

# Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

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## On Silencing, Disappearance, and the Refusal to be Defeated

M. CRISTINA ALCADE

*Dear Higher Education,*

The personal and professional costs of fully engaging in transformative and inclusive forms of leadership have become quite high in recent months. Many of us have gone from being the first and only to achieve a specific role or to lead in a particular space during our careers, to suddenly becoming one of a growing many whose position has been eliminated because of federal and state legislation, pre-emptive policies, and reactive practices. One of a growing number of Black and Brown voices seen as too much. One of a growing number of Black and Brown bodies pushed out. One of a growing number of Black and Brown voices silenced. One of a growing number of Black and Brown bodies excluded from systems not designed for us, yet consistently benefitting from our skills, accomplishments, and expertise.

Seeking transformation and change from the inside has been my chosen approach to you. It has certainly felt like I have been banging my head against brick walls (Ahmed 2012) at different points in my career, as I've engaged in efforts to transform, change, and develop more inclusive structures within your systems.

I've known you as a student, as a faculty member, and as an administrator across institutions. During my time with you, I have witnessed many unhealthy and toxic patterns, and yet I still believe that change is possible. I transitioned to full-time administrative practice as a way to more intentionally focus on the systemic change that I believe is needed to ensure you remain a public good. My decades of research on gender violence, exclusion, racialization, migration, and leadership practices have helped me make sense of moments when the brick walls felt especially heavy.

As a feminist researcher and anthropologist, in this letter I want to bring to your attention patterns of silencing and disappearance of women of color. You have a long history of doing this, having been originally created to preserve racialized and gendered social hierarchies and inequalities in this country (Thelin 2004). This past year, the national backlash against those of us leading systemic change and aiming towards more inclusive cultures and practices made longstanding patterns of silencing and disappearance particularly visible.

I share a glimpse of my own story as it intersects with patterns of silencing and disappearance, in three Acts, because it is not a unique story. While the specific details vary across stories, the experiences of silencing and exclusion across stories are remarkably consistent.

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### **Act 1: The Deafening Silence Hiding Behind Compliance**

Higher Education, your structures, systems, and policies are only possible because of the work of individuals, yet you seem to forget this whenever it becomes uncomfortable to name or include some of us. You have a

well-earned reputation for avoiding discomfort, especially when it comes to confronting the realities behind efforts towards inclusion.

Almost a year ago, three offices identified as focusing on diversity, equity, and inclusion were closed at my university, as in many universities across the country. The public announcement about this significant and impactful series of events appeared as a short piece in a longer weekly campus newsletter.

The highly impersonal message had no specific addressee, was left unsigned, and was not accompanied by any sort of letter to more fully explain the situation to the community. It was loud on the need for and steps towards compliance with new state bills, and deafeningly silent on the experiences, accomplishments, and efforts of persons who were impacted and once considered critical to the success of the institution.

No individual names, no acknowledgement of individual or collective efforts, no note of gratitude for a job well done to any individual, group, or office, and no recognition of pain, distress, or grief. Whose comfort were you protecting, Higher Education?

Had there been a picture, the picture would have shown what the fear of discomfort, through a focus on compliance, might have hidden across institutions: Women of color leading the impacted offices, and the vast majority of those impacted, as people of color as well as persons from other historically marginalized identities. This is a pattern and reality that can't be hidden, Higher Education. Your discomfort does not justify our erasure.

Alignment with institutional values previously affirmed, past awards that had been celebrated, and initiatives that regularly received coverage? Silenced. Webpages meticulously developed to provide evidence-based approaches and resources for specific community needs? Eliminated.

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## **Act 2: A Picture of Elimination**

You can't see the picture I am looking at, and which is staring back at me, so let me paint the picture for you, Higher Education. As an anthropologist, providing a thick description of this moment, frozen in my mind, is an exercise that comes almost naturally.

All that is left of the office are the materials and office supplies we could not distribute across the university.

Two large red plastic bins, lids wide open, dominate the picture to the left. They were not there yesterday. They appeared overnight, waiting to swallow the remnants of the efforts that once made up our office. Except the materials will not disappear by themselves.

Around and between the bins, there are open cardboard boxes overflowing with the folders, documents, brochures, and fliers we developed to announce events, provide guidance, distribute information, and share tools and resources. Behind them, metal shelving racks, holding more materials now destined for those bins. White boxes labeled in careful handwriting, yet the truth is that whatever is written no longer matters. More carefully branded materials and so many more canvas bags with words that no longer resonate across so many of your institutions, now also destined for these and other bins.

Across the carpet, there are scattered workshop materials, a few pens, and more folders—some empty, some still full. Before they were stopped, these workshops and initiatives were successful. Now they are waiting for someone to put them in the bins.

Not us, though. We will not throw away these efforts into those bins.

What would you call this picture, Higher Education?

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### **Act 3: What Goes Up, Must Come Down**

The semester immediately after my role as Vice President was eliminated, along with the entire team and host of initiatives we developed and supported, I learned from a front page headline in the local newspaper that the small house our team had inhabited was now part of the "deconstruction project" approved by the Board of Trustees.

Years before, it had taken weeks and months of exploring potential sites, many conversations, and months of construction to set up the renovated space for a growing team.

It had taken months after moving in to have the letters that announced our office designed and then installed, all according to brand.

Now, they were taken down overnight.

Priorities.

The newspaper cited an executive summary presented to the Board, which described the space as "a small structure that has become inefficient to maintain." It referred to a university representative reportedly saying that "it has not been used for its original purpose for several years, and although it had a few occupants this semester, it will be vacated over the winter."

That was the space we cared for and nurtured to push forward the inclusive institutional values we were charged with moving forward, as so many others were across different spaces and institutions.

Occupants: Vacate. The bins were placed to swallow the rest.

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### **Undeclared, Still**

Higher Education, I continue to expect more of you. Patterns of silencing, exclusion, and disappearance are precisely what I have worked to dismantle and will continue to work against as a researcher, teacher, community member, and leader.

Above my desk, triple-taped to the wall, I have a notecard with a quote from Maya Angelou:

"We may encounter many defeats, but we must not be defeated."

This is the same quote included in the personalized note of thanks and encouragement we sent to partners and collaborators across the university as we closed the office.

I am not defeated. You are not defeated. We are not defeated.

Higher Education, you need us more than ever, but instead you have pushed your patterns of silencing and disappearance into overdrive.

Wake up.

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*With hope and care,  
M. Cristina Alcalde, Ph.D.*

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## References

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## About the author

**M. Cristina Alcalde** is professor of global and intercultural studies at Miami University in Ohio, where she previously served as Vice President for Transformational and Inclusive Excellence, and a leadership coach. She has published widely and speaks nationally and internationally on leadership, exclusion, gender and racialization, gender violence, and migration. Her books on leadership and feminism include the co-edited volumes *Dismantling Institutional Whiteness: Emerging Forms of Leadership in Higher Education* (2022); *#MeToo and Beyond: Perspectives on a Global Movement* (2022); and *Provocations: A Transnational Reader in the History of Feminist Thought* (2015). Her books on gender, exclusion, and belonging, focused on Peru, include *Familia, exclusión y racismo de la peruanidad: la tía Eliana* (Family, Exclusion, and the Racism of Peruvianness: Aunt Eliana 2022); *Peruvian Lives across Borders: Power, Exclusion, and Home* (2018); and *The Woman in the Violence: Gender, Poverty, and Resistance in Peru* (2010). She has also written dozens of articles and chapters on these topics, as well as shorter pieces for *Ms. Magazine* and *Inside Higher Ed*. She is co-editor of the *Navigating Careers in Higher Education* Series through Purdue University Press.