

# Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

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## Our Collective Power: Creating Women of Color in Academia (WOCA) for Us, by Us

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*Dear Higher Education,*

We write this letter as the founding members of Women of Color in Academia (WOCA) at the UCLA Fielding School of Public Health. We are Black, Latina, and Asian mothers, immigrants, children of immigrants, daughters, professors, researchers, and women who recognize that our power lies in our collective voices.

We, like you, have been operating under extraordinarily stressful circumstances, expected to carry on business as usual while watching our loved ones face the harsh reality of COVID-19, communities torn apart by the effects of local atrocities, global warming, global genocides, academic institutions that have failed to protect students and faculty, instead punishing them for speaking out, and an authoritarian government that gives ammunition to white supremacy.

We share our collective stories to situate ourselves within an ever-growing community of fierce women of color transgressing the academy that was once no place we, as women or as people of color, could be (Pirtle 2021). We write this to you, to offer strategies of how we use refusal to cultivate WOCA— a space for us, by us. In the sections that follow, each of us share one specific strategy we have implemented in our research design, community connections, pedagogy, mentoring, and bridge building to ensure the lonely only does not keep us entrapped.

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### ***Our Collective Stories***

#### ***WHITNEY: UTILIZING DEEP STUDY AS A WAY OF DISRUPTION TOWARD ABOLITION***

If, at the root, public health is the study and practice of promoting health for all, then our work must place safety and well-being at the core. Yet, state sanctioned death and harm run rampant through our institutions. I have grieved as I watched the number of Black people killed at the hands of the state continue to rise at a disproportionate rate (American Public Health Association 2021). I have held my sons tight, as we explain “the talk.” I, as a Black feminist abolitionist, intimately understand liberation also at the core of public health praxis.

I refuse to be silent about the connections between our institutions and our praxis. Therefore, over the years I have worked with organizers and student activists to help increase political education and meaningful agitation regarding the structural harms of carceral ideologies and systems. When *All This Safety Is Killing Us: Abolitionist Frameworks and Practices from Clinicians, Organizers, and Incarcerated Activists* (Mukerjee and Martinez 2025) came out, I knew it was time to launch a book club.

Our first meeting was purposefully in the dean's suite. What we do should not be considered marginal or radical, but front and center. We have built a strong community working our way through chapters and planning actions. We worked with university librarians to construct a workshop on Zines informed by our deep study, where students contributed poetry, letters of support and critical critiques of the prison/safety industrial complex (UCLA Fielding School of Public Health 2025). We will share the political and scientific education we have gained with our school and community. It is important to tangibly support students, who share their time for good trouble, with books, food, and stipends. At one point, I posed this question to students, "Where do you feel safe?" and one answered "In this space." I knew then, the work was working as intended. Indeed, abolition is public health (End Police Violence Collective 2025). As the abolitionist mantra goes: *We do this until we free us.*

#### **MAY: COMMUNITY RESEARCH AS A SITE OF COLLECTIVE EMPOWERMENT**

I come to my scholarship through the stories of my ancestors—four generations of immigrant women spanning Indonesia, China, Thailand, and the United States—whose migration, silences, and acts of survival and resilience continue to shape the questions I ask and the futures I imagine. Early in my career, I was repeatedly told that there was "not enough data" on Asian Americans to do meaningful research, despite Asians being one of the fastest growing racial groups in the US. I have since dedicated my career to ensuring that centering Asian and immigrant voices is not only possible, but indispensable. Serving as PI of the **BRAVE** (Building communities, Raising All Immigrant Voices for Health Equity) study has transformed not only my scholarship but the academic spaces I navigate. Rooted in migration histories, reproductive justice, and questions of belonging, the study generates data that center Asian immigrant women – a group that is often invisibilized in public health research (Sudhinaraset et al. 2025).

I have also had the privilege of mentoring women of color staff, high school, undergraduate, and graduate students, post-doctoral fellows, and junior faculty. Through this, I reflect on my desire to change leadership norms within institutional settings- one that pushes back against hustle culture/productivity and instead focuses and prioritizes whole-person care, family and caregiving needs, and immigration-informed learning and care. In research, this means designing protocols, partnerships, and practices with community, and protecting each other is foundational to ethical scholarship. Numerous comments poured in about feeling seen and heard. One participant said: "Thank you for sharing our voices ... grateful that you guys care about people like me." Another person shared: "This survey reminded me that *I am a human first and foremost.*" In these ways, research in academia can be more than producing findings; it challenges who belongs in academia, whose knowledge counts, and how research can become a site of collective empowerment.

**ANGIE: ORGULLOSAMENTE LATINA, INMIGRANTE, MAMI, Y PROFESORA CON EL CORAZÓN LLENO DE AMOR. SIEMPRE ME SENTÍ NI DE AQUÍ, NI DE ALLÁ. PERO CRECÍ RODEADA DE FAMILIA. EL AMOR QUE TENGO HACIA MI FAMILIA SE EXTIENDE A MI COMUNIDAD Y MIS ESTUDIANTES. (TRANSLATION: Proudly Latina, immigrant, mother, and professor with a heart full of love. I never felt like I fully belonged here or there, but I was raised surrounded by family. The love I carry for my family extends to my community and to my students.)**

What a privilege to work with my students. To teach what I would have wanted to take. I recently taught a community-based participatory research course rooted in the *promotor* model. This course was my love letter to my community, our communities that are under attack. Through this course my students contributed to the work of our community partners. I intentionally selected readings from authors of color, including our community partners, and started each class session with a track of the day. Our course playlist included songs by Celia Cruz, Yasiin Bey, Bad Bunny, Karol G, and Caetano Veloso. I am eternally grateful to my students for allowing me to show up to each class as my authentic self. I was able to share my love for *promotores*, emphasizing the foundations from Latin America, the Black Panthers, and Young Lords (Berthold and Somsanith 2024). We visited one of our community partners to listen to a powerful panel of *promotoras*, many students staying after to volunteer at their Food Bank.

While each of our class sessions was memorable, what stays with me the most is our final showcase (UCLA Teaching & Learning Center 2026). Students brought their parents, partners, families, and friends to see the amazing work they produced, including a zine (Community Health Sciences 296 2025) we collectively developed to emphasize how our identities shape our work, engaging visuals and infographics that summarized the findings from their community-identified projects, and a virtual reality training that shows how *promotores* can be incorporated in various scenarios. We enjoyed *tamales* and an amazing DJ together, filling our Health Equity Hub with over 80 attendees. My greatest joy is when my students tell me I make them feel seen, because we are not invisible and we are not going anywhere.

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WOCA is *our* own space, for us, by us. We resist. We persist. Because we believe transformation is possible. And we remain committed to giving the best parts of ourselves to our communities, our students, and each other.

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**ELIZABETH: BREAKING AND BRIDGING SILOS**

A student I met inside a rundown classroom at a juvenile probation camp transformed my academic trajectory. “No matter how much I change in here, I will be the same bad guy out there,” he said. Issues of power, oppression, systemic racism, and poverty are endemic to all areas of life that touch incarcerated youth, especially Black and Brown youth (Kim, McCarter, and Logan-Greene 2020). My work has been a dedication to youth who are directly and indirectly impacted by the legal system. For a long time, I felt dejected by the multitude of issues facing incarcerated youth. There was no simple solution. But I am not here to solve everything. *My true calling is to bridge.*

I have worked across siloed disciplines, and partnered with multiple systems to address the complex ailments systemic inequalities have created. I have been intentional about bridging research and practice, especially to bring practice into research. I developed the first community-engaged implementation science course in our department to co-design, plan, and evaluate with my students and community partners - a two-way bridge built on mutual respect.

In every aspect of my research, however, I am an outsider. Unlike many of my colleagues, I do not work within my “own” community. Every room I walk into, I fully recognize my positionality, the historical context of Black-Korean conflict in LA, and the perceived divergent immigrant experience among Korean-Latine communities. While forming community partnership takes much longer as an outsider, I persist through difference because we recognize that we share our passion to dismantle the cradle-to-prison pipeline.

In some ways, I have always been an outsider. Since the time my family moved to South Africa, one year post-apartheid; the time my family moved back to Korea; the time my family moved to the US at the peak of xenophobic sentiment during the 9/11 national crisis. I have learned to bridge. Bridging differences. Strengthening bridges (Moraga and Anzaldúa 2022). This is my anthem as WOCA.

**COURTNEY: REFUSAL IN THE FORM OF INSTITUTION BUILDING**

As Associate Dean of Inclusive Excellence at the UCLA Fielding School of Public Health, I work to strengthen the institutional scaffolding that allows equity-centered work across the school to be resourced and sustained through collective stewardship. That stewardship depends on faculty, students, and staff, including our Assistant Dean and Program Coordinator, two Black women whose leadership and coordination drive this work forward. Together, we are building systems designed to outlast us.

I have mentored more than seventy scholars, mostly women of color, from postdoctoral fellows to junior faculty and beyond. I had to figure out how to make mentorship at that scale feasible. I began creating shared systems,

structured guidance, writing templates, and mentorship frameworks that my students affectionately called “Dr. T’s Templates.”

Those efforts grew into my lab, the Collaborative Research on African American Wellness and Longevity (CRAAWL). CRAAWL became the home for work that had previously lived in fragments, research collaborations, writing groups, mentorship meetings, shared meals, and conversations about how to study Black life with rigor and care. This made something clear: mentorship could not stop at UCLA. I then developed the Community Health and Research Mentorship Program (CHARM), with support from the UC–HBCU Initiative in partnership with my alma mater, Xavier University of Louisiana, to prepare Xavier undergraduates for doctoral training in public health.

Informal connections are powerful, but they rarely receive institutional support. To make them sustainable, you have to formalize them: give the work a name, build clear systems around it, and align it with institutional priorities so it becomes part of the infrastructure rather than peripheral labor. WOCA reminds me that institution building is not abstract. It shapes whose labor is seen and whose futures are imagined. As the mother of two young children, I think about permanence beyond that will shape the worlds our children and our students inherit. For me, refusal is not resistance alone. It is construction, the deliberate work of building systems that will stand for those who come next.

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## We Rise Together

While we write this from our privileged position as tenured faculty at a public flagship, we recognize that this privilege does not mean we are positioned the same to other faculty within the academy; because these institutions were not made for us. Yet, WOCA is our collective power. Our positionalities compel us to care. We come together to support one another, empathizing and elevating our personal and professional goals. We are a sisterhood, a group chat, a magical collective where multiple worlds collide and thrive.

WOCA is *our* own space, for us, by us. We resist. We persist. Because we believe transformation is possible. And we remain committed to giving the best parts of ourselves to our communities, our students, and each other.

Sincerely,  
Whitney, May, Angie, Elizabeth, and Courtney

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## About the authors

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