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stranger than fiction: that lying, conniving, disabled snitch ... burn, burn, burn the witch!

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Amy Bonsall, Kelly Pickard-Smith, Elliott Spaeth,
Becky Alexis-Martin, Jennifer Leigh and Ghosts

prologue

All authors of this work are disabled scholars with varying experiences of learning disability, long-term illness, and chronic health conditions. All authors are neurodivergent. Three are currently unemployed, underemployed, and/or precariously employed. Two are from marginalised ethnic/racial groups. Two are the first in their generation to access higher education. Three have known severe poverty. Not all involved could be named on this publication, hence the inclusion of ghosts.

The lived experience of the authors is woven into a singular cautionary tale to provide an every-person understanding of career blocking within academia for disabled scholars. This artistic endeavour, inherently analytical in its documentation of the 'identity work' of our authors, draws on past experience (memory) weaved through imagination. The writing and publishing of this piece required a brutal honesty that lays us open, vulnerable and at risk. However, as you will read, the risk of silence could be greater still.

Human experience can be understood through stories. Our work is concerned with performing the narrative of our daily lives (Langellier and Peterson, 2004), making the mundane magical and instilling belief in the unbelievable. Our lived experiences are stranger than fiction, and combined they enchant a fictional narrative that describes the necropolitics of career blocking (Mbembé and Meintjes, 2003) through a new methodology we call 'PanEthnography'. As authors of different disciplines/fields and universities, we were united in our experiences of disability in academe. We conceived and constructed PanEthnography through a lens of Embodied Inquiry (Bochner and Ellis, 2016; Apostolidou and Daskalaki, 2021; Leigh and Brown, 2021). During the month of October 2022, we formed a research collective (or writing coven) to explore our collective experiences of career blocking related to disability. The data-gathering process was undertaken by digital means by using online videoconferencing and countless WhatsApp messages to facilitate communication (Halliwell and Wilkinson, 2021). These events were transcribed in real time. It is essential to understand that the

data gathering was needfully 'quick 'n' dirty'. This allowed us to capture the immediacy of the emotional response, which is a defining characteristic of PanEthnography. This feature also marks this methodology out as being rooted in feminist consciousness raising and digital immediacy. Our PanEthnographic cautionary tale has been inspired by ancient Greek myths to provide an every-person understanding of career blocking within academia. Each author's experience is given equal status within the accounting; there is no main 'narrator' or character-driven 'narrative' as such. In this regard, it could be argued that elements of PanEthnography might veer into Epic Poetry. A future methodological paper on the PanEthnography process is in progress, but necessarily relies on this paper/story becoming published in the world.

The narrative of all contributors was intertwined to form a singular enchantment: a casting of stories intertwined telling truth to power from witchkind.

a PanEthnography of witches

There have always been witches in my family. I mean actual real bona fide witches. It's just a thing, you know? I didn't actually realise that there were families that weren't witches.

Back in the day, witches were 'othered'. They were different. Maybe they didn't move quite like everyone else or want to be around people all the time. Maybe smells or sounds bothered them more than others, or they had their own ways of doing things that were a bit different. Had a separate perspective on the world. Remind you of anything? Sensory sensitivity or neurodivergence per chance?

But it's easy to blame someone who doesn't quite fit in when things are going wrong, or resent them for knowing more or seeing more than you. Like the witchfinders did! Encouraging neighbours to denounce potential witches; those othered ones.

I don't want to have to be different. When disability is masked and I am hiding the extra energy and time I take to do things others might find easy I'm charged with not being disabled enough to need help. Drowned. Unmasked, I'm incompetent and not worthy of being part of academia. Burned. You know what? I am competent, and I am disabled. This shouldn't be some fucking witch hunt where I die either way.

From there it's a small step to the lake or the stake.
innocence drowns
guilt burns
damned either way.
burn the witch they say.

This is a witch trial. I would have much preferred to just get on with my bloody job; which I am bloody good at by the way. This utter bullshit of trials (and tribunals) makes my very bones ache with frustration—there's no power in any of this, there is no power in a grievance. It's all about hierarchy, and the hierarchy is controlling. The system closes down to protect only itself.

I never wanted to be here. My whole work, everything I do, is about inclusion and social justice. Like this is my thing. All I do is to try to make things better for people who are marginalised or who can't speak up. Prizes have been won for this—oh now there's a funny story—the university is all 'Oh look at our prize fool and all the credit we can take; aren't we great!' and then screws you over. From prize to curse—awarded, tainted. A prize fool indeed!

Disabled people are exceptional but exceptionalised. If we can do what we do with
the bullshit
the pain
the pulling ourselves apart,
making ourselves over again
imagine how we'd outshine
the mediocre

Held back by systems weaponised to deflect us—legitimised though, as there to protect us. Enforced compliance weaving additional barriers. Tapestries of rules both vague and opaque. Webs of policies—ceased. I was told *'if the institution cannot identify and agree a solution in your case, given your background and EDI expertise, then we might as well all go home'*.

The tragedy is that People leave, to lesser jobs, to lower pay
the hope of escaping
shitty, toxic environments
One has no
hope.

It's beyond ironic really. And it happens a lot. 'Let's fuck over our EDI expert because they're disabled, and accuse them of not complying! Of doing too much! Of not doing enough! How dare they do EDI work outside of work whilst asking us for adjustments for fatigue!'

Take this whole thing around adjustments. What is reasonable / not reasonable?, reasonable / not reasonable?, reasonable / not reasonable?

You know, I have heard too many times of managers meddling; deciding for themselves what is 'reasonable'—in their estimation. Whether that is putting in treble the teaching hours, or harassing people about petty bureaucracy when they are literally broken and suicidal. Or even refusing to discuss with teams the ways that they can help to keep their disabled colleagues safe because it 'might make them feel uncomfortable'. Literally, I am talking about passing on what they need to do to save their life. I wish this is something that I had only heard once. Their 'comfort' becomes more important than someone's life.

Lost jobs because what's needed is not in place. At the whim of who exactly? Managers with no expertise. Too much hubris to ask or go find anything out, and, on top of that, who quite often resent us for being 'bad'. People keep saying 'they can't do that', and it makes me so angry because who do they think is stopping them?

Who
guards
the
guards?

And listen, the magic part is the institution can make it all disappear. Cloak the mistreatment of us. No matter how accomplished you become, It can strike you down so you can't even talk about it to process. Mouths sewn shut. Liars made of us all by omission. And all the while noses grow. The non-words and non-worlds that are out there, forever latent, magic paper. Required to vanish—be banished, where 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair' (Shakespeare, 1995 [1623], Act 1, Scene 1, p 53).

Recast as troublemaker. Disability microaggressions make your antennae very attuned
vague instructions
take time to read things carefully
no conference because you've been off sick

Every word used to justify inaction that would include you is another barb flung. You can cope with a few right? But when every part of your exposed flesh is stung time and time again it starts to tear it apart. It tears you apart. Cat o' nine tails. Flog the witch.

I have never felt as unsafe as I have since I started working in academia. I am not allowed to put a foot wrong, but I have literally been sent hate mail from people whose job it should be to protect me. That's not the only violence. It's the ones who do nothing as well—that inaction is like a punch that makes the smell of iron stay in my nose and my teeth ache for days afterwards. I probably shouldn't have said all that

please don't use it.

And they use it—against you

The worst thing is when it happens to you from people you had trusted, that you thought were your friends. Have you ever heard of friendship being used as an excuse for not following policy, you know? You name it it's probably happened.

In my last job, I think my manager purposefully gave me a shit review—I had it checked by an employment lawyer and it was complete bullshit—but it meant that I couldn't apply for a senior position that came up. It's like they didn't want direct competition or the idea that I might leapfrog them. That's deliberate blocking right? But I'd not felt the benevolent tap on the shoulder signalling we want you for progression.

Overloaded colleagues collecting
leadership roles
meanwhile, my hat cocked begging
a king's ransom in grants
publications, prizes, prestige
leapfrogged

I just got bullshit like 'oh the work you do externally counts'—but it never did. That was literally the promotion feedback; without further explanation. What do they want? I'm doing everything and more! haven't I bled enough?

I'm red enough

the tallest poppy in my field.

was that the case?—I'd grown too tall?

down to size we will

cut you

I was offered some kind of consolation prize; nomination to an internal award that was never submitted so I asked and was scolded 'take it to a grievance'. I see through their glamour and they do not like it.

Anyway, before I go I wanted to tell you how important this all is. Why it matters so much. It's not about winning, or money, though given how this is probably going to stop me ever getting another academic job again, money will help I'm not going to lie. It's because how someone treats you and talks to you matters. It's not okay to make someone have to justify their disability all the time. To prove to you how disabled they are to ask for adjustments or accommodations that seem reasonable to you. To only notice that someone is disabled when they ask for help. When they get to that point I promise you if they are anything like me they are going to be desperate because none of us want to be different, or to get an easy ride.

Do you think my life is an easy ride?

Why would I pretend about this?

Do you have any idea how much fucking energy it takes?

My heart aches—no actually, it's like my heart and lungs and my whole chest are a gaping empty hole. People will die. I've seen people shot, have you? Have you any idea of what that is like? I should feel more than I do. I'm just numb now.

How much damage can we take?

How many of us will be thrown in the lake?

How many more are burnt at the stake?

That lying, conniving, disabled snitch.

Burn, burn, burn the witch.

epilogue

Academia is fit only for those who 'fit'. Black, Queer, and Disabled people are underrepresented (Brown and Leigh, 2018). Only 4 per cent of academics disclose as disabled, there is a higher proportion of disabled academics on precarious contracts and less than 1 per cent of big grant applications are from disabled scholars who win smaller amounts than the able-bodied and neurotypical. We are not surprised by that, are you? Disabled people are ostracised, driven out, and held back. They are an unwelcome 'other' (Brown and Leigh, 2020). This is of course intersectional (Crenshaw, 1989). It is impossible to consider disability without other protected characteristics. By reclaiming our witchfolk heritage it is not our intention to erase the experiences of disabled feminists-of-colour (Schalk and Kim, 2020). Disability disclosure rates are lowest in disciplines with the greatest gender imbalance, and those who are multiply marginalised face compounding barriers (Leigh *et al.*, 2022). It has long

been known that academia is structurally racist and homophobic (de la Luz Reyes and Halcón, 1988; Misawa, 2015). For example, there is a dearth of women and other marginalised genders, Queer, and Black people in the highest reaches of 'hard' disciplines like those of STEM (Rosser, 2017; Institute of Physics, Royal Society of Chemistry and Royal Astronomical Society, 2019; McGee and Robinson, 2020). Now imagine being a Queer, Black, disabled woman in science. For a fuller account of barriers and statistics on disabled people in science careers, we draw your attention to the National Association of Disabled Staff Networks' (NADSN, 2021) evidence to parliament by the Network's STEMM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths, Medicine) Action Group, and work around the experiences of disabled leaders (CRAC, 2020). NADSN are involved in several intersectional projects to raise awareness of disability in academia and to bring about change that will make things better for everyone.

Universities, funders, and institutions espouse their values; always about inclusivity and equity. Never about harming or disabling their staff. Even so, oftentimes there is a gap between those policies and what actually happens—how practices are implemented in reality. It's some kind of disability washing. They do the bare minimum or less but like to say to the world that they are allies. It's performative and meaningless.

Overwork in academia has been making us all ill for a long time (Gill, 2009). We need self-help books just to survive (Clark and Sousa, 2018; Boynton, 2020; Ayres, 2022). As disabled academics this hits harder, and we need to unpick compounding issues around disclosure, moral stress, and burnout; what is hidden, invisible, and causes pain (Finesilver, Leigh and Brown, 2020; Leigh and Brown, 2020; Leigh, 2021). Fuck the self-help—we need transformative justice (Mingus, 2021/2022). We wish the stories we shared were unusual or the exception, but the bitter pill is that this is the norm if you are othered, disabled, or can be cast as a witch.

That gap between policy and practice is where disabled people sink. If we ever are made welcome, it's an exception, because for once someone did choose kindness over an almost inexorable tide of authoritative voices telling them that really, we don't deserve to be there.

author biographies

Amy Bonsall, PhD is the founder and chair of Women in Academia Support Network (WiASN). She is an honorary research fellow at Royal Holloway University of London, an expert in applied theatre and arts-based practice in research and has directed more than twenty professional theatre productions. Amy is an EDI consultant, trainer and executive coach. Amy has won multiple awards including being named a top 20 UK influencer in the Shaw Trust Power 100 (2021), University of Manchester Staff Volunteer of the Year and Presidential Medal for Social Responsibility recipient. In 2022, WiASN won the Northern Digital Award for EDI. Her most recent publications include: 'Storying resistance and resilience in a women academics' Facebook group: Soup boy and other stories', co-authored with Drs Kelly Pickard-Smith and Eleanora Belfiore, in *Women in Academia: Voicing Narratives of Gendered Experiences in Higher Education* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023); *ResearchHER*, co-authored with Drs Eleanora Belfiore and Kelly Pickard-Smith (Bingley: Emerald Publishing, 2022); and 'Romio ndi Julieti (Romeo and Juliet): Chichewa language production of a serious drama' in *The Routledge Companion of Applied Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020). Forthcoming books include *Shakespeare in Malawi* (Palgrave, 2024); two

co-authored publications with Dr Zindaba Chisiza for Lever Press; and *Hopeful Leadership*, co-authored with Dr Kelly Pickard-Smith, for Emerald Publishing.

Kelly Pickard-Smith, PhD is CEO of Lighthouse Insights, providing culture change initiatives within the Higher Education, Research and Innovation sectors; co-founder of the largest global network of women academics (WIASN); steering group member of the National Association of Disabled Staff Networks (NADSN); and Director of Community Engagement and Partnerships at COUCH Health, leading novel approaches to co-production for health equity in clinical research. Kelly has a passion for arts-based research and the potential for addressing social injustice through artistic practice.

Becky Alexis-Martin, PhD is a pacifist academic at the University of Bradford. Her work explores nuclear warfare, social justice, humanitarian and environmental issues, and human rights. Her expertise is focused on nuclear geographies and decolonising disarmament policy in the Pacific. She has authored over sixty-five news articles, book chapters and peer-reviewed articles. Her first book, *Disarming Doomsday: The Human Impact of Nuclear Weapons Since Hiroshima* (London: Pluto Press, 2019), critically considers the social, cultural and spatial harms perpetuated by nuclear warfare and was awarded the 2020 L.H.M. Ling Outstanding First Book Prize.

Elliott Spaeth, PhD is a visionary leader in the field of Inclusive Practice in Higher Education. With a PhD in Clinical Psychology and extensive experience in pedagogy within higher education, Elliott has dedicated his career to equipping staff in HE with the tools and knowledge to navigate the complex area of inclusive practice with compassion, intentionality and humility. Elliott is neurodivergent, disabled and queer, and shares his lived experiences with powerful vulnerability. His authentic style enables him to establish genuine, transparent connections and drive strategic transformation.

Jennifer Leigh, PhD (corresponding author) is a Reader in Creative Practices for Social Justices in the School of Social Policy, Sociology, and Social Research, University of Kent. She is a chemist turned sociologist, with a particular interest in using embodied, reflective and creative practices for social justice. Her current work includes addressing and highlighting experiences of marginalisation in science due to intersectional factors including disability, gender, race and caring responsibilities. She is a Co-Lead of NADSN's STEMM Action Group and Vice Chair (Research) of the International WISC (Women in Supramolecular Chemistry) Network, and the Athena Forum Disability Champion. Her recent books are *Borders of Qualitative Research: Navigating How Therapy, Education, Art, and Science Connect* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2024), *Women in Supramolecular Chemistry: Collectively Crafting the Rhythms of Our Work and Lives in STEM* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2022), *Embodied Inquiry: Research Methods* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), *Ableism In Academia: Theorising Lived Experiences of Disability and Chronic Illness in Higher Education* (London: UCL Press, 2020) and *Conversations on Embodiment Across Higher Education: Teaching, Practice, and Research* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019). Her next book will be *How to Thrive in Laboratory Life: A Toolkit from WISC* (Routledge, 2025).

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