

Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

In the Midst

ALEXIS L. HOLLOWAY

Dear Higher Education,

I am writing to you from after.

After visiting the pharmacy countless times to pick up medicines with imperceivable negative side effects. Cytosan. Xeloda. Verzenio. After they didn't work. After their effects were felt.

After cooking and cleaning and cooking again. After recipes were tweaked for easier digestion. After food I cooked could not be consumed, no matter how much love it was imbued with, due to failing body systems. After food couldn't heal.

After hearing her tell me, "I'm dying."

After Higher Ed offered no support.

After losing her. After her funeral. After institutional silence.

My Mom's Refusal

My mother was diagnosed with cancer for the first time when I was 5-years old. She found a small lump on her sternum and immediately went to receive medical testing. As the oldest child of three, my mother intimately knew how Western biomedicine often fails Black women, as she lost her own mother to misdiagnosed cancer when she was 13. Although her doctors tried to dismiss the lump she found as "insignificant," my mother insisted on receiving a second opinion. Thank God she did. My mom's intuition granted me an additional two decades with her.

The vast majority of my life, my mom was a cancer survivor. Cancer became a part of my vocabulary: chemotherapy, blood draws, CAT scans, MRIs. My mom having cancer was just a fact of life. She called it "the little c," as a refusal, a denial, a mantra, a truth. She never let it hold her back. At age 50, my mom decided she wanted to learn how to ride a bike. She and my dad would go to parking lots, him holding her seat like he held mine when I was learning, letting go when he was confident she could manage on her own. My mom went on to become a triathlete, competing in countless Iron Girls; a marathoner; and an avid biker, riding in the 5-Borough Bike Tour in NYC, 100-mile rides along the Eastern Seaboard, and joining a Black biking group that convened every weekend. Despite the cancer, she was the epitome of health, a "medical marvel," as her doctor remarked. You can imagine how hard it was to come to terms with the fact that "the little c" was slowly killing her.

Although my mom successfully went into remission several times, the cancer just kept coming back. She was diagnosed with type-4 metastatic breast cancer as I entered graduate school. In hindsight, I think my mom concealed the severity of her diagnosis because she knew I would have left my graduate program. In some ways,

I understand her decision; she wanted me to achieve my dreams, to do what she was unable to due to familial and structural barriers she faced as a young immigrant in this country. But in some ways, I'm upset she didn't tell me. And I'm even more upset about the glaring dearth of institutional support from my university.

When my mom's condition worsened at the top of 2021, I traveled back and forth between school and home, commuting four hours each way to help support her. With my husband and cat in tow, I visited often, helping her with day-to-day self-care and medically necessary treatments. I picked up the household tasks that my mom normally handled: grocery shopping, cooking, laundry, managing the finances, repairing household appliances, and keeping the home warm and hospitable. Amidst caring for my mom, I continued my graduate studies. I attended classes virtually (this was only a viable option due to the COVID-19 pandemic), kept up with reading and writing assignments, worked several side jobs from afar, kept in constant contact with my cohort mates, participated in a grant writing seminar, engaged in online symposia, served as an executive board member for two organizations, and generally overcommitted. I was so focused on trying to manage that I did not recognize how little structural support I received, or the ways I desperately needed to slow down. At times, Higher Ed, you chastised me for moving through graduate school in a non-normative modality, citing concerns for "rigor" and "fairness" to other students at my university who were not participating virtually. But what is fair about losing my mother?

Despite the nagging of arbitrary institutional regulations and anxieties over doing "enough" to be taken seriously by the academy, I found ways to manage—though, these coping mechanisms were unfair to me. I remember a particular time I drove my mother to chemotherapy. Instead of sitting inside with her while she received treatment, I attended class on Zoom from the car. I folded down the seats in the back of her silver Ford Escape, adjusting my position as the hot sun shifted with the passing of time. I recall feeling pressured to participate in discussions on theories and ideas that felt meaningless to me, that did not help me make sense of my lived realities. While my mom was pumped with poison that was meant to heal her, I was busy trying to unmute myself to comment on Foucault! While she was poked and prodded, I was focused on maintaining my internet connection without running out of cellphone data. I had to navigate the guilt of not sitting with her (and of not wanting to see her in this environment) with the anxieties of not seeming committed to my coursework. I felt that I had to center epistemologies and writers and canons that fundamentally cannot account for Black life, labor, or love. It felt hollow.

I felt hollow.

THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF THE BLACK WOMAN ACADEMIC

That moment served as a breaking point. I thought to myself, "Why am I doing this? Why am I so concerned with meeting a standard of excellence that may not be recognized as such when I should be focusing on other things in this moment?" I am grateful that I came to this juncture, as it enabled me to be more intentional about how I spent some of my last moments with my mother, even if those moments were excruciatingly difficult. My mom passed at the age of 64, on the morning of July 2nd, 2021, due to multi-system organ failure caused by metastatic cancer. I returned to classes the following month, trying to navigate brokenness, fatigue, and the demands of the academy.

Black women were never imagined to be in academia. These spaces were formed exclusively for white men, and the neoliberal multiculturalism that permeates academia now has not structurally changed these spaces to account for Black women's labor practices. In other words, Black women academics are an impossibility, precisely because of the gendered and racialized care labor we have to perform, both in and outside the bounds of academia. The university's imagined ideal candidate is usually a married, middle-class, cis-gender, heterosexual white man; he is financially unencumbered, able to pick up and move an entire life without concern, available to work 60+ hour weeks with inadequate compensation or benefits (i.e., no life insurance), and uninhibited by family care responsibilities or financial dependents. You, Higher Education, are what

produces feelings of inadequacy when those of us who live communally are unable to conform our bodies or time to this institutional fantasy. The burden falls on our shoulders to find ways to survive a system that not only enacts violence directly on our bodies and minds, but also extracts time, energy, money, and emotional wellness that our communities desperately need.

While you, Higher Ed, try to reinforce the discordance between the imagined candidate and the actual, lived, embodied Black woman, I am working to accept that my labor and the institution's fantasy do not, and may not ever, align. While some may dismiss my experiences as internalized insecurity or low self-esteem, I recognize that these feelings are structurally produced.

In my research, I work with Black classically trained musicians who regularly grapple with anti-Black racism in the music industry. In our many conversations together, we have come to recognize the many parallels between academia and classical music spaces. Neither space was formed with Black women in mind, and both classical music and academia are guarded by exclusionary gatekeeping practices that render the Black female body anathema in these spaces. We are made to seem like we do not fit. So, in the face of racism, misogynoir, and other violent forces, Black women are expected to put on a performance. Black classical musicians are expected to play on, to smile when donors and patrons utter countless microaggressions, to show up prepared for rehearsal after their racist colleagues sabotaged their tenure process. And Black academics are made to smile through troubling comments in faculty meetings, challenging students who do not see us as intellectual authorities, and administrators who fail to understand the many ways that hiring norms are exclusionary.

Black women academics are also expected to perform this double work of caring for our families, friends, and students, and showing up in a particular way in the classroom, conference space, and office hours. We are made to question our excellence in the moments when we are unable to attend colloquia due to mental health concerns. We are asked to take on additional work when we do not show up in the way that you want us to, Higher Education. We are expected to take the hit when our work is framed as illegible within certain fields due to the centering of Blackness in our theory, methods, and praxis.

“Black women academics are an impossibility, precisely because of the gendered and racialized care labor we have to perform both in and outside the bounds of academia.”

Since graduating in 2025, I have finally had time to sit and really reflect on all that I endured. And I learned some things:

First, I realized firsthand that the metrics of success for Black women in academia are different than for the white male candidates. For instance, I was told by professors in my department that my research was not anthropological enough, and that I would not receive funding for my field research. I ended up winning a very competitive external grant. I was told that I was not qualified for a competitive university teaching award. I won that award. These concerns about my success were unfounded—I earned several competitive internal and external grants for my dissertation research and never fell behind on my milestones for candidacy. Like many Black women scholars in academia, arbitrary concerns trumped my record of success (Evans 2024). While I was earning academic achievements, my mental and physical health were at an all-time low.

Second, I learned how striving for Black excellence can serve as an act of violence. In intergenerational conversations about Black excellence, Black respectability politics are often reified (Higginbotham 1993). Our elders often encourage us to strive for elite education, wealth, and extraordinary professional success. While these goals are valid aspirations, they also serve to underscore neoliberal individualism, privilege middle-class norms, and center exceptionalism over the ordinary. In actuality, I should have strove for mediocrity. The

gendered, anti-Black violence of the academy placed me in a position where I had to perform the impossible in a capitalist, white supremacist hellscape, where my labor was then subsequently erased. If this erasure is inevitable in spaces structured by misogynoir, the confluence of anti-Black racism and gendered violence, then what is the point of striving to achieve for the sake of the academy? Why did I enact this type of violence upon my mind and body if my position within the academy is always tenuous, always questioned? I wish I knew then that striving for mediocrity, for good enough, was not lowering my standards, but rather a defiant act to try and make the academy more humane (Newman-Bremang 2022). By trying to achieve the impossible, of somehow doing it all, I negated my own pain, struggle, and effort. I should not have negated my lived reality.

Finally, I developed a care practice by creating my own communities that I was able to rely on when the institutional silence I faced felt deafening. I located the gems within my department and graduate institution and found a home in the Association for Black Anthropologists. I turned to friends outside of academia, and loved ones who helped me by reading my work and offering generous feedback. These communities became my lifeline when it felt like my world was ending. I leaned on those who actively worked against the violence of academia—those who called and listened to me cry, those who made space for me, those who (lovingly) handed me my ass when I should have been focused on emotional healing and well-being, those who submitted mandatory enrollment forms on my behalf, those who cooked for me and my family, those who continue to ask me thoughtful questions about who my mom was and what she meant to me.

It was in these alternative communities where I realized that academia does not have to be a violent space of exclusion, erasure, or performativity. So, this letter serves not only as a call-out, but also as a love letter to my fellow Black feminist scholars who actively practice care acts despite the inevitability of institutional failure. This letter is for those who slow down to be present in life's ups and downs, who take time to soak up the smiles of loved ones and hug friends for a second too long. This is for those who center relational care not just as a methodological approach in "the field," in "elsewhere," but as constitutive of success in the academy. Much like my mother, these folks reject institutional labels that serve to limit us and instead live a life that reflects non-academic markers of success, like time spent with chosen kin, number of hugs given, and mentees who have been uplifted.

So, Higher Education, I am writing to you not from after, but from the *midst*.

The midst of being loved fiercely.

The midst of healing.

The midst of understanding my role as a daughter-scholar.

The midst of being held by my community.

The midst of recognizing the ways that practicing care in the academy is a transformative act.

Sincerely,
The Daughter, the Caregiver, the Scholar
Alexis L. Holloway

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About the author

Alexis L. Holloway is a Consortium for Faculty Diversity (CFD) Fellow and Visiting Lecturer in Mount Holyoke College’s Critical Race and Political Economy department. Stemming from personal experience, Holloway’s research explores how the mechanisms of white supremacy operate in classical music performance, examining how racial and aesthetic hierarchies position Black bodies as aberrant in these spaces. Specifically, her research centers the resilience and resistance that Black musicians display in the face of racism in classical music pedagogy and performance.