

# Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

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## Navigating the Crip Spring: Invisible Labor, Temporal Stockpiling, and the Myth of the “Able” Academic Body

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*Dear Higher Education,*

Let’s face it: if you are a Black woman pursuing a PhD, you are used to being the "only." Whether you are the only woman of color in the room, the only Black student admitted to the department, or the rare one given a tenure-track role, we often suffer in a state of isolation and invisibility. We are conspicuous enough to face microaggressions that are explained away as the "necessary hard" of doctoral life, yet we are invisible enough for our actual labor to go unseen and unmeasured. Many of us arrive at the proverbial academic "mountaintop" already wearing a battle face—a smile hiding a distress that no one believes anyway—developed to survive the race toward the doctorate.

If you are lucky enough to be among the 0.7% of Black women in the professorate (NCES 2023), a different battle begins: the road to tenure. For younger Gen X and elder millennials, this road is now colliding with the crisis of re-parenting our parents. Like teaching, caregiving is a 24/7, thankless road where the person you are trying to help is often the most unwilling participant. When you add the relentless, panoptic scrutiny of tenure-track life—where your worth is determined by metrics built for the unencumbered—the standard test of academic endurance is doubled by an unhealthy amount of hyper-vigilance and self-sacrifice. This doubling of labor is compounded by an ableist space that teaches us to "suck it up, buttercup!" because tenure-track life is supposed to be impossible.

In your hallowed halls, productivity is imagined as a flat line, but for the scholar living with "unwanted guests" like fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue syndrome (ME/CFS), and Long COVID, the rhythm is entirely non-linear. As Alison Kafer (2013) argues in *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, "crip time" is a challenge to normative, "curative" schedules, where the disabled body is viewed as a thing to be fixed in order to be effective. But like many other crip academics, my curriculum vitae proves otherwise. Working differently does not equate to working less.

In fact, I live in what Ellen Samuels (2017) calls the time travel of disability, where my version of productivity is rooted in a hyper-awareness of how unpredictable my health can be. Thus, I am constantly existing in the future of my own exhaustion. To survive, I practice what I refer to as temporal stockpiling. My 5:00 a.m. work sessions are not the result of insomnia; they are the only hours where no one needs me. When the "brain fog" lifts, I must perform the labor of three people to "pre-pay" for the inevitable days when my body will betray me. I stockpile hours as insurance against a system that refuses to acknowledge that we do not all have the same 24 hours in a day.

This struggle is made even more complex because while you, my dearest Academia, have carved out a language for caregiving as parenting, you remain illiterate in the realities of elder care. Children grow toward independence; caregiving for a parent is a journey in reverse. There is a specific, silent cruelty in watching an

elder who once navigated the high-stakes world of corporate leadership struggle with the basic mechanics of standing, walking, or eating. In academia, we love to intellectualize lived realities of injustice and subjugation, debating how to "decolonize" via syllabus updates. But those in power often stay silent about the harmful fracturing of the self that happens when disabled persons and caregivers are forced to alienate their truths in order to be viewed as belonging—especially when educational institutions are rooted in neoliberal and capitalistic expectations of productivity. We, crip academics, must wear a "uniform that lies"—the PhD and the professional veneer—that masks the reality that we are also nurses and occupational therapists.

This lack of institutional recognition often invites a form of surveillance that Jane Hill (1998) identifies as the construction of "white public space." I felt this most acutely at my previous institution—a predominantly white and Hispanic-Serving institution (HSI) in the Midwest where I was the sole anthropologist and the only non-white faculty member in my department. It was there that an interim chair viewed my caregiving through the lens of "presumed incompetence" (Gutiérrez y Muhs et al. 2012). Demands for hour-long 1:1 meetings and suggestions to monitor my virtual classes were not neutral acts; what was framed as "mentorship" was actually a distinct form of professional policing.

This retributive style of management ignored the fact that I was a junior faculty member modernizing curricula through the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework—during the height of a global pandemic, no less—while my mother suffered a stroke. I was grading papers from her hospital bedside, translating academic metrics while physically supporting her through rehabilitation. When requesting extensions for deadlines, instead of empathy, I was given a clear message: 'This train is moving with or without you.' This 'lonely only' was welcome only on the condition that I performed at a standard that completely erased my humanity. And any requests for accommodation were an invitation to justify more surveillance.

This hyper-surveillance manifested as severe anxiety and depression. My dream profession became a burnout culture that eventually forced me to choose between my career and my family. I chose my family. But I walked away feeling shame and a sense of failure. In doing so, however, I have been granted a second chance at academic life, as well as a measure of hope at my current institution. At my Atlanta-based, women's historically Black college (HBCU), there is a clear push for understanding that we are a web of intersecting identities. In fact, intersectionality is at the heart of everything we teach. Every student here can readily cite the concept, thanks to the groundwork of our mandatory first-year African Diaspora and the World (ADW) courses that teach Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) framework among other inclusive ideologies.

However, even within these spaces, I have seen a limited version of this theory take hold, positioning intersecting identities primarily as the "big three": race, gender, and class. While these are undeniably the heart of what stands out for us as Black women, I have to ask: what happens when the invisible is just as prevalent as the visible?

Dr. Crenshaw did not create an unfinished or incomplete framework; yet, how it is often taken up in the academy remains dangerously lacking. Concepts like disability and the reality of being part of the "sandwich generation"—stepping into the role of parenting our parents while managing a career—are rarely part of the conversation unless there are visible, tangible limitations. By treating chronic illness as a problem solved only by a medical leave, and caregiving as a mere work-life balance issue, the institution privatizes our struggle, stripping it of its political and systemic weight.

Specifically, in terms of my unique experience, I am the 'lonely only' in every sense of the phrase: I am the only child to a single mother, the only grandchild to my only surviving grandparent, and the only niece to a maternal aunt with no children of her own. We four ladies are the family equivalent of 'we are all we got.' There is no one to tap in when it comes to the care of my family; I am simultaneously the coach, the quarterback, and the

cheerleader. I must manage medical baselines and temper tantrums for my matriarchs before heading to the lectern to project a confidence and stability that completely eludes me on the homefront.

We crip academics are not oblivious to the realities of tenure-track life. In many ways, we pursued these paths with unstoppable force and eyes wide open. But the beautiful struggle of this reversal in roles—where daily feats include ensuring our parents are mentally stimulated, well-nourished, and properly medicated—does not eliminate the noise of the tenure clock ticking loudly in the background. We recognize we must sometimes choose publications and conferences over enjoying fleeting moments of mental clarity with the elders we care for. Their care is inevitably tied to our success in academia, yet our successes are typically "clocked" by gatekeepers whose standards fail to include these competing priorities.

Higher Education, your culture of ableism must be addressed. Accessibility is discussed for students, but what about the faculty? If intersectionality is not recognized as inclusive of this caregiving experience and the recognition of "crip time," then it isn't intersectionality at all—it is just a more inclusive form of erasure. Those of us who operate on crip time are ready to contribute to scholarship, but we need you to reassess your standards. We are not asking for a lower bar; we are asking for a wider path—one that recognizes the profound brilliance of those of us who carry our parents up the mountain with us.

*In solidarity and care to all those seen and unseen,  
Tiffany Marquise Jones, PhD.*

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## About the author

**Dr. Tiffany Marquise Jones** is a linguistic and cultural anthropologist whose work sits at the intersection of race, place, and verbal art. A recipient of the American Anthropological Association's Minority Dissertation Fellowship Award for her research on Washingtonians' use of spoken word poetry to reclaim D.C. as "Chocolate City," she is currently working on her monograph dedicated to African American Language and verbal art traditions as tools for linguistic placemaking and resistance against gentrification. Beyond her work in linguistics and urban ethnography, Dr. Jones is an advocate for institutional accessibility, inclusivity, and accommodations. As a neurodiverse educator navigating chronic illness, such as ME/CFS and Long COVID, and primary caregiving labor, she leverages her lived experiences to champion a crip theory framework. Dr. Jones aims to help transform higher education into a more inclusive space for scholars with visible and invisible disabilities. She is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Spelman College.