politeness with justice or performance with impact. I carry that understanding into spaces that were not built with me in mind—spaces where being “professional” often means being quiet, where being “collegial” often means being agreeable, and where effectiveness is too often measured by how little disruption one causes.

I have spent enough time in higher education to recognize that what is often called neutrality is anything but. The illusion of neutrality is strategic. It is protective. It is, as Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. warned, a preference for order over justice—a desire to avoid tension rather than confront the conditions that make tension inevitable.

I know this not only because I have observed it, but because I have experienced the consequences of refusing it.

As a faculty member, I once wrote publicly about a barrier I saw harming those seeking to enter the teaching profession. My position was grounded in what I was witnessing and what candidates were experiencing. I wrote to amplify my students' voices and because I believed that higher education, at its best, was a space where knowledge informs action and contributes to the public good.

I was not reprimanded. Instead, I was invited into a private conversation. The tone was measured, even supportive. I was advised to be thoughtful about what I published, to be mindful of how my words might be perceived, and to consider that I might be seen as speaking on behalf of the institution. It was not a sanction, but it was not neutral. It was a reminder that there are boundaries to what can be said, when it can be said, and how it can be said.

I understood the message, but I spoke anyway.

What followed was familiar. The issue remained unchanged in that moment, despite its urgency. Candidates continued to experience the very barriers I had named. Over time, however, others began to raise similar concerns. What had once been uncomfortable to acknowledge became more widely accepted, and eventually, the policy shifted. Not when it was first named, and not when it was most urgent, but when it was safe.

I was not wrong. I was early.

That lesson did not remain contained to that moment. It followed me into spaces that claim to prepare the next generation of higher education leaders—spaces where conversations about equity are common but where the deeper structures of power are rarely interrogated.

"I was not wrong. I was early."

While enrolled in an executive leadership program, I listened as speaker after speaker—predominantly white men—shared their journeys into senior leadership. Their stories were framed as reflections on opportunity and growth, but what I heard, increasingly, was something else: a familiar performance of proximity to justice without examination of the systems that made their ascent possible. In other words, I was witnessing wokeish in real time.

A common narrative emerged. They spoke about the phone call, the invitation, the moment someone saw potential in them and tapped them for the role.

What was absent from these narratives was any sustained reflection on why that recognition had come so easily, or why those invitations circulate so predictably within the same networks of power. The language of equity framed the program, but the stories being celebrated revealed how comfortably wokeish coexists with longstanding patterns of exclusion.

I listened closely and reflectively, recognizing how easily these stories could be interpreted as proof of meritocratic leadership pathways.

Because I could not recall a single moment in my own career that followed that script.

My path has not been one of being tapped. It has been one of proving exceptionality. Of earning trust. Of navigating systems where opportunity is framed as generosity rather than recognition. Where advancement often comes with an expectation of gratitude rather than acknowledgment of readiness.

I have been told, implicitly and explicitly, to be thankful for the opportunity.

And I am—but not in the way it is often intended.

Because I understand something different: I am the opportunity.

Everything I have achieved has been earned through expertise, through labor, through persistence in spaces that were not designed with me in mind. I also understand that holding that perspective is a privilege—one I have worked to secure, in part, so that I do not have to remain silent to survive.

And that is where the tension sharpens.

Because the same systems that reward wokeish behavior also create conditions where speaking truth carries risk, particularly for those who are not afforded automatic credibility or grace.

This is what it means to be the "Lonely Only" in ways that are not captured by representation alone. It is being the only one willing to say what others recognize but will not risk naming. It is sitting in rooms where silence is mistaken for agreement and where discomfort is managed rather than examined. It is refusing to amarrar la chiva when performance would be easier, safer, and more rewarded.

There is a cost to that refusal.

It is not always formal or documented, but it is felt. It shows up in how one is perceived—difficult, political, too much. It shows up in missed opportunities for alignment with those who have learned how to navigate institutions without challenging them. It shows up in the quiet reality that ideas are often validated only after they are repeated by others under safer conditions.

As James Baldwin reminds us, "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced." Higher education has become remarkably skilled at appearing to face issues without doing the work required to change them. That is the work of wokeish. It is performance instead of resistance; it is appearance instead of transformation.

I am not willing to participate in that.

So, I have made a different choice. I speak when it is inconvenient, when it is uncomfortable, and when it is early—not because it is easy, but because silence is not neutrality; it is participation in injustice.

Higher Education, you must decide what you are willing to reward. If you continue to reward wokeish—measured language, minimal disruption, performative action—you will continue to reproduce the very inequities you claim to dismantle. If, however, you are willing to listen to those who speak from the margins before it is safe, who name what is not yet widely accepted, and who refuse performance in favor of truth, then transformation becomes possible.

Until then, there will always be those of us who refuse to perform what we know must be done.

And we will keep speaking anyway.

Atentamente,
Violet Jiménez Sims, Ed.D.
A Dominican woman who refuses to be silenced

References

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About the author

Violet Jiménez Sims, Ed.D., was born in the Dominican Republic and lives in Connecticut. She is an educator, scholar, and leader with more than twenty years of experience across Pre-K through higher education settings. In previous roles, and as a current leader in teacher preparation, Violet centers a liberation lens to create culturally and linguistically sustaining spaces for educators and students. She currently serves as Managing Director of Academic Programming and Legislative Affairs for the Connecticut Teacher Residency Program.