

## Claiming a Louder Life: Part II

Aomawa Shields describes how she found her voice to speak the truth about systemic exclusionary and racist attitudes – and the importance of other professors doing so, as well.

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In a previous essay in *Inside Higher Ed*, I discussed why I haven't spoken up often while on the tenure track when I've detected systemically racist practices in my field of physics and astronomy. While I wanted to say certain things about race while on the tenure track, I chose to remain silent. Posttenure, I can now voice my opinions in faculty meetings and beyond, without fear of repercussion. This, in essence, is the privilege of both tenure and academic freedom.

Indeed, several months ago, in one of my first faculty meetings since becoming tenured, I spoke up in ways I never have before in that environment.

But I didn't tell the truth.

I didn't mean to lie. I heard my voice, though shaky, suggest in the meeting that a different, perhaps radical, approach about conversations regarding inclusion should be considered. I said that as university physics and astronomy professors, it is neither our right nor our place to tell a student that they should not proceed in the field of physics because of their low grades. We simply don't have all of the information. We don't know the weight of the load that person carried with them into the exam room, or what is going on in their life outside college that might be a contributing factor. We also haven't had a conversation with that student about how much they love physics, and whether they love it enough to work hard enough to be a successful physics major or a future physicist. I suggested that I would want to discuss a number of issues regarding the student's experience in my class before sharing any kind of opinion that I might have about their potential for success in the field.

What followed my remarks was this: a white female physics professor, also a mother, with a dedicated, grant-funded interest in changing the way physics courses are taught for the better, typed public agreement with me into the chat. I felt relief. It was affirming that I hadn't spoken out into the void in this virtual meeting. The professor leading the presentation, also a member of an historically marginalized group, thanked me for my comment. He said that when he was an undergraduate, a professor told him to leave the field. Thankfully, he said, he hadn't listened. I then said something like, "I, too, was told by a professor to leave the field, and thankfully, I didn't listen."

Then a couple of minutes later, I realized it. I had just lied.

I did listen when that senior white male professor told me in graduate school to consider other career options. I listened and left the field for over a decade. I did finally return. But I had listened at first.

Why was I unable to say the truth about my fleeing in the moment? Perhaps I didn't want to seem weak – an example of someone who hadn't fought back, called this professor an asshole and kept going until I proved him wrong.

I have since realized that sharing the truth doesn't make me weak. In fact, it shines a light on the atrocities that have potential long-ranging consequences if the awesome power we possess as esteemed faculty members at institutions of higher learning is severely misused. Who among those unjustly steered away from our field might have been the next [Shirley Ann Jackson](https://president.rpi.edu/president-biography/) (<https://president.rpi.edu/president-biography/>)? The next [Sylvester Gates](https://umdphysics.umd.edu/people/faculty/current/item/167-gatess.html) (<https://umdphysics.umd.edu/people/faculty/current/item/167-gatess.html>)? The next [Claudia Alexander](https://solarsystem.nasa.gov/people/1140/audia-alexander-1959-2015/) (<https://solarsystem.nasa.gov/people/1140/audia-alexander-1959-2015/>)? Words have power and can kill dreams. Sometimes, as in my case, a dream can be resurrected. Sometimes, as Langston Hughes has written, no one knows what happens to it. "[Does it explode](https://www.hancockhs.org/apps/video/watch.jsp?v=169542)" (<https://www.hancockhs.org/apps/video/watch.jsp?v=169542>)? You can bet the dreamer wonders. The killer of that dream does not.

On June 10, 2020, I took part in the academic [Strike for Black Lives](https://www.particlesforjustice.org/) (<https://www.particlesforjustice.org/>), a day intended to give me and other Black academics a rest from our professional demands and non-Black academics a chance to reflect on the role they might play in helping end both personal and systemic racism and begin engaging in important work toward those goals. I am proud to see my department and my university taking specific action steps to be better.

And of particular note, amid all the developing [initiatives](https://news.uci.edu/2020/08/25/uci-launches-black-thriving-initiative/) (<https://news.uci.edu/2020/08/25/uci-launches-black-thriving-initiative/>) and [strategies](https://ps.uci.edu/black-thriving-initiative/) (<https://ps.uci.edu/black-thriving-initiative/>), I have appreciated not being expected to participate for the most part. This is unusual, as so many Black faculty members are often [burdened with the heavy lifting](https://www.jstor.org/stable/90007882?seq=1) (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/90007882?seq=1>) of leading the charge to enact social change on campuses through service on diversity committees, and then [rarely rewarded for this service come promotion time](https://www.dukechronicle.com/article/2019/04/duke-university-lecturers-the-invisible-labor-of-marginalized-faculty/) (<https://www.dukechronicle.com/article/2019/04/duke-university-lecturers-the-invisible-labor-of-marginalized-faculty/>). Instead, as much as possible, I have focused on taking care of myself so that I can stick around academia for the long term as an example of what's possible.

On strike day I read a book: Angel Kyodo Williams's [Being Black: Zen and the Art of Living With Fearlessness and Grace](https://angelkyodowilliams.com/book/being-black/) (<https://angelkyodowilliams.com/book/being-black/>). I let it nurture my soul and give me comfort and strength for the actions that I felt led to take next. This essay to break my silence is one of those actions.

I am hopeful that more positive change, within my department and those of hundreds of colleges and universities across the country, is to come this time. And difficult conversations are part of that. The important thing is that we are having them now. Even when non-Black people aren't saying all the

“right” words, many are no longer staying silent in the face of blatant systemic racism and anti-Blackness. And thankfully, neither am I.

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