

Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

‘Lonely Only’ Voices: Modeling Perseverance, Power Despite Pain, and Possibility

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Dear Higher Education,

Can we agree that 2025 tried us?

As a “lonely only” in graduate school, I saw hope for the future as it was modeled via the (then, even fewer) underrepresented voices in academia. I interpreted the perseverance demonstrated and modeled by the “lonely only” to serve as receipts of the bravery, adaptability, cross-cultural navigation, successful civic engagement, perseverance, and investment of one’s time and life into society, as a whole. Later, my own voice chimed into the chorus of individuals who accepted the call to invest their energy, passion, and spirit into the academic sector.

In the face of misrepresentations of our motivations and goals, to say nothing of our merit to inhabit spaces we have historically, systemically, and unjustly been precluded from occupying, we exemplify leadership and drive toward collective greatness. Many of these characteristics are commonly considered to be positive when represented by our non-minoritized, non-marginalized counterparts; to be heralded and celebrated. Yet, in 2025, where was the collective celebration of the grit and labor, to say nothing of the overcome strife and frustration, all while maintaining the focus and resilience for the manifold cleared hurdles and shouldered burdens members of the “lonely only” navigated with considerable strength and grace?

2025 saw the success of broad-scale defragmentation of efforts and offices dedicated to diversifying voices, rendering academic and professional spaces equitable, and including all into the seats of seminar halls. We saw the delegitimization of multiple groups’ appeals to the “race card,” largely to accommodate the emotional sensibilities mobilized by select majority actors’ strategic deployment of their own. Remember those claims of “reverse racism?” That phrase, spouted with great confidence while beautifully laying bare the speaker’s undeniable ignorance of what racism is and how it works and gets exercised? It was the work of bell hooks that first helped me recognize racism as a label that can and should be assigned to *systems* and the inequities they secure and safeguard. The *individual* is then left with the choice to uphold or fight against those inequities as they are represented in structural configurations.

Who needs a stronger statement of empowerment?

For me, seeing the individual as the agent of action means that *each one of us holds both the power and the responsibility to challenge examples of discrimination*. But there’s also a catch: the responsibility comes coupled with the requirement to either seek out education to close the gaps we all have, or to educate ourselves by reading broadly and engaging deeply in our own self- and communal investment. These tasks are not easy. They require discomfort and community, which makes for an even more uncomfortable scenario: having others witness our discomfort as we struggle through our growing pains. And, unfortunately, the discomfort experienced through education is often the challenging proof that growth is, indeed, taking place.

As a silver-lining of a soft skill, it is largely a result of representing the “lonely only” that I know how to speak across difference. I have first-hand experience in the discomfort that comes with learning about history through someone else’s perspective and experience that is significantly different from my own. And I’ve been conditioned to speak to and through such “norms” that have been imbued with power in order to attempt to gain access to opportunity, stability, and (hopefully, eventually) prosperity. It is thanks to the “lonely only” that society can recognize that speaking across difference is, indeed, possible. In fact, those that have overcome structural, institutional, and cultural barriers to achieve their goals and embody positions of excellence are a testament to what all self-assuredness, self-confidence, and determination can achieve. The “lonely only” represent what is possible. The “lonely only” provide opportunities for cultural self-reflection, societal growth, and communal self-improvement.

And, while difference can be a strength, 2025 did not come and go with a feeling of being “seen,” recognized, and valued for my perspective. For many, me included, it was experienced as a doubling down of how being the “lonely only” can be exacerbated by curated suspicion nefariously spread through broader society in order to generate increased hostility toward difference, rather than acknowledging the manifold ways greatness takes shape. After all, I represent American greatness. I demonstrate both Black and American excellence, fortitude, determination, and strength, simultaneously.

In turn, (and perhaps also in faith?) I have recently been repeatedly asked why the White majority demographic cannot – without risking social reprimand – claim pride and generate strength in claiming “White excellence.” My answer is not to look to me to answer that question, but rather to history. Again, cue discomfort. I certainly did not make “white power” an embarrassing utterance. Neither have I ever discouraged individuals to take pride in growth, overcoming odds, or breaking molds. It’s when a group has opted instead for breaking necks, backs, minds, and spirits that the differences present themselves. And sure, a certain type of rebranding may be in order. But the process of carving out a future free from the painful symptoms of a gut-wrenching past also requires facilitation in tandem and collaboration with the demographics that have been historically oppressed, dehumanized, and delegitimized by generations of one’s own ancestors. And this process is likely to require a fair amount of continued (re)education and correlating discomfort. But it’s possible. Of course it is. I don’t want to keep anyone from sharing in a sense of pride and self-celebration. I simply hold that such pride and celebration cannot be at the expense of other groups, demographics, communities, bodies, or beings.

Perhaps an invitation is in order. Let us imagine a time when everyone is recognized and treated with dignity – with the same respect, honor, and acknowledgement of operating on this shared planet on the same social grounding as everyone else. Even more challenging to imagine would be the required domino effect such a universal status shift would require – resulting in a new standard of recognized requirement to share access to all resources to ensure that everyone – every individual of the global community – would have access to living their lives without the needless examples of lack that continue to be upheld as normal because those who “have” deem that it’s normal that other’s “have not.” In turn, increasing representation, investing in society, and practicing feminist thought all require the difficult labor of managing multiple, often competing demands: imagining what *could be* while remaining grounded in the realities of what currently *is*. And let us not forget that, at times, simply being present often serves to be political. Therefore, activism and education are synonymous when represented by marginalized and racialized community members.

Knowledge production and filling in gaps that were intentionally created requires manifold labor: emotional, psychological, spiritual, and mental. And politics of belonging have been intrinsically tied to our perceptions of freedom in the American context. Performing freedom while also straining to acknowledge what Angela Davis refers to as being a constant struggle, we see that freedom is often hard won and hard defended. How can and does the work, perseverance, and support of my forebears and community result in carving out space for increased representation? While (some, certain) new voices and perspectives are at least performatively

sought out in academia, criticality of the status quo – as a form of care – often gets misidentified and mischaracterized as defiant and unduly negative towards society. This is perhaps to be expected, given the sensitivity and resonance of vulnerability that accompany the call for social change. It is important to consider what the alternative would be. In such moments, is it instead apathy that's being presented as our collective goal, or is it something else? If criticality is undesirable, then surely acquiescence wouldn't be the goal. Or would it? Should we all, then, unite in acquiescence? But who are we submitting to? Flared conservative thought dedicated to a majority representative foothold to "White" colonizing, domineering, and violent traditions historically rooted in exploitation, rather than access to opportunity and justice for all, is proving challenging to uphold.

Taking stock as a member of the "lonely only" who has been repetitively positioned at the margins, I offer a different vantage point. From my position, I see symptoms of collective exhaustion in response to lockdowns, correlating isolation, divisive politics, increasing militarized policing practices, and inequitable protections of students' rights to demonstrate, engage in free speech and generate new politics of belonging. Continued hostility and suspicion directed at minoritized and marginalized communities, and greater dedication to appease so-called leaders that steer us down paths of death and destruction, rather than toward community and shared identity, present academia with a frightening future. I wonder: What is our collective education philosophy statement? What do we unite behind as professional academic thinkers? Navigating the frustrations accompanying the exorbitant budgets devoted to non-human development, like AI and human desecration and destruction via warfare and man-made deadly drugs, overshadows possibilities. If we could finally just invest in ourselves for prosperity and justice for all.

In closing this letter, I turn to the tradition of life-writing as it intersects with creative expression as a method of addressing one's frustrations, trauma, and social burdens.

"Progress:" The Right Race Card

Don't get ahead of Us,
but don't walk with Us either.

Behind Us is where you feel
most comfortable.

Because it's the only place
We have allowed you to be.

You're allowed to learn with Us.
Also, only through Us.

Anything else
unfairly emboldens you
to be, think, and commune without Us.

Which is,
naturally,
not allowed.

*In great faith,
Cynthia D. Porter, PhD*

About the author

Cynthia D. Porter (she/her) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures at The Ohio State University. Her interdisciplinary research bridges Body Studies, German Studies, and Comparative Media Analysis with a particular focus on tattoos in German-speaking Europe, body modification, and representations of the body in literature and film. Further, her research also examines the intersections of Black Diaspora Studies and German Studies, with a focus on how bodies are interpreted, valued, and imbued with meaning across cultural contexts. Her poetry serves as a creative outlet through which she explores power and influence, as well as the complex politics of belonging that get culturally tethered to the body.