

**When Enough Became Too Much:
Institutional Betrayal, Resignation, & Institutional Courage for Change**

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*“It’s just the way it is
 Maybe it’s never gonna change
 But I got a mind to show my strength
 And I got a right to speak my mind
 I’m gonna pay for this
 They’re gonna burn me at the stake
 But I got a fire in my veins
 I wasn’t made to fall in line”*

—Christina Aguilera & Demi Lovato, 2018
 written by Aguilera & colleagues

Formal Resignation Letter

[Date]

Dear [Department Chair], [Dean], [Director], [Vice President], and [Provost],

I am writing to resign from my position as Assistant Professor in the [Department] and [Institute]. I have thoroughly enjoyed my time at [Institute], as well as many aspects of the [Department].

My leaving reflects both a wonderful opportunity in my future faculty position at Boston University and, importantly, a work environment in the [program] that I experienced as toxic and one that I believe is antithetical to retaining top marginalized scholars—both faculty and students. (My graduate student, Daeja Marzette¹, a phenomenal scholar and [University’s] Graduate School Dean’s Diversity Fellowship recipient who is a Black young woman, left the [program], effective January 2021, and the Dept. May 2021). I deeply hope the Dept. and university work to correct the issues in the [program]—for the good of [University], including the ability to retain top talent.

My last day working for [University] will be [Date]. Until then, I will continue fulfilling my [University] duties, as detailed for my leave at Stanford University.

Many best wishes for [University].

With much appreciation,

Sincerely,

¹ Marzette provided permission to include her name in the current article.

Institutional betrayals are institutional actions or inactions that harm those who trust and/or depend on the organization (Smith & Freyd, 2014; Smith, 2017). Though at first glance, my resignation letter may read as an institutional betrayal, it instead was an institutionally courageous act of solidarity with some members of my former department. As such, institutional courage (Freyd, 2018; Freyd & Smidt, 2019) can be an antidote to institutional betrayal, as institutional actors engage in behaviors that have the power to transform the institution for the better. In my case, when I informed my Department Chair that I would be leaving, I shared with him many of the problems I had identified within the program. Therefore, in submitting my formal letter of resignation, I told the Department Chair that I wrote the letter as I did in order to give him leverage within the program, the rest of the department, the college, and the Provost's Office to combat institutional inertia (Ahmed, 2012) by actually making change through institutional courage (Freyd, 2018).

The Truth About Retention

The first truth is that I should have left my former institution. The university was unable to provide me with collegial environments of race scholars and trauma researchers that could inform my work with cultural betrayal trauma theory regarding the impact of within-group violence and discrimination in marginalized populations within the context of inequality (e.g., Durkee & Gómez, 2022; Gómez, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2023b; Gómez & Gobin, 2020, 2022). The structure of the program, including its subpar curricula in inequality and violence (Gómez, 2022a), meant I would not be able to truly teach, advise, and mentor students within my scholarly and research expertise. That reality has downstream effects of inhibiting the pipeline of junior marginalized critical race and

Black feminist professors, researchers, instructors, clinicians, and scholar-activists. The opportunity to move from clinical psychology to social work also meant that I would be within a field—with its own history and present of racism (e.g., Dettlaff, 2023; Dettlaff et al., 2011)—that has central social justice efforts (Council on Social Work Education, 2022). Therefore, my decision to leave was a good one for multiple reasons. However, the second truth is perhaps equally as important regarding retention: If the program were not so toxic and discriminatory, I never would have left; I had planned to stay my entire career at my former university without ever entertaining other opportunities.

Informal Resignation Letter to Trusted Colleagues

Hello, [University] Colleagues & Friends,

I already shared this with [Department Chair] and [Director], but wanted to let you know personally given that each of you has made my time at [University] truly special.

I have decided not to return to [University] after my 2021-22 fellowship year at Stanford University.

I have signed the offer letter to begin as faculty in July 2022 at the School of Social Work at Boston University where I will be contributing to their violence and inequality research expertise, as well as their social justice mission of the School and the field of social work.

Note: *I am telling my students of my leaving tomorrow (so please do not share before then; I want them to hear it from me).*

I joined [University] with the full intention and hope that the university and [city] would be my forever home. As such, this decision has been a difficult one for me since I am so grateful to so many of you for your kindness, generosity, collaboration, and friendship.

For full transparency, I am leaving due to the toxic culture and climate within the [program], including but not limited to the interpersonal and structural racism, sexism, and classism that have painfully impacted myself and my students.

During my time in [Department], I have worked publicly and behind the scenes to contribute to positive change. However, the situation has become untenable for me—and remains one that I do not want to continue to recruit students into.

Therefore, my decision to leave is a push-out factor, as opposed to being drawn away by something shiny. In fact, I did not seek a counter offer from [University] given that what I truly want—an equitable, collegial environment—is something that I don't believe the [program] at the present time can provide.

My hope is that BUSSW will provide an environment of inclusion and growth that I can contribute to alongside courageous colleagues who are doing the same.

This coming year at Stanford, I remain affiliated at Stanford, though on leave. Thus, I will be around-y , though not fully so, of course.

Again, I thank each of you for all you have given and shared with me during my time here.

I will always cherish those parts of my time at [University].

In solidarity,

“If you are silent about your pain, they will kill you and say you enjoyed it.”

—Zora Neale Hurston, 1937

In addition to my goal of personally notifying my trusted colleagues at my former university of my departure, I wrote the above note—as well as the current essay—to grant myself ownership over the interpretation of my reasons for leaving. The harm I had experienced as a Black woman assistant professor at my former department (Gómez, 2021b) included paternalism, devaluation, and “know your place” aggression, which is behavior done to competent marginalized people that communicates they should “know their place” as subordinate and unworthy (Mitchell, 2018).

Push-Out Factors

“March, 2, 3 . . . 1, 2, 3 . . . Who told you you're allowed to think?”

—in Christina Aguilera & Demi Lovato, 2018

written by Aguilera and colleagues

Examples of harm are numerous. For instance, a White man senior professor asked faculty to send him concerns from students, explaining that not all students would feel comfortable coming to him directly. I compiled a list of the concerns students across the program had told me about. Upon sharing them with him, this professor accused me of lying through masquerading my own concerns as “student concerns.” I sat in shock as I read his email to me with this assertion. He had met my response to his request for student complaints with an attack of my integrity. Soon after, I watched *Picture A Scientist* (Shattuck & Cheney, 2020), a documentary on sexual and gender harassment, including the specific intersectional oppression (e.g., Combahee River Collective, 1977, as cited in Taylor, 2017; Crenshaw, 1991) of disrespect and exclusion against women of Color in the academy. A deluge of memories and recognition swept over me: he was not the only professor in this program to display outrageous and insulting behavior.

Over my two years as faculty, I had 1) experienced being talked over, talked down to, and ignored in meetings and over email; 2) been excluded from discussions and decision-making processes that my role indicates I should be a part of, including those pertaining to my existing and proposed graduate classes; 3) endured attempts to intimidate me into silence or submission; 4) witnessed the verbal abuse and interpersonal toxicity amongst my colleagues during faculty meetings in the program; 5) listened to faculty members’ racist, sexist, transphobic, and homophobic comments and jokes about prospective students during graduate admissions meetings; and 6) vicariously felt students’ pain from faculty; this includes faculty members’ condescension, retaliation, disrespect, exploitative class/work expectations, and curriculum that vacillated between culturally incongruent and oppressively harmful. Through bleary eyes and tear-stained

cheeks, I then remembered how much I had done to try to engender institutional change in the program.

Institutional Courage: Cultural Problems and Concrete Changes

As a Black, female, untenured, tenure-track assistant professor, I worked to create the institutional culture and climate that I wanted to engender across my former program and department, including in my classrooms (Gómez, 2021a), my HOPE Lab (Gómez, 2022b), and my service to the program, department, university (Gómez, 2022c), and larger academic community (e.g., Brown & Gómez, 2022; Gómez, 2023a). Unknown to all in my department except a couple of senior professors was my preparation for comprehensive institutional change within the program, which included a chart I made of cultural problems and concrete changes my last academic year on site at my former university (Table 1). Had I stayed, next steps were to work with these two senior professors to recruit like-minded and courageous faculty to join the effort, eventually presenting our recommendations to the program and the department, with systemic change following.

Table 1

Concrete Changes to Address Cultural Problems

Cultural Problems	Concrete Changes
- Disrespect of students - Toxic overwork (current students work approximately 70-80 hours/week) - Toxic faculty in all aspects of student training (interference) - Systemic bigotry/oppression in curriculum, requirements, etc.	- Qualifying examinations: committee-ruled, not full faculty - Reduced curriculum (for overwork, to add Oppression & Systems class, to remove \$2,000 tuition overage that students pay out of pocket) <u>UPDATE:</u> tuition overage removed 2021 to begin Fall 2021

	- Current: Ethics & Diversity class - 1 credit, Gómez teaches - De-colonize the syllabus (e.g., at least graduate psychopathology course) - Proposed: Oppression & Systems class: 3 credits, Gómez teaches. <u>UPDATE:</u> class approved for Fall 2021 (but Gómez on leave at Stanford, so class cancelled)² - Reduced/fewer assessments required in in-house practicum - Individualized grad student plans: More research-focused vs. more clinically-focused E.g., research methods course not mandatory just because “research labs are inconsistent in research activity.” That class taken electively or required for those in “lower productivity” labs - Two years of heavy coursework, then opens up space for specialty classes, professional development, conferences, seminars, reading, more research, etc.
Decision-making process: - There is none - Decisions rarely made - Decisions are uninformed (no agenda, no materials circulated prior, not circulated afterwards for review) - Different rules for different decisions	Decision-making process: - Make decisions regularly - Decisions are informed (agendas, materials, etc. provided beforehand and/or circulated afterwards) - Same rules for same types of decisions - Clear, consistent, timely, effective

Note: Originally written December 2020, with updates on progress included August 2021. Original table was organized in a color-coded fashion between Culture and Concrete Changes columns. To make the table accessible to all in the current essay, I have re-organized it in black and white, as well as corrected wording/grammar and revised any program- or department-specific lingo in table and below listed text.

² Course detailed in Gómez, 2022a.

“Culture eats strategy for lunch”

—© Peter Drucker

Within the original table, I also wrote the following, seemingly intractable cultural problems for which I did not have ready-made solutions:

- poor communication
 - absence of communication
 - changes made without communication
- discriminatory/oppressive content in faculty discussions
- dehumanization of students/applicants in faculty discussions
- pathologization of students/applicants in faculty discussions
- hurtful, hostile, oppressive, bullying faculty meetings
- attempted triangulation
- microaggressive (e.g., assumptions of inferiority; Sue, 2010): “Jennifer says she wants X, but what is best for her is Y.”
- blockade to change
 - arrogance
 - “I walked uphill, barefoot, in the snow, so they should too!”
 - absence of critical thought
 - lazy
 - subpar work and work ethic
 - not keeping up with the literature
 - not trying their best

- faculty-centered education and pedagogy as opposed to student-centered
- no hope for change
 - *[confidential: past students' mental health difficulties]*
 - faculty verbally abusive but still teaches graduate course
 - qualifying exams discussed for years and years but not changed
 - senior faculty member advocated against dehumanization in graduate admissions but dehumanization continues

Upon notifying the Department Chair of my resignation, I shared the original version of this table with him. There is nothing more I can do now. However, with this table or other like materials, my former university could engage in institutional courage (Freyd, 2018) by committing sustained time, resources, effort, and expertise to structurally fix these problems. As such, the program could become a paragon of base-level relational and institutional health and ongoing increases in diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Change Requires Change

I was hired into my former position through a postdoctoral to faculty transition (PFT) program. In informing the PFT program of my departure, they asked for my feedback (excerpt):

For recommendations for future . . . I would say that the home institutes and departments need to demonstrate that they have a culture and climate that promotes DEI, support for junior and marginalized faculty, etc.

It really is a misplaced effort to solely focus resources into already-stellar scholars, while ignoring the environments where those scholars have to work.

Now, the above doesn't necessarily mean that the [Dept] or its [program] would be out of the running to participate in the new PFT Program. But it would mean that they, like all depts/institutes, would need to show what measurable/demonstrable policies and practices they already have in place to support such scholars, what measurable/demonstrable outcomes they are finding from those policies and practices; and when there have been problems, what measurable/demonstrable changes they are making to ensure that marginalized scholars are supported in an inclusive environment.

Change actually requires the work of engaging change. It is possible, and it is work [sic] courageous work that requires action and not just words and platitudes.

The last thing I'll say: I have many colleagues (and students, of course), at [University], including in the [program], who I adore.

So a lesson to be learned is that wonderfulness isn't enough to retain. There needs to be an absence of toxicity, prejudice, and so on. That means, the whole program needs to shift—not just bolstering what's gong [sic] well while continuing to ignore what is going terribly.

Concluding Thoughts

At my former institution, I often told students the wonderment of my job in academia. As a tenure-related faculty member, I shared how I was simultaneously a researcher, teacher, advisor, mentor, speaker, writer, public scholar, theorist, thought leader, scholar-activist, Black feminist, race scholar, collaborator, and learner who had the freedom to do the work I most care about while impacting macro-level institutional change (e.g., Gómez et al., 2018). However, I regularly sensed that my students fundamentally did not believe me; I inferred that they conceptualized my lab, my classrooms, and myself as anomalies against the daily indignities and overarching culture that routinely harmed them.

Though no U.S. university or college is perfect, I do believe that programs, departments, and schools fall somewhere on a continuum between depraved, oppressive institutional and interpersonal toxicity on one end; and purely peaceful, equitable, and equal environments on the other. In leaving my former institution to work at another field, school, and university, I am testing that premise. I hope that without me, my former institution—as well as all those similarly

harmful—become *The Better Academia* that we each and all so desperately need to live, work, and thrive as academics contributing to a better present and future for everyone through our research, teaching, and service.

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