Dear Higher Education
LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

The Politics of Praxis: Or, What if I Never Make it to the Mountaintop?

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Dear Higher Education,

Here is the honest truth: I don't want to tell you my stories anymore. I've been telling you my story for over two decades now. And for what? Where has it gotten us? You've requested my story over and over again. You've told me that if I tell my story I'll be granted access (both literally and figuratively). You've not only requested it, you've required that I tell it in a particular way - for admission, acceptance, accommodation, recognition, even for a livable wage. And I have always done exactly as you've asked because, like so many of us in DEI, I too was brought into consciousness through story.

Well before being introduced to women of color feminisms, queer and crip histories, and Indigenous ways of knowing, I was taught the power of story by the care network of working-poor single mothers who raised me. They didn't know the literature or theory, but they knew, and they taught me to know. Stories are survival. Stories are relational. Stories are sacred…

So, my hesitation doesn't arise from self-righteousness or indignation; it isn't even out of anger. It's with deep sadness that I now question the utility (and the ethics) of sharing my analysis of higher education through story. Will you hear me this time? Will you see me? If so, will it matter? After twenty years I just don't know that I am open to being vulnerable any longer. But I do know I am not alone in this disillusionment and painful uncertainty, and I do not take that solace for granted.

I was participating in an internship program with the Ronald E. McNair Program the summer I became disabled. That was the summer my story changed; the summer my story stopped being my own. I was a first-generation, low-income college student - a nerdy White queer kid - who desperately needed an out, out of poverty, out of the Bible Belt, out of generations of trauma. Academia, they told me, was my ticket and I wholeheartedly believed them. That summer, I enthusiastically believed them because their story came with a stipend, and I had a kid brother back home to support.

Really though, I had internalized the myth of meritocracy[1] long before then. I think I was in fifth grade when I first told my mom I wanted to go to college. In many ways, every choice I've made since then can be traced back to what she said next. English is my mom's second language; her father made it to the eighth grade; her mother not even that far. I didn't fully understand what that meant at the time, but I did understand her tears of anger and despair. And I did understand the tone in her voice when she told me that she was stuck - stuck *there* - in a place

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[1] Here I am referring to Stephan McNamee's *The Meritocracy Myth* which was released in its 5th edition in 2023.

without name that exceeds geography, gender, affect and occupation. She told me she was stuck but I could get out. I had to get out. Only she had no idea how to help me...

I'm skipping the next parts of the story, because you've heard it many times before, because you've requested it from all of us. The adversities and determination. The overcoming of odds. The passion we have because of it. That summer the McNair Program was teaching me the narrative structure but the women who raised me had already taught me the game. There is a difference between relational and transactional, and we do not judge people for the things they gotta do to survive. So, I was learning the going exchange rate for stories like mine and trying not to judge myself for cashing in the most valuable thing I was told I had.

Except then the stories changed: *Jaws of Life*. *Life flight*. *ICU*. *Coma*. *Life support*. *Broken bones*. *Surgeries*. *Brain injury*. *Unexplainable*. *Miracle*. *Rehab*. *Deficit*. *Disabled*. These new stories are fragmented and incoherent. They're stories I cannot tell even if I wanted to tell them because these are stories that refuse narration[2]. They haunt me, lingering and ephemeral[3] . They're not the stories that matter though, not really, not now. The stories that matter are the ones that came next and those are the ones I am so profoundly tired of telling...

- I could tell you about the many doctors who've said people like me cannot get degrees like mine. If I did, would you applaud me as inspirational or reconsider who gets to define what's real? Would you think differently about what disability means? About what you've internalized?
- I could tell you about being denied accommodations because "it's never been done that way," or it would make abled people "uncomfortable." If I did, would you talk to me about rigor, standards, and outcomes - despite the fact that accessibility doesn't interrupt any of this? Or would you acknowledge that you don't actually know what accessibility looks like and the institution doesn't support you in learning? Would you learn from disabled people?
- What if I told you about having to get more documentation from more specialists saying the same things that were already said in prior documentation from previous specialists - only to have my accommodation request denied again by overworked abled people who don't know enough about teaching and learning in higher education? Would you tell me that's just how the system and law works (as if I needed the reminder)? Would you tell me to sue (as if I could)? Or, would you reflect on the time, energy, knowledges, and resources it takes to navigate these administrative injustices?
- What if I told you I understand your exasperation with the increase in accommodations and that I agree - completely - that this system isn't working. What if I told you I know you're overworked and underappreciated and that I am here to advocate with you for my instructional support? Would you understand my exasperation when I tell you that what we hear is "disabled people are a burden"? Would you understand that we are not the problem here and advocate with me for more support? Would you think about the multiply marginalized disabled people who do not have the time, energy, knowledges, or resources it takes to navigate these administrative injustices? The ones that will just disappear rather than ask for what they need.
- If I told you about the student evaluations that said I should find a different job because disabled people can't be real professors, would you shrug and tell me those evaluations don't matter all that much? That there is always the outlier, and we can't let it drown out the others? You may be right. But would you also help me try to change who's considered a real professor? Would you help me fight for structural change if I told you about all the disabled students who came to me for mentorship? Or the other graduate students who needed to talk about being too afraid to seek accommodations? Or the tenured faculty who came to me trying to figure out new ways to teach?

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[2] Critical trauma theorists have long grappled with the notion that experiences of trauma seem to exist outside the bounds of discernable narrative structures.

[3] Here I am referencing Gordon's work *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociology Imagination*.

- Would you listen if I told you about taking ten years to finish my Ph.D. when others in my cohort finished in five? Or would you think like the university leaders' administrators who regularly reminded me of the impacts and inconvenience of my crip timeline[4]? Would you see the hypocrisy in all mission statements, programs, and offices that are eager to welcome disabled people, until we need something done in a different way? Would you see the violence of this assimilationist approach and admit how it aligns with larger anti-DEI efforts?
- Would you listen if I told you that the inherent ableism of the job market and adjunctification of higher education means that I couldn't apply for those positions you sent me? Would you nod when I explain that I can't work on multiple campuses or up-root my care network or my team of 13 doctors for something temporary? What if I tell you that "publish or perish" means something different to folks like me? Would that inconvenience you to help me change the system? A system that isn't working for anyone, actually.
- How exactly am I supposed to tell you about well-regarded colleagues who espouse intersectional scholarship and politics but act as though disability distracts from work on racism, or settler colonialism, or xenophobia? As if BIPOC people aren't continuously experiencing disablement? Historically. Constantly. Globally[5]. In Gaza right now[6]. I'm not going to tell you about the 2020 uprisings or what it's been like here since George Floyd was murdered just a few blocks from my house. That story matters but it's not mine to tell. They used disability to try and justify his murder though. Did you notice? Ableds never do. I commit to never talking about disability without talking about race and vice versa. Will you?
- How exactly am I supposed to tell you that there is no return to normal for me or millions like me who are immunocompromised or newly disabled?[7] Normal wasn't working before and it's not working now. People like me are still dying. We are "post pandemic" just like we are "post-colonial" and "post-racial" and "post-feminist." Higher education has made it clear: the comfort of normality is worth more than my life. How exactly am I supposed to help you understand that this is a DEI issue? IYKYK[8]. I just don't think there is a story I can tell.
- I can tell a lot of stories about well-meaning people who think accessibility is the same as inclusion and belonging. Or that digital inaccessibility is our only access issue. Or that accessibility is a checklist (rather than a way of being in relationship).[9] Or that access that is all disabled people need[10]. I could tell you about conflated words and hollowed out language used for policies, initiatives, metrics and progress which only erase me more. Every disabled academic I know has stories to tell about the violence of compliance-based offices that uphold the ADA and nothing more. Would you do anything differently? Would you establish, no, better yet, would you fund a disability culture center? A mentorship program? What about courses or facility lines in disability studies so we see ourselves reflected in the curriculum?
- What if I told you about my disabled colleagues, mentors, students and friends who have been pushed out? The queer/trans, BIPOC, immigrant, international, and first-generation disabled people who helped me survive even though they didn't. What would you do if I told you that I too am slowly being pushed out? Afraid every day that I won't make it out alive. This isn't hyperbole. What if I told you that I know that I've held on this long because of the privileges my Whiteness affords. Would you slow things down?

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[4] Although not without contention, many people within disability communities have reclaimed "crip" as a word of empowerment. "Crip time" refers to the ways in which disabled people experience time and space differently, see Sameuals' "Six Ways of Looking At Crip Time."

[5] See Erevelles' *Disability and Difference in Global Contexts: Enabling a Transformative Body Politic*.

[6] See Puar's *The Right to Maim: Debility | Capacity | Disability*

[7] For example, the Center for American Progress reports that there were 2.7 million more disabled adults in the U.S. in 2022 than there were in 2020.

[8] Often used in text messages or on social media, IYKYK stands for "if you know, you know."

[9] I'm drawing here from Aimi Hamrae's work in critical access studies.

[10] See Kraus's 2021 article, "Disability Students Need Equity, Not Just Access."

Would you do anything differently? Would you have to be so worried about the enrollment cliff if you prioritized educational equity for people like me?

- Everything I am saying, our students have also been telling you.[11] We are not okay. Yet, you interpret their struggles or disengagement as evidence of their personal ineptitude. What if their silence was speaking to the overwhelmingness of it all? What if we took (at least partial) responsibility providing the transactional narrative template they mobilize when oversharing their struggles in hopes of receiving access, or acceptance, or understanding? Educators are not therapists; that's true. You have a right to feel frustrated but there are things we can do. What if I found the words to describe the loneliness, the tears of anger and despair? Or, if I told you what it feels like to be stuck here - in a place with no name that exceeds degrees, institutions, positions and broken promises? Would you tell me to go to the counseling center or take a wellness workshop? Would you wonder why I didn't trust you?
- I could tell you stories to illustrate all the ways that ableism is inherently a part of our current political rhetoric, even if it appears to be unspoken. The erasure of Black history is the erasure of disability history. Anti-trans politics is anti-disability politics. Attempts to silence academic discussion on war, genocide, and hate are attempts to silence discussions on the forces of debility. If I tell you these stories, will you ask me about my disability story? Maybe because my disabilities are visible or apparent to you, or maybe because they are not visible or apparent? Or will you pause and remember that this story isn't my story; it's a much larger story about how academic ableism intersects with other forms of academic injustices and that story belongs to all of us.[12]

On and on and on. It's unrelenting. I don't know what else there is to say or how I can say any of it differently, so that you - dear higher ed - will listen. But I know I'm not alone in this disillusionment and I do not take that solace for granted. My queer crip feminist mentors who raised me up and into this work have been warning me.[13] They've told me to be discerning about sharing my story all along. They've taught me about "moving at the speed of trust," and moving with caution around those who request my story, especially those who demand it.[14] Our stories are our methods and our theories; our praxis is our power. They know and they've been teaching me to know. We must keep our stories sacred, and relational, because stories are how we hope. There is no judgment in survival but there are sacrifices that I am no longer willing to make. I'm ready for different stories now. I'm ready to imagine otherwise. Will you weave your story with mine? Can we listen, together?[15]

Onward,
Angela M. Carter (she/her)

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[11] While exasperated in recent years, the current mental health crisis on campus is not new. In a 2023 article for *NEAToday*, Mary Ellen Flannery reports a "nearly 50 percent increase" since 2013 in college students who "meet the criteria for at least one mental health problem."

[12] See, Dolmage's *Academic Ableism*

[13] I both reference and borrow Kafer's book title with my use of the words "feminist queer crip." We do not have agreed upon practices for citing someone's praxis, yet I live and work in deep gratitude to so many, including: Jigna Desai, Margaret Price, Liat Ben Moshe, Nirmala Erevelles, Alison Kafer, Eli Clare, Sami Schalk, and Jina B. Kim.

[14] I first heard the phrase "moving at the speed of trust" from Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha who (I believe) got it from brown's work *Emergent Strategies*.

[15] I am invoking the quote by Murri activist Lilla Watson who said, "If you have come to help me you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."

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