

# Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

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## From Lonely Only to Authentically Me in the Academy and Beyond

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*Dear Higher Education,*

There have been many times in my academic career when I have felt like the Lonely Only. I have written before about my bicultural identity as a Mexican American with Irish and Italian heritages at the intersection of being a mother-scholar and cancer thriver in various educational settings, including higher education (Santamaría Graff 2018; Santamaría Graff & Manlove 2021). My intention is not to rehash these previous reflective writings, but rather to situate who I am now in a post-COVID moment shaped by the policies of the current federal administration. Specifically, I want to focus on the concept of moving from “Lonely Only” to “Authentically Me” within the multiple spaces I inhabit and through the complex identities I embody during these times of uncertainty, chaos, and divisiveness.

I want to acknowledge the past, where a fractured version of me resides, and capture the ways I have evolved to not only accept the Lonely Only, but also to embrace and release her. To release her, I remember the parts of me that split from my essence during specific traumatic moments in my life, including pivotal ones experienced in grade school. In doing so – like the shamans of old – I gather the shards and reintegrate lost aspects of who I am. Through this process, I evolve into Authentically Me, a human being who is learning to forgive and not resent and who is choosing to return to her essence – one rooted in love, empathy, and self-empowerment.

In this letter, I seek to conceptualize Authentically Me in consideration of where I, and all of us, find ourselves in this important moment in history – where we are called as educators, leaders in higher education, and individuals to make critical decisions that support our humanity and encourage mutually beneficial interdependence with each other and the world around us. To do so, we co-create a reality where reconnection and unity drive internal healing and external transformation.

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### Origins of the Lonely Only

When I was young, my challenges with identity stemmed from the dissonance between who I knew myself to be and who (or what) others told me I was. This stark contrast created fissures within me that made me question my connection to my beloved family, as well as my ability to cope in a world that constantly demanded assimilation and compliance.

During my formative years, Lonely Only emerged from these fissures. My sadness sprang from my inability to protect what was most dear – my relationship with my Mexican identity. Lonely Only is a moniker I’m adopting for this paper; it accurately depicts these years of isolation, separation, and rejection. I refer to myself as the Lonely Only, though doing so brings up memories of shame, betrayal, and sadness. I embody this term not to

expose but rather embrace my vulnerabilities so that in my sharing of them, I can connect with others who may recognize their Lonely Only.

One of the first times I experienced what it meant to be Lonely Only was in first grade. An older boy named Mike came up to me on the playground. It was the end of the school day, and I was waiting for my Abuela. My Abuela, who did not drive, would often walk twenty minutes to pick me up at school when my parents could not because of their work schedules. I looked forward to walking with my Abuela back to her home, where fresh tortillas, beans, and fideo were always waiting.

One day, Mike looked at me, pointed at my Abuela and said, “Get out of this country, you wetback!”

At age six, I didn’t know what a wetback was but could feel intense hatred and disgust being directed at me. Other students laughed at me. Some called me beaner, others called me dirty. They made it clear I was not wanted and that being Mexican was a bad thing.

Throughout elementary, middle school, and high school years, I, the Lonely Only, suffered. As one of the only Mexicans in the predominantly White, Catholic schools I attended, I often felt disconnected from other students, especially when they took pleasure in saying hurtful things to anyone they perceived as different. Worse, some nuns and teachers reinforced racial and ableist discrimination, normalizing cruelty and edifying White-dominant values masked as catechism and righteousness. They communicated these lessons not only through doctrine, but through everyday interactions that disciplined difference and rewarded conformity.

In fifth grade I said “lápiz” instead of “pencil,” and a nun washed my “dirty mouth” out with soap. In eighth grade, my best friend ended our friendship because I was “too weird” – I ate a lot of rice and beans and “wasn’t like the other girls.” In high school, after years of being conditioned to not speak Spanish, Castilian Spanish became a required foreign language requirement. I was furious and felt betrayed. For the first time I understood: Mexican Spanish was “less than.”

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## Coming to an Awareness of the Lonely Only

Names have an intrinsic connection to discerning the essence of an object or person (Sedley 2019). Accordingly, it is in consciously acknowledging Lonely Only as a name to describe a core part of my lived embodiment that I can reclaim my own power. Referring to my experience as Lonely Only gives meaning to the times I failed to fully love and accept myself.

This rediscovering of who I am and who I came here to be on this Earth before I became Lonely Only, has been a process.

As a woman of Color with a complicated racial and ethnic identity (Mexican, Irish, Italian) who presents phenotypically as White, I constantly reside in liminal spaces – sometimes insider, often outsider, and mostly somewhere in between. From the outside, others often see a White woman. From the inside, I experience the world through the histories, cultural practices, and ways of knowing rooted in my Mexican heritage. Because I am bicultural, I was born holding space for multiple perspectives at once – many of which are contradictory, including my embodiment of both colonizer and colonized identities. These inside-outside tensions can create confusion for others who struggle to understand who I am and where I am coming from, as well as for me as I navigate a positionality where, in some contexts, I am privileged and in others I am oppressed.

In educational systems – from grade school to higher education – my mixed European and Mexican American identity and others’ perceptions of it have caused me to doubt **where** I can authentically reside. For example, when I lived in Xocén, Mexico, teaching as a preservice teacher, it was not appropriate for me – as an outsider – to attend certain Indigenous ceremonial gatherings, even though some of my third-grade, Yucatec Mayan students wanted me there. Navigating my Mexican American identity within an Indigenous context taught me that belonging exists on a multidimensional continuum that is ever-evolving depending upon the variables present, such as cultural protocols, historical relationships, and language.

I learned that every bit of me both mattered and did not matter and that, sometimes, certain parts mattered more than others. Being Mexican in the Yucatec Mayan community mattered when I showed deep respect for their culture and ways of knowing connected to my upbringing with my Abuela. At the same time, being Mexican mattered not at all, when it was attached to a national identity rooted in colonization that did not embrace or fully recognize the Yucatec Mayan’s Indigeneity, specifically the Maya language. I was told by the Indigenous elders that they preferred English as the language of instruction for their children even though I was there to teach Spanish through an immersive student teaching licensure program. I did as they asked and adapted all instruction in English. However, the part of me that went to México to reclaim my Mexican Spanish language heritage recoiled at the thought of having to teach the White-dominant language that had targeted my Abuela and assaulted my childhood.

In the end, I realized that context is everything. Who I am, who others perceive me to be, and perhaps who others need me to be, in a given context, reflect something larger than my own personal journey with identity – a journey where confusion, uncertainty, and loneliness were constant companions. This broader picture illuminates geo-political and societal constructs that, over hundreds of years, have positioned White Westernized dominance and power rooted in Christian ideologies as superior to all other ways of knowing, being, and existing in the world. My story of Lonely Only is a micro-moment in this grander landscape, but one that reveals how these long-standing structures inform and influence who is permitted to belong, to lead, and to be seen as fully legitimate in spaces where we interact, including higher educational ones.

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## The Movement from Lonely Only to Authentically Me

The movement from Lonely Only to Authentically Me begins with a commitment to challenge constructs that debilitate rather than uplift and affirm who I am. Where Lonely Only emerged from fragmentation – moments when external judgments and internal doubts pulled me away from my sense of Self – Authentically Me, in contrast, requires me to intentionally reintegrate my essence. Within the context of Lonely Only, this means taking full responsibility for my choices and recognizing that sometimes the loneliness I experience in my profession stems from internal challenges rather than something happening to me from the outside. This realization is an important epiphany: when I accept responsibility for my choices, I can release the weight of believing that someone or something “out there” alone causes my pain. I shift my focus away from proving myself or becoming who others expect me to be and toward understanding how I choose to show up in the world. At the same time, moving into Authentically Me requires discernment – the ability to recognize when isolation or separation may be necessary to cope within unfair or toxic working environments and how to respond to them.

Calling out Lonely Only and compassionately holding space for her allows me to name the external forces that shaped her. These forces – including unfair systemic practices – are not confined to my childhood or to isolated institutional experiences; they are unfolding now in public policy and political discourse. Recognizing this broader terrain shifts Lonely Only from being merely a personal wound to revealing how institutional practices can marginalize and isolate women of Color. Accordingly, procedural, hierarchal, and often covert systems create circumstances where Lonely Only becomes an archetype that many women of Color embody

in order to survive within higher education and other professional spaces. Seen in this light, *Lonely Only* reflects not weakness nor deficiency, but adaptation within environments that too often marginalize, fragment, and silence those who do not fit dominant expectations.

*Authentically Me* emerges not by denying *Lonely Only*, but by integrating her lessons with clarity and courage. She is grounded in her own truth, of who she is and can become. She is accountable for her internal work, awake to inequitable systems, and committed to showing up whole in spaces that were not built with her in mind.

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## Lessons for These Times

During these current times, when our government and large corporations are working against the interests of working-class peoples living in the United States and across the globe, so many of us - women of Color specifically – have been disproportionately impacted. We have lost jobs connected to DEI (Diversity, Equity & Inclusion) initiatives, been denied reproductive healthcare through Medicaid and other federally funded programs, have had asylum laws change to no longer protect Latinas and others from gender-based violence, and have had wage and hour protections of home care workers – an industry with a high concentration of Black and Latina women – removed (National Women’s Law Center 2026). In moments like these, I return to the words my Abuela once told me, “Never forget nor give up who you are.”

These words guide me back to the lessons she imparted – lessons that remind me of who I am and why it is so important to self-identify.

I am a bicultural Mexicana: A Mexican American, mother-scholar, faculty member who prepares future educators and who is committed to social justice at the intersection of humanizing, relational, liberatory practices.

Now, more than ever, we – women of Color in higher education – must remember and reclaim who we are, if we have not done so already. It is time to embrace all our audacious, beautifully complex parts and to reconcile whatever within us holds us back from our authenticity.

The leaders who govern and control our country have shown us who they are. We must believe them. This means we can no longer rely on them to show up for us, for our children, or for our humanity. Their cards are now on the table, and it is clear they are playing by different rules.

We do not need to sit at your table anymore. Instead, we can let go of your hold over us – the constructs and traps created over hundreds of years to make us doubt who we are and to grow suspicious of one another. It’s time to create a different world, one where women of Color and leaders within higher education are affirmed for our spiritual gifts, humanizing traditions, and relational practices that center students, families, and communities.

It’s time to release *Lonely Only* and other archetypes shaped by colonizing, patriarchal constructs that have fueled sadness, shame, anger, and confusion. It’s time to remember and reclaim who we have been waiting for – our Authentic Selves.

*Con cariño,  
Cristina Santamaría Graff*

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## About the author

**Dr. Cristina Santamaría Graff**, an educator for over thirty years, is an Associate Professor of Special Education in the Departments of Urban Teacher Education and Urban Educational Studies in the School of Education at Indiana University, Indianapolis (IU Indy). She is also a Faculty Fellow leading the inaugural Scholarly Writing for Faculty Success (SWFS) at IU Indy under the Office of the Provost. Beginning her career in education as a bilingual education and bilingual special education teacher in elementary schools, Cristina has dedicated her professional life to learning from families and their expertise of their children. She is currently a Member-At-Large of the Family, School, Community Partnership Special Interest Group (SIG) for the American Educational Research Association (AERA) and an archivist and board member for the Division of Diverse Exceptional Learners (DDEL) for the Council of Exceptional Children (CEC). She is nationally recognized for her work implementing Family as Faculty, a model through which family leaders are co-instructors/co-researchers in university courses who assist future educators in developing a critically conscious, humanizing approach to teaching and has written several refereed articles and book chapters documenting this scholarship. She has served as Editor for the special education journal, *Multiple Voices: Disability, Race, and Language Intersections in Special Education* and is currently an Associate Editor for the journal, *Exceptional Children*. She was recognized by AERA with the Exemplary Contributions to Practice-Engaged Research Award and was a Principal Investigator on a Family Engagement Educator Preparation Innovation Project funded by the National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement's (NAFSCE).