

# Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

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## Black Woman Isolation in the Academy: Remaining Despite Being Lonely

KEISHA CLARK

*Dear Higher Education,*

I am writing to say why I am willing to remain as one of the lonely and only.

The road to my current position in the academy has not been easy; it has been fraught with confusion and misunderstanding. My culture was often not recognized, and my experiences were questioned. Far too often, the lack of representation in positions of power in the academy challenged my belief that I could find a place within it. Despite these challenges, my persistence to complete a doctorate and become a professor was stronger than the opposition. I have continuously navigated spaces where I am the only representation of my intersectional identities. This concept was developed by Crenshaw (1991). It describes the connection between race, sex, gender, and the systems and structures that often discriminate against those who have a variety of marginalized identities that exist on an axis in their existence.

My pathway through the academy was profoundly shaped by a formative figure in my life at the age of fourteen. I had a friend who relocated to my town. She resided with her aunt, who would inadvertently influence my future trade strategy in ways neither of us could have anticipated. My friend lived with her aunt for a year, and during that year, I would encounter her aunt. Dr. Jones was the first person to talk to me about a PhD. She had one, and she was the first to explain that there are doctors other than physicians. This realization was transformative for me. Her presence in the academy indicated that there were spaces for people like me to work at a university. I had the fortune of growing up in an environment where my racial identity was not consistently ridiculed. During that time, I remained naive, and it seemed like simple demographic information rather than a central part of my existence. I firmly believed in the meritocratic narrative that opportunities were equally distributed among all people, and let us not forget, that as long as I was cognitively capable, my experiences would be based solely on my merit and work ethic. I had no understanding of structural barriers and the continued exclusion of women and people of color from spaces. Ultimately, throughout this process, I found myself grappling with these concepts, and my understanding of the world was upended.

Eventually, I began my academic journey by attending community colleges on a military post, as my mother had during my formative years. This experience often included others with similar intersecting identities. Attending a college on post was a different experience from the much larger university I later decided to attend. For that portion of the academic journey, I did not have any direct examples in my life as I was a first-generation university attendee.

Throughout the entirety of my undergraduate experiences, I never encountered a Black woman as a professor, and while there was a Black man, we only shared skin color and not culture, as he had immigrated from another country. Due to my choice to attend a predominantly white institution (PWI), the experiences of feeling tokenized in these settings were intense. The burden of being treated as a representative of my race

began my search to better understand tokenism (Turner, González, and Wong 2011). I would sit in my classes sometimes as the only Black student and more often than not the sole Black woman. In several classes, I was the only woman of color, which came with the question of “How do Black people or African American women feel about this?” Often, I recall asking myself: “How would I know how Black women feel?” I do not recall a time when a professor asked other students similar questions, for instance, “How do immigrants feel?” Or “How do white people feel?” I quickly came to the realization that this burden was often placed on students of color who professors identified as American. Far too frequently, these questions were directed towards students of color and typically related to our race. Throughout that phase of life, I was excited, and though things were hard, the prospect of someday completing a PhD kept me focused; the path to get there remained unclear, but it was a goal.

My experiences in graduate school, at the master's level, continued to mirror the experiences of isolation and lack of representation among the student body, faculty, and staff. It was during this phase that I began to truly understand that my culture and race among those in power were not present. It was the first time I truly began to understand the feelings I often faced during undergraduate studies, which took shape as cognizant beliefs and values that made me feel I did not belong. Again, students who looked like me were limited, and the number of other Black students was extraordinarily scarce. I began to feel racially and culturally isolated but through a lens of clarity and understanding.

As I progressed through the academy, the persistent obstacles that continued to challenge me as I navigated institutional barriers eventually became a centralized aspect of my journey. Despite recognizing that I was dedicated and capable, I often felt alone, alienated, and inadequate. Over time, I slowly began to recognize that the feelings were less personal and more about existing in a space where my culture was neither included nor considered. It wasn't until my PhD journey that I began to realize that others experienced feelings that aligned with mine. This shed light on the fact that these struggles were part of a larger, more systemic issue. During orientation, a PhD candidate openly described the doctoral process as inherently isolating- a period with notable estrangement from one's support system, particularly those who existed outside of the academy. She emphasized leaning on those in the academy who were going through the same struggle. While I made friends along the way, I found myself in a cohort of one; the other person, who happened to be another woman of color, left and pursued a PhD in a different program where she felt more support. During my PhD program, I was fortunate to have my first Black non-immigrant professor, a Black woman. We shared a similar culture; she understood without words and offered a tremendous amount of support; just her presence encouraged me. However, shortly after becoming acquainted, she left for a different institution. I found myself again as the lonely and only.

Throughout my doctoral studies, I engaged in critical self-reflection as I sought to articulate the complex emotions I experienced in academic spaces. In this process, I encountered the concept of imposter syndrome, commonly understood as a phenomenon wherein individuals feel inadequate or fear being exposed as frauds despite evidence of competence (Clance and Imes 1978). Many of my female peers shared their own experiences with these feelings, prompting me to consider whether this framework applied to my experience. However, upon deeper consideration, I realized that my sense of not belonging was not grounded in self-doubt about my intellectual abilities, which differed from those of many of my peers. Rather, my experiences and concerns were rooted in the absence of individuals in positions of power who reflected my intersecting identities—whether faculty, administrators, or fellow doctoral students. This conveyed implicit messages about who was perceived as belonging within the academy. These subtle yet pervasive signals contributed to my feelings of isolation, not because I doubted my worthiness or capability, but because institutional representation was lacking. I maintained a strong sense of self-efficacy and conviction that I deserved to be present in these spaces, even as I confronted the challenges of being one of the few—if not the only—person with my background. Ultimately, the arduous nature of the PhD journey did not deter me; rather,

it solidified my resolve to persevere and complete my doctoral studies, knowing that my presence and success could pave the way for others.

Upon completing my PhD, I opted to pursue a career in academia as a professor. I joined an American Ethnic Studies department, as my scholarship and passions aligned with the department. My initial attendance at a department meeting felt like I'd found my place on campus, home, if you will. A variety of cultures were represented, all passionate about educating students. We were our own little microcosm; this was my first opportunity to work with a team primarily composed of people of color. I felt as though there were things that could be left unsaid, and often I did not need to explain certain experiences as they were often relatable to those in the department. We were often tired from being invalidated in other spaces in the academy, but we collectively knew we belonged and that we were there with purpose. Unfortunately, the administration merged us with another department. As a result, there were some immediate faculty departures. Over time, even more faculty continued leaving for appointments at other institutions. Faculty attrition affected our ability to function and cover courses; our faculty lines were not replenished. While the other department had marginalized individuals, they were predominantly from very different experiences of marginalization. Things were different; there was a loss of fire or passion for my discipline in the department. Then we hired folks who had little or no passion for teaching topics or courses in American Ethnic Studies. Those with passion continued to leave without being replaced. More recently, the last colleague in the discipline announced their departure. They, too, have found an appointment elsewhere, primarily serving students of color. This departure will be the final one of my colleagues to leave... and the remaining one will be me.

It's been a while, but again I wonder what it is like to return to the lonely and only. When people ask why I stay, it's because I love my work. I value making students feel safer on campus and providing a welcoming space in my office. As a bonus, there is peace in knowing that my presence, with my intersecting identities, can reassure students that they are not alone. They do not have to be lonely and only as long as I am here. Many students express their gratitude for my presence.

Sincerely,  
Keisha Clark, PhD

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## References

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### **About the author**

**Dr. Keisha Clark** is a researcher whose primary focus is on empowering Black families through her scholarship and advocacy. In addition to this central theme, Dr. Clark's research encompasses a broad range of interests, including conflict, sexuality, and taboo communication within marginalized communities. Recently, her work has delved deeply into the nuanced experiences of Black mothering and the unique challenges faced by Black individuals serving in the military. As a mixed-methods scholar, she skillfully combines qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide comprehensive insights and drive meaningful change in her fields of study.