

# Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

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

ANONYMOUS

*Dear Higher Education,*

I used to love you. Blemishes, and all. I knew there were problems, and I was willing to engage because I believed in your larger mission and your potential to open doors, especially for marginalized individuals—students, staff, and faculty alike. I was ready to be part of the solution, to foster better relationships between students and the academy. In some ways I remain ready; however, I am not sure you are ready. At least not those you have placed in leadership and administrative positions without accountability, support, or training to handle the inevitable, uncomfortable parts of you.

Higher Education, you make faculty encapsulate our years of sweat and tears into a dossier presented for review by external, sometimes unnamed evaluators. The dossiers before you do not tell the full story of our professorial career. It is an accurate story albeit sanitized due to the nature of the genre, which does not allow for the dark side (yours, not ours) to be exposed.

My dossier represents a story of resilience, of first-generation tenacity, of endurance to make it to this milestone. The research statement before you does not convey the callousness that unfortunately is common in your ivory tower. It does not reveal the cruelty inflicted through processes like blind peer review where colleagues are told that their work has little value for the field. As the saying goes, “Sometimes, it be your own people.”

No, space parameters and convention do not allow me to describe how those words sent me into the fetal position—a position of protection and insulation from the dangers that lurk outside. It is ironic that rather than rein in your people, you—Higher Education—advise us to ask trusted colleagues to preview feedback and provide a summary that presumably is kinder and more constructive than the actual review. Never mind the secondhand impact of this practice.

It would be impolite and likely seen as an excuse for my teaching statement to describe the coordinated attack on my teaching that I experienced during my first year at a new institution. Maybe students here have a practice of conducting online background searches on all faculty, not just the new (and only Black) faculty member. Stereotypes of the South would have me believe I would have experienced such behavior at my first institution, not the one in the Northeast. Still, I pressed on as so many do, remembering the words a colleague told me early on that we will never please 30+ students in a classroom.

On brand with your lackluster response to the mistreatment of faculty of color, the response I received was something to the effect that evaluations are a space for students to vent (at the expense of my livelihood, reputation, and mental health).

Higher Education: You know better. When are you going to do better?

Moving from silence to action can be challenging. Bearing the brunt of your silence is even more so.

Academia is made richer through diverse and inclusive research and teaching perspectives and practices. However, as numerous faculty of color in your employ have documented in the literature, our experiences are akin to spirit murdering, “the personal, psychological, and spiritual injuries to people of color through the fixed, yet fluid and moldable, structures of racism, privilege, and power” (Love 2014, 302). Managed by administrators who—through silence—engage in benign neglect, your current conditions undermine and endanger the scholarly careers of faculty from marginalized backgrounds. Audre Lorde reminds us: “My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you” (Lorde 1984, 29). What might it look like to break the many silences in your midst? Let us imagine.

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## Academic Hauntings

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Imagine a new student orientation where we openly acknowledge that this may be students' first experience with a Black woman professor

We teach students about working with diverse populations.

Should we not also discuss that they will be

Taught

Led

Graded

Critiqued

By Black, Brown, Indigenous, or immigrant faculty members?

I am at once:

Extremely helpful

Available

Very communicative

Pretentious

Ego-filled

Condescending.

I am the best professor in the program, and I need supervision by other faculty.

Let us not allow students to be ghosts

haunting the minds of marginalized, pre-tenure, or adjunct faculty.

Imagine peer reviewers are instructed

to evaluate the long paper

Short paper

Poster

Work-in-progress proposal

in front of them.

Not the one

they would have written,

on the research

they would have conducted.

To leave their petty grievances and methodological biases

at the door.

Imagine pulling back the curtain

to reveal the gatekeepers among us

Who writes:

"This population (i.e., ethnic group) is not of interest."

"This research has little value for the field."

"This is interesting but does not break new ground."

“My major concern is that the paper is lacking in quantitative research.”

The Ivory Tower is full of keyboard gangsters and ghosts.  
Come out, come out whoever you are.

*Respectfully submitted*

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## References

Lorde, A. 1984. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Penguin.

Love, B. 2014. ““I See Travyon Martin”: What Teachers Can Learn from the Tragic Death of a Young Black Male.”  
*The Urban Review* 46: 292-306. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11256-013-0260-7>

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## About the author

The author has requested to remain anonymous.