

SPECULATING THE FUTURITY OF DISABILITY STUDIES:

A COLLABORATIVE KNOWING-MAKING PROJECT

by

Griffin Xander Zimmerman

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As members of the Dissertation Committee, we certify that we have read the dissertation prepared by: **Griffin Xander Zimmerman**  
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“Citation is how we acknowledge our debt to those who came before; those who helped us find our way when the way was obscured because we deviated from the paths we were told to follow.”

Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, p. 17

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I respectfully acknowledge the University of Arizona is on the land and territories of Indigenous peoples. Today, Arizona is home to 22 federally recognized tribes, with Tucson being home to the O'odham and the Yaqui.

This collected work has been realized while inhabiting stolen lands across Turtle Island in the states now known as Washington, Kansas, New Mexico, and Arizona. I offer gratitude to the Spokane, the Kiikaapoi, the Osage, the Washtáge Mo<sup>n</sup>zhá<sup>n</sup>, the Očhéthi Šakówiŋ, the Pueblos, the Piro, the Tigua, the O'odham, and the Yaqui Nations. Thank you for your care for, and teachings about, Land and our relations. I would like to acknowledge that many of the ideas presented in this dissertation, including those of collective care, transformative justice, bodyminds, and relationality, are part of the teachings and knowledge of the First Nations and Aboriginal peoples that have been systematically stripped, co-opted, and presented through the lens of colonization and the settler nation-state. I respectfully commit to challenging originating narratives that erase First Nations peoples. May I honor the teachings I have received and continue to learn.

## DEDICATION

To my colleague, my friend, and my love—Wren Choir McClintick, et al. I wouldn't be the person I am today without your first lifesaving smile, offered hand, and queer/trans acknowledgement. I've learned so much from you, my love, and I look forward to a lifetime of lessons.

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## ABSTRACT

Disability Studies is a wild, contentious, sideways slipping, rhetorically denied, enthusiastically stimming, insistent and defiant field. In short, it is Home. But homes can need to be remodeled...a room added here, the wallpaper updated there, the thresholds and countertops adjusted to better support changing abilities, adapted lives. A collection of three essays, this dissertation seeks to engage with Disability Studies to imagine a futurity of the field grounded in relationality and radical empathy.

In the first essay, I investigate the relationship between Disability Justice theory and ungrading praxes. In this article, I claim that one of the key challenges to implementing ungrading stems from attempting to tack alternative assessment onto our existing pedagogical frameworks. By utilizing a disability justice approach, I offer a praxis-based primer to support educators in shifting their habits of mind to facilitate ungrading.

In the second essay, I shift from praxis to theory, examining the intra-community tension that has resulted in multiple differing communities of disability scholarship. Applying lessons learned from Jennifer Nash in *Black Feminism Reimagined*, I name disciplinary border-policing as defensive posturing that undermines coalitional potential. By urging adoption of a methodology of 'letting go,' this article speculates a collaborative disciplinary future, answering the call for a (Disability)(Mad)(Neurodiverse)(Crip) Studies that is enacted by and with

community members and offers a pluralistic approach to knowledge production and narratives of lived experience.

In the final essay, I move to futurity, issuing a call for collaboration on an open-access, interdisciplinary, community-constructed relationality mapping project, the Disability Studies Community Archive. This digital humanities project maps disability studies artifacts, including research, activism, community contributions, and art. The central goal of this project is to develop a dynamic network of disability scholarship that pays specific attention to the interdisciplinary genesis of Disability Studies by incorporating contributions from Black Feminist, Critical Race, Queer, and other scholarships of difference.

Keywords: disability studies; black feminism; relationality; digital humanities; pedagogy; community

## Chapter 1: Everything I Ever Learned I Learned from (Black)(Feminist)Disability Studies

"I believe that it is through narrative that you come to understand and know your self and make sense of the world. Through narrative you formulate your identities by unconsciously locating yourself in social narratives not of your own making. Your culture gives you your identity story, pero en un buscado rompimiento con la traducción you create an alternative identity story."

(2015, p. 6)

- Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Luz en lo Oscuro*

Without Disability Studies, I would not be the same Me/Us/We. Before reading *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness* (Yergeau, 2018), I couldn't conceptualize myself, an afab, high-achieving, linguistically-inclined academic, as an autist. Before Tara Wood's essay on crippling time, I didn't realize that my time blindness wasn't a personal deficit of character. And before Eli Clare's *Exile and Pride* (2015) and Susan Raffo's *Liberated to the Bone* (2022), I wouldn't have started my current journey to live in peace with my disabled, crip, (mal)functioning bodymind. In many, *many* ways, I am indebted to the personal narratives of disabled scholars para mi propio conocimiento<sup>1</sup>. Without them, I wouldn't know myself.

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<sup>1</sup> I am a white, native English-speaking individual whose first degree was in Spanish. I include Spanish here as a deliberate choice to build relationality and invite radical

The thing about Disability Studies, though, is it really...isn't. Or rather, it is *and*.  
Ostensibly,

while Disability Studies remains a broad church, inclusive of a wide range of disciplinary perspectives and areas of concern, what distinguished Disability Studies from research and other scholarship....[was] reject[ing] traditional notions that the disadvantage experienced by disabled people was the natural and inevitable result of their impairments arguing instead that it is society that disabled physically impaired people. (Morgan, 2021, p. 109)

This definition of the discipline is itself both fraught and in flux. As Price explains,

DS is a messy, rather contentious discipline, due both to its hugely variant constituency and to the sometimes conflicting goals it sets forth. As a consequence, we spend a lot of time explaining ourselves to ourselves, and explaining ourselves to those who are new to the discipline, or even hostile to it. (2012, p. 160)

These contentious relationships have spawned a plethora of differentiated approaches to theorizing, practicing, and advocating for disability. Naming themselves Crip Studies, Neurodiversity (or sometimes NeuroQueer) Studies, Mad Studies, Critical Disability Studies, Transnational Disability Studies, Black Feminist Disability Studies, and Disability Justice, each seeks to contend with or remedy perceived deficits in theory, focus, population, inclusivity, and method.

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empathy between lenguas mezcladas y salvajes and "moving sideways and crooked and crip" (Price & Kerschbaum, 2016, p. 19)

What I have noticed, however, is that this interdisciplinary, extrademic (as in extraterrestrial, as in beyond the academy) discipline seems to almost demand interweaving. That is, collectively we seem to be knowing-making something more than what each fractal of the discipline focuses on. You don't have to be (only)disabled to "...already know what we are talking about. We are talking about the experience of finding it impossible to fit in. No matter how you shape yourself, you are always further confined by infinitely regressive borders" (Maier, Hsu, Cedillo, & Yergeau, 2020, n.p.). This failure to fit is an intersectional knowledge, the waistband of society carving ever tighter lines into our compressed flesh, sending echoes that reverberate: "Her disappointments, exist within a system you understand not to try to understand in any fair-minded way because to do so is to understand the erasure of the self as systemic, as ordinary" (Rankine, 2014, p. 32). What's more, these 'ordinary' erasures extend through an "interspecies framework [that] insists that what counts as human is always under contestation" (Shalk, 2018, p. 115). As Clare laments,

We treat so many body-minds as if they matter only in service to our own.

Remember the dams we've built,  
The prairies we've plowed under,  
The oil wells we've drilled.

Any reckoning with personhood has to account for this destruction too.

(Clare, 2017, p. 31)

"Reckoning with personhood" means developing narratives to help us contend with how our bodyminds are storied, often over and eclipsing our own

understandings. Yergeau viscerally describes how narratives applied to disability can circumscribe our realities:

Autistic stories might take shape as screaming in a supermarket, or as banging one's head against the hard edges of a radiator, or as jumping joyously in a mud puddle. Often, autistic stories aren't beheld as stories at all, but rather as symptoms. (Yergeau, 2018, p. 2)

In her unpublished, personal papers, Butler concurs, explaining,

Sanity is that combination of perceptions, interpretations, teachings, and beliefs that we share with others of our community. Sanity is the tool with which we build worlds around ourselves. The smoother our interface between our personal worlds and those of others, the more sane, the more human we perceive those others to be. (qtd in Schalk, 2018, p. 59)

And Clare tremors through the onslaught of strangers' pity, explaining, "They cry over me, wrap their arms around my shoulders, kiss my cheek....They assume me unnatural, want to make me normal, take for granted the need and desire for cure" (2017, p. 5–6). Each of these narratives, imposed unwillingly on (crip)(mad)(trans)(Black)non-normate bodyminds, makes direct claims about what marginalized bodies are and can be, and "when intents different than our own desires are read onto our bodies, we are both robbed of our agency even as we are described as agents acting out and thus justifying our destruction" (McClintick, 2019, unpublished).

Disability Studies, then, can at least be unified through persistent fights for the ethos to craft our own rhetoricity, to “transform social spaces in ways that enable those distant Others to speak back” (Yergeau, 2018, p. 31). Disability Studies, in each of its factions, crafts tools to tell our own stories, stories that connect: connect us to and through our various identities, connect us beyond divides of species and environment, connect us sideways in narratives that fail to pass normative projects of ethos and rhetoricity. Disability Studies recognizes that narrative becomes a core strategy to craft theory around what is always already. It is how we speculate ourselves into a world:

If, as Gloria Anzaldua claims, ‘nothing happens in the “real” world unless it first happens in the images in our heads,’ then changing the narratives of (dis)ability, race, and gender, changing the way marginalized people are represented and conceived in contemporary cultural productions, can also change the way such people are talked about, treated, and understood in the ‘real’ world. (Schalk, 2018, p. 2)

Thus, I return to my claim that Disability Studies is *not*. It is *not just* the advancing of the social model of disability, which “argues] instead that it is society that disabled physically impaired people.” Instead, it extends the boundaries of this limited(ing) (single)subject position, finding “resonant conceptions of mutual socialities in cultural rhetorics, decolonial theory, crip communities and crip activism, and other communities maintained by people whose praxes are informed by theories in and of the flesh” (Maier, Hsu, Cedillo, & Yergeau, 2020, n.p.).

The collected essays within this dissertation approach Disability Studies under a Black Feminist model, which seeks

...to expand our conceptualization of disability. This expansion...that encourages a move away from a primarily identity-based approach to disability and toward a theoretical approach that seeks to trace how disability functions as an ideology, epistemology, and system of oppression in addition to an identity and lived experience. (Schalk, 2022, p. 8)

In each essay, I seek to approach this model through the concepts of relationality and radical empathy (both, I wish to highlight, are Indigenous and Black Feminist ways of knowing). Through an indigenous lens, "a relational reality creates relationships between ideas or entities, it is an affective force that compels us to not just *understand* the world as relational, but *feel* the world as kin" (Tynan, 2021, p. 600). Recognizing the embodied experiences of marginalization as "relational and constellated" (Powell et al., 2014, n.p.), each essay seeks to draw upon "theories of embodiment more complex than the ideology of ability allows...these many embodiments are each crucial to the understanding of humanity and its variations, whether physical, mental, social, or historical" (Siebers, 2013, p. 315). In each essay, I urge a transformation toward "becoming better accomplices in one another's struggles by researching the uneven social architectures we inhabit and pursuing more wholly inclusive and liberatory worlds" (Maier, Hsu, Cedillo, & Yergeau, 2020, n.p.). Meanwhile, as Angela Davis reminds us, "radical simply means 'grasping things at the root'" (qtd in brown, 2017, p. 4). For me, practicing radical empathy means then, to approach disability as a single Aspen in a grove, to trace its roots to

where they entangle, merge, and divide with racism, classism, sexism, queer and fat phobia, xenophobia, the ideological hierarchy of separating Land from Animal from Human, and every other means of Othering, to understand myself (and by extension, the journey I take to advance disability scholarship) as interdependent and connected. I am You. You are Me in a differing kairos. Together, the lessons of Us can build the community of our dreams.

### **Who Are You? Where Do You Come From?**

Rather than asking, 'What's your name? What sort of work do you do?,' Aboriginal people often ask, 'Who are you? Where are you from?' The former question relies on classificatory practices that value individuality and the labour market, whilst the latter creates a relational network where people can establish kinship relationships; strengthening sameness across difference. (Tynan, 2021, p. 600)

In order to invite my reader into relationship with me, I need to answer the question "who [I am] related to? How are you related to me?" (Tynan, 2021, p. 600). While describing one's positionality is a common practice in feminist and disability scholarship, I wish to "get beyond making facile statements about [my] identity and begin the admittedly difficult but important analytical work of assessing precisely how these personal factors affect [my] work" (Kirsch, 1999, p. 80). I am deeply indebted to Susan Raffo for a model on how to approach this disclosure, and share with her the conviction that

There are generations of relationship betrayal between so many of our people: within kin groups and between kin groups. There are also generations of relationship and care. I care deeply about transforming that betrayal and harm into connection and respect. I care deeply about coming back into kinship with each other as well as with our other-than-human kin. (2022, p. 3)

I am very new at being in relation, in thinking of myself as part of a network of connections, and I offer up my wobbling first steps to contextualize the knowing-making offered within this collection.

I am a person that has felt unmoored from relations for most of my life. I grew up keenly feeling a disconnect between myself, who I was storied to be, and the story my family wished to unfold before me. Those relationships I have now are built in the queer fashion of chosen family, with deliberate attention and care. My name, Griffin Xander Zimmerman, was chosen for myself and legally applied on February 6<sup>th</sup>, 2020. Griffin for the mythical keepers of libraries and knowledge, and my personal love for what we call in the neurodiverse community 'Penguin Pebbling,' a love language that "ha[s] the urge to take these stones out of our pockets and begin sharing them with the people around us. Here, we say, look at what I learned!" (Raffo, 2022, p. 1). Xander because I have a love affair with all things Joss Whedon. Zimmerman is a family name, but three generations back, my White, Jewish ancestors fleeing Germany at the cusp of the century before the first World War. It's the first last name I can remember ever wanting, a six-year-old crouched in rapt attention as my great grandfather patiently taught me the delicate art of

stamp collecting. My genetic lineage includes predominantly Scots, German, and Native peoples (my mother would always tell me, "You're a Heinz 57 mutt!"). I name my native ancestry not as an act of claiming connection, as I was raised in the context of a white, laboring-class community, but to actively work against how "disappearance is the strategy of this colonial state" (Raffo, 2022, p. 4). My ancestry is mostly that of the settler-colonizer, betrayer: in generations past, I come from people who owned 16 slaves in the territory now known as Louisiana, who were the very first families to take over stolen Choctaw land (and with it, we surmise, Choctaw brides), who were, even earlier, the first tax collectors in the New England colonies.

I grew up only knowing I was not the same as the other families in the middle class suburb of southern California, my young parents uneducated and struggling to keep a family of six fed and in the better schools, my (AuDHD<sup>2</sup>) carpenter father and (AuDHD & physically disabled) paternal grandparents raising me to speak Southern Rural Dialect while my (Mad<sup>3</sup>) mother taught me to codeswitch to Standard American English lest I was perceived as stupid or alien at school. I was raised with the values of honesty, loyalty, and hard, persistent work; the axioms "blood is thicker than water," "pull yourself up by your bootstraps," and

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<sup>2</sup> AuDHD is a community term to identify individuals who are both autistic, or ASD, and ADHD.

<sup>3</sup> Mad here denotes a 'mental disability' that is separate from those of the neurodiverse community, which typically encompasses Autism, ADHD, and learning disorders. In truth, we do not really know what diagnosis would be applied to the neurological differences my mother manifests, but her variable emotional and psychological functioning was a constant, salient presence in my upbringing.

“it ain't no nevermind what everyone else is doin'” daily gospel. My parents believed children were property, born to work for the household, and the abuse that inhabited our home like a living, breathing thing was an extension of this generational trauma.

I have also always felt equally unmoored from place. Land is difficult to form a relationship with when you moved over 100 times before you are 25, roaming all over the west coast of the United States to follow work in the housing developments springing up like a viral rash from the gashed land, tract after tract of ticky-tacky<sup>4</sup>. I was initially raised on stolen native Chumash lands, and I remember my grandmother passing on the oral history of my Native (Blackfoot and Cherokee?) ancestors before I ran outside (always, forever barefoot, even after foot met sharp object and was reconfigured through over 50 stitches) to smash acorns with rocks, pretending to make flour by carefully rinsing the remains in the crick that flowed through the front yard. I know the only place I've ever felt connection effortlessly in my soul is under the canopy of towering Coastal Sequoias in Humbolt National Forest, calling as my young feet clamored every summer up the sides of stumps where four generations of my family climbed before me. Still, in the cooing of the dove, the smell of California Sagebrush *Artemisia Californica*, the darting, quickly mincing rush of a line of quail, head feather bobbing, the gentle, soothing wash of frigid Oregon waves over tinkling, ever shifting agate pebbles, I feel Land calling. In the grief of my estrangement, I distance myself from Land the

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<sup>4</sup> “Little Boxes” composed by Malvina Reynolds and sung by Pete Seeger

same way I lock my consciousness in my head from the shoulders up, as my body shoots tendrils of pain around the borders of my blockade. Still, it calls me. Trying to hold it apart does not mean it is not part of me.

I offer these stories as the only way I know how to quantify the relationships that shaped me in comparison to the relationships I cultivate today. Both are part of my work. As Raffo teaches, "None of this is about identity precisely...It is about experience, about identity as collective, cultural, and historical rather than individual" (2022, p. 4). Today, I am in the process of learning to heal into kinships. I no longer name my birth family as kin. Instead, I kin other crip, chronically ill, echolalic spoonies. I kin queerness and transness, with its ability to "put within reach bodies that have been made unreachable by the lines of conventional genealogy....which by seeing the world 'slantwise' allow other objects to come into view" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 107). I kin chosen family and care webs, believing fervently that "it's radical to imagine that the future is disabled. Not just tentatively allowed to exist...but a deeply disabled future: a future where...our cultures, knowledge, and communities shape the world" (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2022, p. 21–22).

I also hold in tension with these kinships the privileges I am afforded, being White, (sometimes) masculine, (intermittently) able-bodied, having access to education and the mental and verbal acuity to (usually) leverage that education with rhetoricity. I am learning, always learning, to lead with radical empathy and connection, and when necessary, to leverage my privileges in the same way I

leverage my Autism: "Autism destroys—and norms need destroying" (Yergeau, 2018, p. 78).

## **Speculating Narratives**

Anzaldúa explains that "Conectando experiencias personales con realidades sociales results in autohistoria, and theorizing about this activity results in autohistoria-teoría" (2015, p. 6). The three essays contained within this work each attempt to practice autohistoria-teoría, drawn from my own experiences and situated in the context of disability studies, relationality, and radical empathy.

In the first essay, "Enhancing Ungrading: Ideological Assumptions and Disability Justice Interventions," I work to draw connections between the emancipatory aims of ungrading assessment strategies and the intricate ways Disability Justice urges relationship and care. This essay urges educators to abandon systems-based approaches toward critical pedagogical practices. Instead, it supports a shift toward disability justice principles to guide educators into building relationship, community, and collaboration with their students.

In the second essay, "Towards Relationality: Speculating a Collective Futurity for Disability Studies through 'Letting Go,'" I move from the classroom as a site of relationship to the Disability Studies discipline. Tracing the intra-community tension that has resulted in diversifying the study of disability into different factions, I turn toward Black Feminism to theorize coalition and collaboration across difference. In this essay, I specifically target the classificatory practices of the Western,

neoliberal practice of scholarship, illustrating how 'letting go' of defensive border-policing creates space for a collaborative disciplinary future.

Finally, with "A Digital Critical Disability Studies 'Care Web': Imaging a Disability Studies Collective Archive," I move speculation into praxis, describing a digital humanities project that foregrounds relationality. This essay functions as both a call to action and a call for collaboration, inviting radical empathy between differing experiences of marginalization, as well as differing sites of scholarship of difference, to build a network of situated knowledge which honors the interdisciplinary genesis of Disability Studies. By outlining the values, methodology, and framework of such a project, I invite broad community participation in the creation of a scholarly care web.

Collectively, these three essays envision a future for a discipline, as well as the communities it encompasses, that is built on relationships, acknowledging of contributory knowledges, and privileging of differences beyond (just) disability. This dissertation advances the argument that Disability Studies relies on Black, of Color, Indigenous, Feminist, and Queer ways of knowing that permeate our theory and praxis, and that by foregrounding these knowledges, we can build coalition based on radical empathy.

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## Chapter 2: Enhancing Ungrading: Ideological Assumptions and Disability Justice Interventions

Within this issue<sup>5</sup>, you will soon read many stories about how teachers have entered, and adapted to, their ungrading journeys. Personally, I was introduced to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire in 2011 as part of a required composition pedagogy course for grad student teachers. This text ignited my enthusiasm for critical pedagogy and equitable assessment strategies, and I began to (somewhat haphazardly) trial different alternative assessment methods, moving from descriptive rubrics to portfolios to, most recently, labor-based contract grading. However, as Gabay and Smith mention in this issue, no one system provided the panacea I was hoping for; I became very familiar with the challenges of trying to align any one system to my individual classrooms' needs.

My guess is, if you are reading this special issue, you too, dear reader, have similar stories of the sparks that ignited your own interest in alternative assessment practices. Whether you know these practices as ungrading, contract grading, socially-just assessments, assessments for inclusion, or some other term<sup>6</sup>, all share a common acknowledgement: Grading “dehumanize[s] and flatten[s] nuances in students' practices and understanding” (Blum, 2020a, p. 3), often disproportionately

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<sup>5</sup> This essay is currently in press with [Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture](#) as part of a special issue edited by Dr. Ellen Carillo. All internal references to the issue and contributors are made as part of the text of the special issue.

<sup>6</sup> Throughout this article, I will be using the term ungrading to refer generally to any assessment practice which “doles] intentional, critical work to dismantle traditional and standardized approaches to assessment” (Stommel 2020b)

impacting students who occupy marginalized positions (see Inoue, 2019; Kryger & Zimmerman, 2020; Price, 2011). If we understand pedagogy as both a “moral and political practice” (Giroux, 2003, p. 6), then we recognize that “grades are anathema to the presumption of the humanity of our students” (Stommel, this issue).

This article, then, is written from the assumption that I need not persuade you about the importance of transitioning our classrooms away from grades-based assessment systems. Instead, this article is designed to address a concerning trend: Even as I see increased interest in and dialogue around ungrading, I have equally seen a significant number of instructors reverting to traditional approaches after short-lived forays into alternative assessment, seemingly stymied by challenges they are unable to overcome. In other cases, as both a peer colleague and student myself, I have experienced ungrading strategies implemented alongside otherwise traditional classroom pedagogies, resulting in incongruence and tension between the liberatory promise of ungrading and the top-down control of the teacher-centered classroom. As Stommel reminds us, “Agency, dialogue, self-actualization, and social justice are not possible (or, at least, unlikely) in a hierarchical system that pits teachers against students and encourages competition by ranking students against one another” (2020a, p. 28). What I have noticed is while ungrading is fundamentally embedded in broader efforts to affect liberatory and critical pedagogies, many college educators struggle with attending to the day-to-day praxis of shifting their classrooms toward a “radical space of possibility” (hooks, 1994, p. 12). And no wonder, when the majority of college teachers report effectively nonexistent pedagogical training (Stommel, this issue),

and implementing ungrading means grappling with structural barriers such as employment risk, administrative objections, and departmental policies, all in a climate that continues to foster overwork and precarious employment.

This article is designed to bridge the gap between an ideological commitment to ungrading and pedagogical praxis by focusing on the ideologies that are embedded in ungrading systems. I see this as an important shift from the focus on a proliferation of different tools or methods to a focus on the *habits of mind* necessary to adapt ungrading to your individual classrooms. As Kryger and I have previously written,

While we could provide a simple and easily replicable list of methods and practical applications that would undoubtedly be useful for many well-intentioned teachers and administrators, we would be perpetuating that which we claim to be disrupting. It is not the assessment technology itself that does the social justice work; it is how we implement, explain to stakeholders, critically analyze, and recursively revise the technology that matters. (2020, 3)

I claim that one of the key challenges to implementing ungrading stems from attempting to tack alternative assessment onto our existing pedagogical frameworks, a move in disability studies we call "retrofit" (Hamraie, 2017). In his introductory essay to this issue, Stommel cautions that "the work of teaching, the work of reimagining assessment, is necessarily idiosyncratic" and must be engaged in as part of a bigger set of pedagogical questions. To support teachers in this

necessary work, I draw upon disability justice (DJ) frameworks to guide us in shifting these viewpoints to support ungrading's liberatory goals. "The overall ethos of community-first care is a core commitment of disability justice activism" (Currie & Hubrig, 2022, 134), and as such, I believe it to be uniquely situated to facilitate the introspection necessary to develop flexible, inclusive assessment practices.

First, I will ask you to examine what ideological assumptions you hold as a teacher, and I will demonstrate how these ideologies influence and interact with ungrading principles. Next, I will explore how a DJ framework provides important contextualizing guidance to enacting ungrading ideologies. Finally, I will synthesize key lessons from DJ theory and localize them in examples of classroom praxis. It is my sincere hope that this exercise will help all of us, collectively, "challenge what teaching can do past its white supremacist, ableist, and cis-heteropatriarchal framings; ...guid[ing] us toward something that is altogether revolutionary" (Kafai 2021a, 99).

### **Examining the Ideological Underpinnings of Ungrading**

Kohn asserts that, as educators embarking on ungrading, we need to "grapple with curriculum...with pedagogy...with assessment...with issues of control" (2020, p. xviii). In this section, I am going to ask you to think deeply about (y)our core assumptions about what (y)our learning environments look like. I ask these questions not as critique, but in the spirit of Freire's "problem-posing education" where "people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not

as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation.” (2000, p. 83, emphasis original). I encourage you to first reflect on the questions before noticing where your ideologies or assumptions meet and/or diverge from those that facilitate ungrading. In keeping with my disability justice roots, I invite you to “move and process as you need to, dear reader” (Kafai, 2021, p. 25). Reflect in the way and at a speed that is most beneficial for you: Be patient with yourself. Take breaks. Revisit your reflections as needed.

Will you begin with me?

### **Questions: What Assumptions Do You Carry into the Classroom?**

Ahmed reminds us, “The hardest work can be recognizing how one’s own life is shaped by norms in ways that we did not realize, in ways that cannot simply be transcended” (2017, p. 43). As educators, we experience this acutely in moments of discrepancy between our pedagogical intentions and the day-to-day business of teaching. A first step toward emancipation, then, is to critically examine what we assume about classroom activity systems<sup>7</sup>, and how those assumptions are manifested in our personal classrooms. As you reflect, be sure to note what these values *look like, for you*. What actions/tools/methods/physical spaces are

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<sup>7</sup> “An activity system is any ongoing, object-directed, historically conditioned, dialectically structured, tool-mediated human interaction....The activity system is the basic unit of analysis for both groups’ and individuals’ behavior, in that it analyzes the way concrete tools are used to mediate the motive (direct, trajectory) and the object (the *problem space* or the *focus*) of behavior and changes in it. (Russell 1997, 510, emphasis in original)

involved? You may wish to also note where these beliefs come from: memories, texts, teachers—what figures are part of your lineage?

**1. How is knowledge constructed in your classroom?**

Consider, who enters the classroom with knowledge? Are some knowledges more important than others? Who decides what will be learned, and who judges that knowledge (what is/are 'correct', 'true', 'important', 'worth learning')

**2. What does learning look like in your classroom?**

Who engages in the act of learning? What habits, activities, and actions are involved in learning? How is learning demonstrated? Are there differences between individual and group/collaborative learning?

**3. What do you believe NEEDS to be assessed?**

What is the purpose of assessment? Where and when is it absolutely necessary to assess? Who can do the work of assessment? How should assessment be communicated or enacted?

**4. What do YOU, as the teacher, need to maintain control of?**

What kinds of power dynamics should shape the classroom? When can('t) you trust your students?

Okay, reader, how did that feel? Did you uncover anything confusing? Surprising? Let's journey on together and look at how ungrading asks us to approach our pedagogies.

Even within frameworks designed to “empower [students] to enact meaningful change in their realities,” there remains an ongoing necessity of attending to how “neoliberal encroachments seek[ing] to reinstate the banking<sup>8</sup> concept of education” (Bezio, 2023, p. 265). Traditional pedagogical methods treat students as non-agentive vessels, patiently accepting codified knowledge from the teacher-sage. Learning only occurs when students can demonstrate they have retained the information in the manner the teacher deems correct. In describing the work of Jonathan Alexander, Yergeau describes,

The queer motion toward the ‘not yet here’ is what propels Alexander to assess the field of composition and rhetoric as an inherently straightening enterprise—and, I would add, a thereby inherently ableist enterprise. He suggests that...pedagogy and composition are, at root, social(izing) and norming projects (and, in this vein, composition pedagogy unfurls as a white, straight, masculine project). *To compose is to comply; to teach is to inculcate compliance.* (2018, p. 18, emphasis added)

In the last fifty years of scholarship on writing instruction, there exists an increasing call toward pedagogical models that recognize student agency and embrace social justice (see Huot, 2002; Shor, 2009). Ungrading, similarly, recognizes the failures of traditional assessment practices: They detract from learning, encourage competitiveness, are inconsistent, discourage risk-taking, and ignore the

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<sup>8</sup> The banking model positions teachers as the keeper of knowledge, with the purpose of a classroom being to “deposit” the teacher’s knowledge to the students. In such pedagogies, all control of classroom knowledges remains the purview of the teacher (Freire, 2000).

subjective/emotional aspects of learning (Stommel, this issue; Blackwelder, 2020). In synthesizing the ideologies that form the foundation of ungrading approaches, I have identified the following core values:

**1. Knowledge is a verb:**

Knowledge is not passive, static, or rhetorical. When we speak of knowledge, we speak of that which is always (necessarily) fluid, rhetorically situated, and actively engaging in the various worlds around us—not just academic or professional, but also experiential, social, domestic, and personal (hooks, 1994). This means ungrading approaches knowledge as *co-constructed*, as English teachers, we must understand that “writing is a process of discovery and perception that produces knowledge and conocimiento....Últimamente es el escribir que me escribe” (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 1-3).

**2. Learning is collective; learning must be agentic:**

In this issue, Ubbesen, Bruenger, and Lemer focus their exploration of ungrading as a practice that specifically “acknowledge[s] how abilities, identities, and languages are tied up in teaching and learning.” That is, the act of learning is both situated and a site of constant fluctuation between teacher/learner, with each learning from the other. Collective, agentic learning environments ask us to deeply and genuinely trust our students, and ask us to prioritize solidarity with our students over notions of uniformity, order, or objectivity.

Also, by removing the extrinsic motivation of grades from classrooms, ungrading demands “startling] with students’ interests...allowing them to ask

questions they found important...giv[ing] them control over their learning” (Blackwelder, 2020, p. 48). It is essential to emphasize that this orientation goes beyond simply incorporating pre-determined options into your curriculum: “Eliminating grades tested my creativity and patience...Students had to take ownership of the class...I had to do the work [of teaching] *with* them” (Blackwelder, 2020, p. 49, emphasis original).

### 3. Assessment is foremost about supporting learning and growth:

Huot (2002) and other writing assessment scholars have long been challenging the usefulness of grading practices, arguing that grades actually communicate very little about learning and instead function as mechanisms of control, discipline, ranking, and sorting. Ungrading instead approaches assessment as a dialogic, formative process. From this perspective, an essential nature of teaching writing becomes engagement.

### 4. Above all, trust your students:

This may be one of the most difficult, and also fundamentally critical, orientations to incorporate into ungrading. As Blum admits, “The hardest work for me has been relinquishing control, following students’ needs (which I try to predict, but predictions don’t always match particular groups), and—I know this is shocking—trusting students” (2020b, p. 61). Wood reminds us, “Allowing agentive control reduces the risk of imposing normative or compulsory modes of composing onto students in writing classrooms” (2017, p. 278). Succinctly and aptly put, ungrading answers the demand to “expel cop shit from your classrooms” (Moro, 2020, n.p.)

As you work through these questions and ideas, it may be useful to return to the items that gave you the most pause. As we progress, I invite you to unpack and (re)imagine new possibilities in your orientations.

## **Rejecting Normative Orientations: Community-Building through Care Work**

As we have seen from the previous section, ungrading practices are best supported in community-driven, agentic, and flexible classrooms. As we will soon explore, disability justice provides a generative framework for designing our ungrading pedagogies from the ground up, countering the ways in which “access is rarely weaved into a collective commitment and way of being; it is isolated and relegated to an afterthought” (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018, p. 47). These orientations require “building infrastructures of education founded on principles of mutual welfare, rather than on myths of meritocracy” (Maier et al., 2020, p. 12). In this section, I turn from ideology to the praxis of constructing classroom communities which support these ideologies, “center[ing] students’ needs and the lived expertise of marginalized students before considering institutional expectations, curriculum outcomes, and on-campus mandates” (Currie & Hubrig, 2022, p. 132).

As a discipline founded by disabled BIPOC and queer-identifying activists—people living “at intersecting junctures of oppression” (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018, p. 21)—disability justice provides the knowledges born of lived experience that enable designing pedagogies that counter

the socio-cultural forces that define those in and outside the academy and classroom, the ways we define acceptable and unacceptable writers, and the ways in which our assessments construct the naturalness of racial formations, social groups, and other constructs that divide and distinguish people for dominant interests and purposes. (Inoue, 2009, p. 101)

Central to this positionality is the valuing, even privileging, of difference:

Those of us who arrive in an academy that was not shaped by or for us bring knowledges, as well as worlds, that otherwise would not be here. Think of this: how we learn about worlds when they do not accommodate us. Think of the kinds of experiences you have when you are not expected to be here. These experiences are a resource to generate knowledge. (Ahmed, 2017, p. 10)

Price underscores this ethos of centering the margins, claiming,

Ableism contributes to the construction of a rigid, elitist, hierarchical, and inhumane academic system.... I am not arguing that mentally disabled persons can measure up to current 'standards' of academic discourse. I am arguing that academic discourse needs to measure up to us. (2011, p. 9)

It is critical here to interrogate how ungrading systems, no matter how well-intentioned, can unwittingly uphold norming and exclusionary structures. As brown explains,

We need to go beyond having a critique/counter analysis/alternate systemic plan for society—we have to actually do everything different,

aligned with a different set of core principles for existence....It is imperative to regenerate our curiosity, our genuine interest in different opinions, and in people we don't know yet—can we see them as part of ourselves, and maintain curiosity, especially when we want to constrict and critique? (2017, p. 115)

Or, put more succinctly, "The notion of best practices does harm" (Stommel, this issue). For example, as a core tenant of ungrading systems, a particular point to attend to critically is the call towards flexibility. While Hamraie points out that "advocates for social diversity and inclusion often cast the concept of flexibility as openness to nonnormate ways of inhabiting built worlds.... There is another way to understand flexibility, however: as an instrument of standardization, normalization, and fit" (2017, p. 41). In their book *Building Access: Universal Design and the Politics of Disability*, Hamraie explores how industrial understandings of flexibility still rely on normate templates that assume and even proscribe the ways in which bodyminds can manifest and inhabit the world. Put another way, educational moves toward flexibility such as optional assignments or even labor-based contract grading (Kryger & Zimmerman, 2020) can easily assume students fit into standardized structures, forcing assimilation, and blaming them when they don't or cannot adhere. Though human variation is more broadly accepted than it was in the past, and though many teachers do their best to celebrate difference and diversity, structurally shaping classrooms to be responsive to human variation can be difficult. Making it less difficult is one aim of this work.

For our purposes, an ethic of flexibility suggests that administrators and teachers create assessment systems that are flexible rather than people who are flexible. This ethic, one I find crucial to all social justice endeavors, leans on the acceptance of the idiosyncratic, embodied nature of teaching as expressed by Stommel in this issue. Flexibility requires that teachers' grading systems be negotiable and negotiated, that they're co-creating not just content knowledge but also evaluation practices. The goal is to design with/alongside rather than for our students. Instead of demanding our students to be resilient and resourceful to survive in academia, putting energy toward developing systems that do the bending for them—that is a step toward disability justice in education.

Let's pause for a check-in: How are you fairing, dear reader? I've asked a lot, I know. You may, at this point, be ready to throw up your hands, asking if even our liberatory systems are mired in the quagmire of "imperialist impulses—whitening, converting, persuading, assimilating" (Yergeau, 2018, p. 81), then what recourse do we have? Teaching still requires planning, curriculum design, syllabi and student learning outcomes and structure. I'd like to offer a message of hope: "...The cyborg grasps hir decolonial possibilities. S-he knows hir broomstick can't carry hir beyond colonization, but with it, s-he might rake together a decolonizing golem.<sup>9</sup>" So, dear reader, shall we figure out how to craft Frankenstein's monster out of the graveyard of the *habitus* of academia?

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<sup>9</sup> This quote is left deliberately uncited at the request of the author. However, we will say that we find the book, *A Third University is Possible*, a transformative read.

## **Disability Justice Lessons for Developing a Praxis of Community Care**

Ungrading, critical pedagogies, and disability justice are unified by their essential orientation toward trust: Trusting yourself, your students, and your classroom to be able to figure out their way through the messy and idiosyncratic pedagogical options, together. This last part of my essay focuses on key lessons that DJ gifts us with to guide us through the seeming dichotomy of an ungrading *system* which is also fluid and ever-evolving. Within these lessons I've included examples of how to shift aspects of normative assumptions in the classroom community. As you read these, I invite you to revisit your pedagogical reflections and make notes of your own shifting orientations; I hope these insights will ignite sparks of revelation that will help you unlock the possibilities of your future praxis.

Disability justice frameworks teach us to:

### **1. Reject reliance on static systems:**

In this issue, Gabay and Smith observe that "what many instructors often fail to understand is that assessment is a highly contextual, cultural, and subjective process." This point, however, does not mean you must throw out all planning, tools, and pedagogical constraints. Instead, DJ asks us to "shift from a culture of strategic planning to one of strategic intentions—what are our intentions, informed by our vision?" (brown, 2017, p. 70). In praxis, this can look like constructing syllabi as community manifestos, which eschew "poisonous hierarchies, including the top-down assumption that the instructor knows what is best for everyone in the room in all instances, at all times, forevermore" in favor of clearly articulating

pedagogical values, forefronting community care (like scheduled wellness check-ins with students), and de-centering assessment as secondary to learning objectives (currie & Hubrig, 2022, p. 136).

It should also be noted that rejecting systems and best practices must also be balanced against teacher workload; ungrading does not require we sacrifice the teacher for student benefit. Instead, you can consider this invitation to reorient toward a collaborative pedagogical practice that invites students to share the workload of classroom composition, choices, and management. For example, in this issue O'Meara describes a "choose your own adventure" reading list, while Gabay uses co-constructed rubrics and Smith incorporates self-assessment/justification letters. Each of these methods is *different* labor, but not necessarily *extra* labor. And while it is true that most ungrading practices prioritize feedback models that "honestly, [are] more time-consuming overall" (O'Meara), I personally have implemented group workshop sessions which enlist individual small groups of students to workshop their papers together, thus minimizing my experiences of repetitive feedback while maximizing student opportunities to learn from each other and collaboratively craft solutions to particular writing challenges. Similarly, readers can look to Bruenger and Lemer's examples in this issue for an in-depth illustration of focusing feedback that is "descriptive, constructive, and clear" without being copious to the point of teacher overload.

## 2. Design everything from the margins:

Toni Morrison boldly tells us, “I stood at the border, stood at the edge and claimed it as central. I claimed it as central, and let the rest of the world move over to where I was” (qtd in Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2022, p. 28). DJ asks us to imagine classrooms where student knowledges of trauma and structural inequities bring a critical lexicon toward understanding classroom readings, where learning is designed around the interruptions of illness and caring for kin, where we “transform social spaces in ways that enable those distant Others to speak back” (Yergeau, 2018, p. 31). For example, in this issue Smith describes her lightbulb moment when she realized, “*time* was itself a privilege, and my students did not have the luxury of *time*” (emphasis original). In your ungrading design, ask yourself what intersections can proscribe certain ways of being, of participating and articulating, and deliberately create entry points for adaptation.

## 3. Embrace uncertainty and questioning:

DJ offers a unique freedom to teachers because it reminds us that “You have the right to not know the right moves to make” (brown, 2017, p. 141). Being in community and communication with our students means being willing to be told what you don't know and to be open to negotiating around the unknowing together. Personally, I breathe a sigh of relief, knowing that instead of trying to anticipate and predict every outcome of the classroom, I can instead invest in creating methods for a mutual exploration of the unknown. The DJ approach is “not assuming. Anything. It's always asking” (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018, p. 70). In praxis,

this can look like making space for students to articulate when content or an assignment doesn't feel valuable to their learning (see O'Meara in this issue), designing around flexible deadlines to accommodate the unpredictability of life, or even embracing your own inability to accurately judge student learning by implementing self-assessments.

#### **4. Treat change, and therefore adaptation, as the rule, not the exception:**

To quote Octavia Butler, "All that you touch You Change. All that you Change Changes you. The only lasting truth is Change. God is Change" (2012, p. 11). It might be fair to say that, for DJ, change is the only norm it assumes. DJ also helps us accept change not only stemming from unforeseen events, but also from our own failures and missteps:

The easier 'being wrong' is for you (the faster you can release your viewpoint), the quicker you can adapt to changing circumstances. Adapting allows you to know and name current needs and capacity, to be in relationship in real time, as opposed to any cycle of wishing and/or resenting what others do or don't give you. (brown, 2017, p. 94)

Piepzna-Samarasinha give us a very practical example of this adaptability in action, explaining, "If I'm having a pain day and a hard time processing language and I need you to use accessible language, with shorter words and easiness about repeating if I don't follow, and you do, that's love. And that's solidarity" (2018, p. 75).

**5. Create collective access by embracing boundaries, accountability, and discomfort:**

Perhaps one of the most intimate understandings of DJ is that community doesn't just materialize from good intentions: "Community' is not a magic unicorn... the only way we will do this is by being fucking real, by not papering over the places where our rhetorics falls flat...where this shit is genuinely fucking hard" (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018, p. 35). For instructors, sometimes the most frustrating, elusive part of a critical pedagogical practice is trying to coax students into a collaborative, trusting community. DJ offers powerful reminders, here, of two components necessary to engender that trust, reciprocity, and support: boundaries and accountability. "Real-time transformation requires stating your needs and setting functional boundaries" (brown, 2017, p. 149), which can look like reserving the right to limit feedback after deadlines for the instructor or empowering the right of students to set limits around classroom content that evokes pain and trauma (for example, literacy narratives can be extremely vulnerable for students with histories of abuse, trauma, or instability). As a counterpoint to boundaries, a supportive classroom community carries the expectation of accountability, for both the teacher and the students. Birdsong recounts learning from Mia Mingus that in DJ, accountability is not about holding members to a set of standards; instead, DJ cautions, "Accountability, as I mean it, is more about ourselves in the context of the collective...you can't hold another person accountable. You can support someone's accountability, but we hold ourselves accountable" (Birdsong, 2020, p. 18). Put another way, accountability is not about the standards you set for your students,

it's about how all the classroom members understand that a community means they are opting-in to a set of mutual understandings and behaviors. In their article in this issue, Ubbesen, Bruenger, and Lemer demonstrate this accountability in the way feedback is posed to students around incomplete assignments and Lemer creates a safe environment for students to be experimental through constructive, consistent feedback.

### **Dreaming Towards Liberation**

Thank you for staying with me, dear reader. I sincerely hope that this weaving together of disability care and ungrading ideologies will help you as you plan, imagine, and enact your pedagogies. Remember, your intentions are more important than any system you can adopt: "Creating Collective Access epitomizes...innovation, experimentation, relationships.... You couldn't have planned this shit, but it happened because of lots of disability justice work getting the ground ready for this bloom" (Piepzna-Samarasinha, qtd in brown, 2017, p. 97). I invite you to lean on your reflections when you need to remind yourself to orient yourself towards community, care, flexibility, and above all, trust. Give yourself the grace to try, fail, and remember that, in the very act of committing to this liberatory work, you/we "reclaim our collective humanity, we engage in the radical act of learning and unlearning; we engage in the radical act of education and knowledge sharing" (Kafai, 2021, p. 100) that will guide us all toward an emancipatory future.

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### **Chapter 3: Towards Relationality: Speculating a Collective Futurity for Disability Studies through 'Letting Go'**

There is a popular meme in the LGBTQIA+ community which goes a little like this: I'm pansexual, nonbinary, trans, and ADHD—I've never made a decision in my entire life. As someone who resembles this remark, I find it humorous that my academic interests have landed me in Disability Studies, a discipline experiencing similar challenges with decision-making.

In the historical context of the western, neoliberal academy, United States Disability Studies is a relatively new academic discipline, having emerged as a focus of study in the early 1980s (Schalk, 2018). Originating in the social sciences, the field is currently recognized as the interdisciplinary domain of largely humanities scholars who research disability as “a socially constructed phenomenon and systemic social discourse which determines how bodyminds and behaviors are labeled, valued, represented, and treated” (Schalk, 2018, p. 3). As a field grappling with theories of affect, marginalization, and embodiment, Disability Studies has also become intertwined with an institutional focus on intersectionality, and as such is quickly gaining traction as an academic focus for difference, equity, and inclusion efforts. However, even as Disability Studies is the subject of rapidly expanding institutional interest, the discipline simultaneously struggles with a lack of institutional home. For example, while many programs are adding graduate certificates in disability studies, these certificates are usually offered through associated humanities programs such as Law, Education, Applied Health, or

Interdisciplinary Studies. Further, at last count, only 10 universities in the United States have dedicated Disability Studies departments (Cushing and Smith, 2009).

This lack of disciplinary home is mirrored within the field's scholarship by challenges in establishing disciplinary cohesion in theory, methodologies, and approaches (Price & Kerchbaum, 2016). Further, the field risks polarization across cultural and contextual lines when, for example, communities differ in language usage and semantic range (see Harbour et al., 2017). Perhaps one of the easiest places to see these tensions in action is in how the field is beginning to divide itself into several distinct communities, among them Disability Justice, Mad Studies, Crip Studies, and Neurodiversity Studies. To further muddy the waters, in several situations, these communities do not see themselves as an outgrowth or subset of Disability Studies despite a shared orientation toward describing "how bodyminds and behaviors are labeled, valued, represented, and treated." Circling back to decision-making, as a newly minted scholar, I am struggling with how to describe myself: Am I a Disability Studies or Critical Disability Studies or Disability Justice scholar? If I write about psychological disabilities, do I publish under Mad Studies or Neurodiversity or Neuroqueer studies? As a chronically ill scholar, am I part of the Crip Studies movement? And how do the entanglements, distinctions, terminology, and ideologies within each of these communities signal my values and alignments to those outside of my interdisciplinary corner of the academy?

As you may have guessed, I will not be spending this essay advocating for unifying Disability Studies under one label or disciplinary perspective. Nor do I

share the concerns of other scholars with how each of these communities will carve out its own distinct area of expertise and protect its particular 'ologies'. Instead, similar to the richly nuanced choices that lead some individuals to identify as nonbinary while others identify as genderqueer or agender, I envision a path forward that embraces the validity of *not* choosing one community over the other, instead building coalition through an acknowledgement of blurry boundaries and shared experiences. Drawing upon the work of Jennifer Nash in her book *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (2019), I argue that what I will collectively refer to as "scholarships of disability" are stymied by a 'defensive' orientation in their disciplinary practice, and this orientation is actively preventing these scholarly communities from the theoretical, advocacy, and activist projects to which they are dedicated. To exemplify the problematic positioning within these disciplinary conversations, I will first discuss the various perspectives that are driving the identification of differing communities of scholarship to underscore the legitimate critique and variety of experience that is attempting to be captured under various community foci. Then, I will illustrate how the current posture and dialogue within and between these different communities of disability scholarship exemplifies 'defensiveness' that undermines their frequent calls for collaboration. By highlighting the ways in which these scholarships of disability are investing energy in defensive postures, we can identify the problematic underlying assumptions that drive this defensiveness. To contrast with this positioning, I turn to genre studies to explore the consequences of disciplinarity while underscoring the porous and overlapping nature of the differing perspectives on disability. Finally, I

will leverage Nash's concept of 'letting go' to speculate a (Disability)(Mad)(Neurodiverse)(Crip) Studies future that is enacted by and with community members and offers a pluralistic approach to knowledge production and narratives of lived experience.

### **Disciplinary Divides: A Home for Each of Us**

It is no secret that establishing disciplinary identity is part and partial to the work of the academy. As Bowker and Star have observed, "Disciplines can be thought of as the information infrastructure of the academy, the classifications and categories that 'sort out' both the domains of knowledge and the people and activities that produce, curate, and disseminate knowledge" (1999, p. 3). As positionalities, ideologies, and communities of practice shift and evolve, so too does the institutional instinct to define and redefine these boundaries as a process of seeking cohesion and control of intellectual exchange. Disability Studies is not unique in this regard, as all academic disciplines have to balance how "a single field of study divides and expands into an inchoate array of competing methods and interest—and you begin to form a picture of intellectual work that is at once constrained and incoherent" (Harris, 2004, p. 358). However, most disciplines are established as an outgrowth of shared programs of study that define membership and ways of approaching knowledge production within them. Disability Studies, on the other hand, faces additional challenges by virtue of its existence as an international and interdisciplinary community of scholars who practice their scholarship from a diversity of perspectives and approaches as influenced by their

home disciplines. By examining the articulation of defining traits of each community that associates, broadly speaking, within disability scholarship, we can begin to trace how these communities view themselves as different from each other, and how those differences are supported by a posture of territoriality or 'defensiveness.'

The founding community of disability scholarship, Disability Studies, is predominantly unified through its adherence to what has become known as the social model of disability, where disability is defined by "the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organisation which takes little or no account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream of social activities" (UPIAS, 1975). This social model distinguishes impairment (the difference of bodily form or function) from the experience of disability, is in direct contrast with the individual (based around pity for individual deficit) or medical (a drive toward cure or remediation of conditions viewed as deficit) models, and defines disabled individuals as an oppressed group (Shakespeare, 2006). While the social model has defined the trajectory of disability studies as a discipline for nearly 50 years, many scholars have argued that Disability Studies is now in a "post-social model era" (Goodley, 2017, p. 11), where "the argument that disability is not lodged in the individual but in social barriers to full inclusion now seems a rather blunt instrument for describing the wide spectrum of disability experiences" (Davidson, 2016, p. 434). It is through these and other critiques, often paired with perspectives generated from other

disciplines of marginalization, that differing academic communities of disability scholarship have formed.

One critique of Disability Studies is that the social model of disability does not sufficiently consider the embodied experiences of impairment, which seeks "to counter-balance an over emphasis in the social and minority models of disability on environmental restrictions experienced by disabled people wherein the ability to fully participate as citizens in a democracy (for example) is impinged upon by real bodily limits" (Thomas, 1999, p. 125). Crip Studies answers this critique by blending queer theory with disability theory, drawing upon 'crip' as a "non-compliant, anti-assimilationist position that disability is a desirable part of the world" (Hamraie and Fritsch, 2019, p. 2) while leveraging the discipline to question binary identifications of normal, abnormal, and with them compulsory ablebodiedness (McRuer, 2006). Crip Studies has also answered a call to include experiences of chronic illness under the umbrella of disability experience, which have historically been excluded from disability scholarship. For example, Siebers' theory of complex embodiment is desirous of perspectives that "raise[s] awareness of the effect of disabling environments on people's lived experience of the body, but...emphasizes as well that some factors affecting disability such as chronic pain, secondary health effects, and aging, derive from the body" (2008, p. 25).

Another critique of Disability Studies is of the discipline's initial orientation toward and still often predominant focus on physical disabilities. For scholars that focus their work on disability experiences that are a product of the mind, Disability

Studies' investment in visible or 'apparent' disability experiences does not adequately account for their lived experiences. For those focusing on the experiences of individuals with psychiatric disabilities, "mad studies has developed from within, alongside and, at times, in dispute with Disability Studies" (Morgan, 2021, p. 108). Mad Studies "maintains a sharp focus on experiential knowledge and brings to the fore a reconceptualization of mental distress as 'madness' as 'a reference to political categories of critique and exclusion'" (Morgan, 2021, p. 108). In particular, Mad Studies sets itself apart from Disability Studies in often rejecting the idea of madness as impairment, and it contends that "madness has to figure itself not only in relation to ideas about competency, moral ability, curability, and so forth but also in relation to questions of access, stigma, and advocacy" (Gilman, 2015, p. 114) as a result of its association with disability.

Similar to Mad Studies, scholarship under the label of Neurodiversity Studies, or neurodivergence, also attends to the lived experience of disabilities that are related to mind. Here, the key distinction is a differentiation of diagnosis, where "the diagnostic categories generally put under the umbrella of 'neurodiversity'...overlap with categories of 'learning difficulty'/'learning disability'...being typically defined as congenital and permanent. This contrasts with most categories of 'mental illness'...often caused by traumatic life events, and [considered] episodic and/or 'curable'" (Graby, 2015, p. 233). This community has distinct differences in the social experience of disability from that of Mad Studies due to public acceptance of neurodiversion as a 'natural' deviation of the norm, while those experiences theorized under Mad Studies are often still the subject of

a medicalized approach where cure is the expected outcome of treatment. Boundy (2008, n.p.) argues that the “desire to be freed from forced behavioral conformity [is] the most central concern of the neurodiversity movement and community.” A subset of the Neurodiversity Studies community identify with the label ‘neuroqueer,’ which combines a disability lens with Queer Studies to define “neuroqueer identities [as] those in which subjects perform the perversity of their neurotypes...neuroqueer subjects are verbed forms, more accurately and radically conceived as cunning movements, not neuronal states or prefigured genetic codes” (Yergeau, 2018, p. 27). Theorized by and almost completely centered in the autistic community, neuroqueer scholars, similar to Crip Studies scholars, borrow from queerness to theorize activism and resistance as responses to society’s disabling forces.

While additional groupings of scholarly focus exist, the final community we will touch on here is the Disability Justice community, which is largely concerned with the intersecting nature of disability, race, sexuality, and gender. A historic/current/ever-present critique of Disability Studies has been “the failure of Disability Studies to engage issues of race and ethnicity in a substantive capacity, thereby entrenching whiteness as its constitutive underpinning” (Bell, 2006, p. 275). Founded by BIPoC community activists in response to their consistent experiences of marginalization within the discipline, Disability Justice

centers sick and disabled people of color, queer and trans disabled folks of color, and everyone who is marginalized in mainstream disability organizing.

More than that, disability justice asserts that ableism helps make racism, Christian supremacy, sexism, and queer- and transphobia possible, and that all those systems of oppression are locked up tight. (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018, p. 22)

Central to Disability Justice is its explicit attention to arts, community, and activism as salient and necessary contributors to disability scholarship: "We are intergenerational memory banks filled with the labor, organizing, and artmaking of our radical disabled, queer of color contemporaries, elders, and ancestors....In sharing our crip stories, we unearth legacies of colonialism and non-disabled supremacy" (Kafai, 2021, p. 65).

### **Disciplinary Identity as Defensiveness**

Each of the distinct communities of disability scholarship shares a focus on the lived experiences of disability, with varying foci of embodiment, sociality, intersectionality, impairment (or lack thereof), and cultural context. As described in the previous section, each of these scholarly communities is an outgrowth of legitimate critiques and differences in theorizing disability identity, experience, and marginalization. These differences exemplify the complexity of disability as a concept and subject of study, where

Indeed, for many reasons, disability (in its mutability, its potential invisibility, its potential relation to temporality, and its sheer variety) is a particularly elusive element to introduce into any conjunctural analysis, not because it is so distinct from sexuality, class, race, gender, and age but because it is

always already so complexly intertwined with everything else. (Bérubé, 2006, p. viii)

And, as we will discuss later in this essay, while several scholars have identified opportunities for coalition and collaboration between each distinct community, this dialogue “has revealed rifts within the movement as individuals seek to retain political gains achieved through specific forms of struggle” (Davidson, 2016, p. 434). I posit that this posture, spurred on by the infrastructure of the academy, represents a practice of ‘defensiveness’ as defined by Jennifer Nash in her monograph, *Black Feminism Reimagined After Intersectionality* (2019) and, as such, is reifying the very marginalization disability studies is dedicated to theorizing and eradicating.

Writing in the context of Black Feminist Studies, Nash argues that the discipline’s protectionist stance toward the term ‘intersectionality’ threatens the cohesion of feminism as a discipline. In defining this stance as ‘defensiveness’, Nash explains, “I understand defensiveness to be a space marked by feelings of ownership and territoriality, and by loss and grief” (p. 32). By naming the affect, Nash demonstrates how defensiveness in the form of controlling the definition, usage, and circulation of the term intersectionality

is, though, ultimately a dangerous form of agency, one that traps black feminism, and black feminists, rather than liberating us, by locking black feminists into the intersectionality wars rather than liberating us from those battles, and enabling us to reveal how deeply problematic these battles are.

The defensive posture produces a kind of impasse for black feminist theory, one that keeps us fundamentally stalled, and that frustrates black feminism's political projects. (p. 26-27)

Similarly, I contend that the driving desire to define boundaries and disciplinary identity for the differing communities of disability scholarship is directly contributing to the debilitation of the goals of such scholarship. In the previous section, we explored the various positionalities and critiques that spurred the establishment of several distinct categories of scholarship of disability. In this section, we will use what Nash identifies as the three principal domains of defensiveness—origin stories, appropriation, and critique—to analyze how each discipline's efforts to establish a unique disciplinary identity exemplify defensive positioning.

In each of the aforementioned scholarly communities, there exists a consistent call to identify and safeguard disciplinary boundaries, nomenclature, and membership. Similar to the conversations Nash identifies concerning the sanctity of intersectionality, these protective urges are oriented both toward the prevention of misuse by outside forces and also internally policing what is seen as necessary individual differentiation between disciplinary foci. For intersectionality, one of the first actions Nash identifies as central to defensive posturing is the attempt to establish specific origin stories as disciplinary cannon. Nash explains, "Origin stories work by presuming that intersectionality emerged not through debate or collaboration but through a *singular* voice, historical moment, or foundational text" (p. 39, emphasis original).

Interestingly, perhaps due to the central connection of disability with individualized experience, many communities of disability scholarship work to explicitly reject establishing origin stories. For example, speaking of Mad Studies, Ingram cautions, "In Deleuze and Guattari's terminology, this knowledge is rhizomatic and nomadic, as opposed to arboreal and settled (1987)" (2021, p. 95). Likewise, when speaking of the term 'neuroqueer,' Yergeau attributes "the collaborative work of autistic bloggers Ibbey Grace, Athena Lynn Michaels-Dillon, Nick Walker, and myself," as shared provenance instead of claiming ownership of the term (2018, p. 27). This is not to say that these areas of study are absolved of the all too common intellectual record keeping and chronological accounts of disciplinary scholarship (Ingram's article, for example, is titled *A genealogy of the concept of "Mad Studies"*); however this work is not part of the central manner of manifesting defensiveness on behalf of the disciplines. Instead, these communities focus on establishing origin through another lens: by drawing boundaries around the people to which the scholarship pertains.

As we explored in the previous section, Disability Studies originated as a scholarly community principally centered on the experiences of those individuals with apparent, physical disabilities and their experiences navigating largely environmental societal barriers. Part of the initial tension within the discipline was navigating how definitions of disability affected membership: "[A]s Plumb (1994) points out, if disability is defined solely as oppression and impairment is not regarded as a prerequisite for it, many other groups could be considered 'disabled' who would not ordinarily be defined as such" (Graby, 2015, p. 232). As each

subsequent scholarly community has worked to incorporate a broader definition of disability, it has simultaneously continued this defensive positioning by gatekeeping the bodyminds that are subject to its definitions, claiming "a necessary stage in any new project is establishing its boundaries and how permeable or malleable they should be, asking 'who is inside and outside, included and excluded' (2019; 1)" (Morgan, 2021 p. 114). Even for those that are explicitly part of the 'in' group, the work of defining disciplinary origin through its membership is conceptualized as a necessary, ongoing defense of the scholarship. For example,

Self-identifying Mad persons must collectively perpetually (re)define the porous borders of Mad studies by that which Mad studies is not....Self-identifying Mad persons are engaged in ongoing epistemic border policing to secure ideological territory and prevent the co-option and collusion of Mad perspectives by countering non-Mad sanist sentimentalities.

(Castrodale, 2017, p. 52)

Identifying this claim as defensive invites the question, What would happen if we rejected border policing as part of the work of Mad Studies and mad people? How does pouring energy and attention into securing ideological territory affect the other work the scholarships of disability can take on? Especially for scholarship that advocates for identity and inclusion not through any demonstrable, applied markers but through community self-identification (that is, rejecting the medical model requires rejecting disability based on medical labels), this deep investment in defensive protections around membership exemplifies a seemingly incongruent tension between the goals of the scholarship and the practice of the discipline. As

we will see, this is just one way in which defensive orientations stymie, and at times outright contradict, the ongoing work scholarships of difference are invested in.

The second defining characteristic of defensiveness for Nash is guarding against appropriation: "Black feminist scholars regularly mobilize language like 'gentrification,' 'appropriation,' 'commodification,' and 'colonization' to describe how intersectionality 'travels' in troubling ways. The intersectionality wars are often waged through attempts to highlight—and police—intersectionality's 'appropriations'" (p. 43). This is a trait that scholarship of disability shares ubiquitously, with very little disciplinary-focused conversation occurring without "...end[ing] with a concern about the wider current context of these discussions acknowledging that many activist concepts, from both Disability and Mad studies, have been 'co-opted, appropriated and politically neutralised" (McWade et al., 2015, p. 307, as cited in Morgan, 2021, p. 115). This defensiveness is so deeply entrenched into disciplinary identities that scholars claim "...one of the most significant challenges for Disability Studies, and perhaps even more so for the disabled people's movement has been the adoption and co-option of its ideas and languages by politicians, policy makers and providers" (Morgan, 2021, p. 115). They further see that "identifying and challenging this usurpation...has become the moral imperative for Disability Studies" (Morgan, 2021 p. 116).

Defensive postures against appropriation and co-option illustrate a frequent tension across scholarships of marginalization, where "identities, narratives, and experiences based on disability have the status of theory because they represent

locations and forms of embodiment from which the dominant ideologies of society become visible and open to criticism" (Siebers, 2013, p. 318). However, all too often (for example, when disability and intersectionality become buzzwords signaling benign inclusivity championed by institutional DEI initiatives), "Paradoxically in naming the discrimination and calling attention to the needs there is a risk of...essentializing of our identity that diminishes our full humanity. This is the challenge faced by every equality seeking movement..." (Minkowitz, 2014, p. 131). In other words, scholars of disability have good reason to invest in defensive posturing around ensuring their theories and lived experiences are not leveraged by dominant institutions against their own communities. However, scholars also note that the 'moral imperative' of defensiveness creates inherent tension between protective desires and "wanting Mad Studies not to be owned by anybody in particular and refusing to define its borders" (Beresford & Russo, 2016, p. 271). Especially when these defensive postures are leveraged on behalf of legitimizing theory, community, or methods of scholarship against other scholarships of disability, defensiveness works directly *against* the necessary ambiguity within disability identity, where

the experiences of people placed in different categories, or who identify with different movements, necessarily differ, and their differences should not be erased in the name of unity; however, nor should they be essentialised in ways that lead to divisive separatism. (Graby, 2015, p. 241)

The last aspect of defensiveness is critique, where "...critique is not imagined as a generative labor, as a significant component of feminist scholarly

conversation; instead, to the extent that it moves away from intersectionality's inaugural texts, critique hinders intersectionality's analytical capacities" (Nash, 2019, p. 64). Again, scholarships of disability take a slightly different approach to critique; whereas Nash outlines how Black Feminism views critique "as a singular figure who is imagined to be *outside* of intersectionality and *destructive* to the analytic" (2019, p. 46, emphasis original), scholarships of disability are more likely to view critique as not a threat, but rather as ineffectual or passé. As Thorneycroft explains in a review of other scholars,

Disability studies has arguably reached a point of 'conceptual exhaustion' (Campbell 2019: 6), whereby its normalising approach to disablement (Goodley 2017), and the tiring 'intellectual masturbation' (Oliver 2009; 50) over the social model has led to weary arguments and repetitive intellectualising (see: Goodley 2001; Hughes and Paterson 1997; Levitt 2017; Woods 2017, for examples)." (2020, p. 97)

This view of critique as "intellectual masturbation" further informs the approach to the formation and practice of new disability disciplines. For example, scholars of Mad Studies caution, "I believe it would be a mistake to use disability studies as its lodestar. Instead, *a more critical edge* is required, especially one that has learnt from disability studies and plied it for its dis/uses" (Thorneycroft, 2020, p. 97, emphasis added). This underscores the view that critique of existing theories such as the social model are inefficacious and "the talking has to stop" (Oliver, 2013, p. 1026).

Defensiveness that rejects critique is especially harmful to scholarships of disability because it precludes building on or further development of any previous theory or praxis. How are scholars to collaborate or build coalition across differing communities if they are prohibited from building on others' scholarship? Instead, the defensive rhetoric posits that the only way to positively contribute to the field(s) is to reject existing work and "...replace it with something more meaningful or useful...(Oliver, 2013, p. 1025). This contributes to the fracturing of the study of disability into individual disciplines while simultaneously encouraging disciplinary competitiveness.

In each of these areas of defensiveness, I have demonstrated that scholarships of disability are deeply invested in territoriality, ownership, and control, despite frequent appeals to collaboration, inclusivity, and coalition. Indeed, it is clear that each community views defensive action as part of the central necessary work of the discipline, and that further, the risks of failing to engage in this gatekeeping will result in, at best, impoverishing the validity of the discipline and, at worst, the degradation of disability as a useful analytic. Some communities in particular, such as Mad Studies, already feel they have witnessed the harmful effects of this failing to adequately safeguard the integrity of Disability Studies scholarship and have oriented their efforts within their new discipline toward avoiding the same mistakes. I have also demonstrated that these feelings of defensiveness and the necessity of defensive action are outgrowths of a legitimate need to account for expanded membership, differing lived experiences, and expanded analytics into disability theory and praxis. However, scholars'

commitment to defensive posturing is actively impairing their ability to develop the scholarship to better respond to the initial disciplinary shortcomings.

As consistently as scholarships of disability invest in defensiveness, they also invest in calls for cross-disciplinary collaboration: "Coalitions and solidarity, rather than competitiveness and siloes, are what is needed to mobilise the acceptance of difference and a non-violent ethos" (Thorneycroft, 2020, p. 113). Nash teaches us, however, that the problem with investing in defensiveness is that defensive orientations conscript energy, intellectual focus, and disciplinary action away from the central work of impacting the marginalization of disabled people. Further, postures of defensiveness pit each community against the other, where concerns over entrenching specific membership, avoiding appropriation, and dismissing critique prevent each community from effective collaboration and coalition. Nash emphatically highlights how "the defensive posture produces a kind of impasse for black feminist theory, one that keeps us fundamentally stalled, and that frustrates black feminism's political projects" (p. 26-27), and this impasse is shared by scholarships of disability. In the next section, I will explore a path forward past defensiveness by leveraging an improved understanding of the call toward disciplinarity paired with Nash's concept of 'letting go.'

### **Refusing the Work: 'Letting Go' Toward an Inclusive Disciplinary Future**

In the previous section, I highlighted how defensiveness is a natural outgrowth of the challenges faced by scholarships of disability, even as that defensiveness interferes with the work these communities are attempting to

accomplish. We have seen how promoting origin stories by policing membership is designed to create spaces for those who have been historically marginalized or left out of previous disability scholarships. In cases of defensive postures toward appropriation, we have explored how this protective instinct is a reaction towards the flattening of disability identity and scholarship carried out by normalizing projects. And we have seen how a prohibition against critique is meant to learn from what are viewed as previous disciplinary mistakes and turn energy toward something that is envisioned as more productive. It may feel difficult, then, to imagine a future for scholarships of disability that does not invest in defensiveness, even as we acknowledge that it is interfering with liberatory work. However, I argue that the seeming salience of defensiveness is rooted in a misunderstanding of the required work of disciplinary identity as well as a misattribution of the locus of disciplinary power. In this section, I will propose a path forward that moves away from defensiveness by first, reconceptualizing the work of disciplinarity, and second, leveraging Nash's practice of 'letting go' to build a coalitional path forward.

I have previously acknowledged that establishing disciplinary identity is an integral part of scholarship within the western, neoliberal university. Under existing university structures, "Disciplines...are sociohistorical phenomena, as well as intellectual enterprises; they are learned cultural categories" (Reid & Miller, 2018, p. 89). This means the work of establishing disciplinary identity is vital to any cohesive area of scholarship, for both academic or financial capital within the university, and also for acknowledgement and production of cultural capital. For scholarships of disability, and indeed any scholarship of marginalization or difference, this

establishment of disciplinary identity as 'learned cultural category' becomes essential for gaining recognition that contributes to the deconstruction of barriers within society. The goal then, is not to reject the work of establishing disciplinary identity, but to imagine a discipline as something other than a closed class, discrete category that has firmly established boundaries. Thorneycroft points out how "...disciplines rarely examine how their concepts, theories, politics, and practices are picked up, (re-)theorised, (re-)used, and (re-)shaped. Disciplines, much like the schools and faculties that host them (can) become 'closed institutions' (Foucault 1977; Goffman 1961)" (2020, p. 92). I argue that it is in this deliberate analysis studies of disability can find room for mutuality and collaboration. The first step toward 'letting go,' to enable inter-community learning, support, and coalition, then is

to go beyond having a critique/counter analysis/alternate systemic plan for society—we have to actually do everything different, aligned with a different set of core principles for existence....It is imperative to regenerate our curiosity, our genuine interest in different opinions, and in people we don't know yet—can we see them as part of ourselves, and maintain curiosity, especially when we want to constrict and critique? (brown, 2017, p. 114–115)

Genre Studies, a discipline that has been theorizing approaches to categories and classification for many years, offers a view of disciplinarity that turns from "a hierarchical system of closed categories" to an "open approach [that] is organized around socially perceived similarities based on multiple shared traits, with *no rules defining membership* and no single feature necessarily shared by all members" (Reid & Miller, 2018, p. 89, emphasis added). Note that this definition

automatically refuses the defensive urge to establish origin stories of membership, inviting an expansive and inclusive attitude that recognizes the membership of all who claim disability and contribute to the work. For scholarships of disability, this redirects the efforts of establishing disciplinary identity away from defensive posturing and towards instead an ethos of cultivating similarities and radical empathy. This recognition of 'diffuse disciplines' advocates for "an approach that conceptualizes disciplines as continually emergent intellectual categories of networked interests, goals, and practices" (p. 89). This new conceptualization of disciplinarity allows scholarships of disability to abandon the work of constantly trying to distinguish themselves from each other or develop independent theories that must move beyond the work of peers in order to be seen as valid. The work of disciplinarity now becomes answering questions like: How do your ideas, goals, and theories inform, enmesh, or differ from mine? Are there opportunities for our work, collectively, to mutually enhance these goals? How can we learn from one another, even if we don't identify the same or use the same terminology or labels? This proposed shift in the manner of establishing disciplinarity refuses the work of traditional territoriality, recognizing that "classification systems, and the categories of which they are composed, are themselves rhetorical constructions, embedded in historical conditions, and serving, in the words of Kenneth Burke, as ways of both seeing and not-seeing (Burke [1935] 1965, 49)" (p. 95). This 'not-seeing' is particularly salient to a community of scholars that acknowledges "if one discipline wins the battle against essentialist and pathological discourses and practices, the power of abjection phobically shifts to burden other abjected groups"

(Thorneycroft, 2020, p. 114). Therefore, in order to approach disciplinarity without becoming a marginalizing force ourselves, scholarships of disability must

shift[ing] the model of classification that we apply to disciplinarity, like shifting a terministic screen, [to] change[s] the possibilities and constraints visible to us, giving us permission to be more inventive in our scholarship, pedagogy, and programs, while helping us avoid some of the oppressive aspects of 'being disciplined'" (Reid & Miller, 2018, p. 106).

This shift in perception of the work of establishing disciplinary identity simultaneously orients ourselves toward learning and supporting each other while also opening us up to the act of 'letting go.'

Nash imagines the act of 'letting go' of defensiveness as "a deliberate giving up to another, the simultaneous practice of yielding and falling toward what is deeply and largely unknowable" (2019, p. 83–84). Where Nash focuses this analytic on Black Feminism's proprietary urges toward intersectionality as distinct from transnational feminism, her vision of letting go as an act that "allows for new forms of intimacy, allegiance, and alliance" (p. 84) is generative for moving scholarships of disability past their current fractured foci towards building a futurity that, "across disciplines and perspectives,..create[s] constellative knowledge(s) with our relations" (Maier et al., 2020, n.p.).

As a community, scholarships of disability regularly recognize the importance of working in coalition with each other:

Gender reaches into disability; disability wraps around class; class strains against abuse; abuse snarls into sexuality; sexuality folds on top of race...everything finally piling into a single human body. To write about any aspect of identity, any aspect of the body, means writing about this entire maze. This I know, and yet the question remains; where to start? (Clare, 2015, p. 143)

I posit the answer to “Where to start?” comes from declaring what to let go of; we need to abandon defensive practices that seek to eke out disciplinary territory through border-policing and rejection of differing community efforts, instead seeking a scholarly practice that can “benefit from engaging in rich...discussions with other fields to value other onto-epistemological knowledge(s), including decolonizing pedagogies, critical feminism, gender studies, dis/ability and critical race studies,...Crip theorists...and Indigenous/Aboriginal knowledge(s), among others” (Castrodale, 2017, p. 53). Nash guides us toward these practices by emphasizing the need to create

*intimacies* between analytics that have been wedged apart....I am invested in what it means to blur the boundaries of who these analytics ‘belong’ to, who they can—and should—describe. I use the term ‘intimacy’ precisely because of the ways it suggests the permeability between concepts. (2019, p. 106–107, emphasis original).

Thus, instead of defensively defining who the Mad community includes, disability scholarship can ‘let go’ of the idea that membership must be strictly defined and

regulated, trusting those who claim Madness (Cripness/Disability) and contribute to anti-ableist work as kin. It can re-orient defensive effort into developing theories of mutual intimacy between the experiences of crip, madness, neurodiversity, and BIPoC-disabled intersections, seeking liminality and coalition from these overlapping margins. Instead of obsessively guarding against appropriation, scholarships of disability can refuse territoriality, recognizing the cautionary words of Octavia Butler:

Embrace diversity.  
Unite—  
Or be divided,  
robbed,  
ruled,  
killed  
By those who see you as prey.  
Embrace diversity  
Or be destroyed. (2012, Ch. 17)

Here, embracing diversity means embracing diversity of thought, definition, experience, location; It means recognizing that resisting the urge to compartmentalize these differences leads to strength. Through “unleashing its investment in fluidity;...a tool that brings together marginal subjects” (Nash, 2019, p. 106), disability can draw up the collected knowledges of its contributing disciplines, forming a voice that is strong enough to speak back against any norming force that seeks to co-opt and obfuscate the necessary liberatory practices yet to come. It is vital to recognize that attempting to control or prevent

appropriation is as effective in clutching water in arthritically twisted, cupped hands; our liberation lies not in prevention but in

the ways in which we *activate* together. The practices that help us go hard, wild, loud, and chaotic....This is the hard thing. To deeply acknowledge the impact and then to stay in the middle space, not leaning away from it to minimize it, not pressing forward to try and control what happens next, but staying in the middle, waiting and connected. (Ruffo, 2022, p. 85; 65)

And by refusing the urge to rest in “feminist fatigue....this particular form of frustration with analytics saddled with reparative promise....[that] have been bemoaned and criticized for what they cannot ever accomplish” (Nash, 2019, p. 101), disability scholarship can reimagine critique as a search for intimacies between existing theory and additional connections with new promise, expansively negotiating borders, constituency, and knowing-making to fluidly adapt to the evolving needs of the community.

## **A Fractal Future**

We find it generative to think about power, identity, and relation as fractally formed....What if fractals structure the choreography of heads that turn and stare as we enter grocery stores...structure like verse ‘the quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives’ (Lorde p. 36)? Like fractals, social dynamics are recursive, chaotic, expansive, and interconnected....Linked as we are to expansive social geometries, we are all implicated. (Maier et al., 2020, n.p.)

I return to my trans, polemically, perpetually both/and bodymind to advocate for *not* choosing to align myself, nor advocate for, a specific community of disability scholarship. In the same way I can't differentiate between my madness, my autism, my ADHD, or my transness as the particular mediators of a specific experience, I seek a futurity for my field that productively fails to differentiate. As Maier et al., point out, such "narrow disciplinary approaches not only deny the intersectionality of trans experience...but also preclude the powerful alliances that could be built among disabled communities and others working towards more inclusive and accessible worlds" (2020, n.p.). Disabled futures deserve scholarly, community, and activist practices that seek to learn from, build coalition with, and engage in intimacies between multiple forms of disability identity and experiences of marginalization.

I acknowledge the important, even necessary ways in which each scholarship of disability has sought to establish itself as an independent discipline in order to contribute new and representative knowledges to our understandings of disability. Simultaneously, I insist that the desire to 'stand apart' reifies the exclusionary, proprietary, and defensive postures of the western, neoliberal academic praxis. By examining the ways in which this desire for individual disciplinarity produces defensiveness through gatekeeping the constituent bodyminds, deployment of terminology, and critique of scholarly knowledge, I have illustrated the ways in which our fractured energies are being mobilized in ways that work against the inclusionary and reparative aims of disability scholarship. By understanding the work of disciplinarity not as demarcating

territory but instead of identifying similarities, permeable boundaries, and commonalities among scholarship, we can instead to view these fractal communities as rhizomatic, formed of multiple interacting, repeating, and overlapping ideas and desires that must collaborate to support the whole organism. And by adopting Nash's liberatory call of 'letting go' of defensiveness and border-policing, we are invited into a futurity where scholarships of disability can direct energy toward establishing radical empathy, intimacies, and coalition. In Nash's words, "While the risks of letting go are indeed high, requiring us to dream of different ways of being and feeling...envisioning...identities untethered to territoriality, the benefits are even greater, giving [us] the opportunity to envision new forms of agency and relationality" (2019, p. 131). We could all benefit from figuratively sitting bisexually, changing our positions and ideas, collectively stimming towards a disciplinary future where each of us can simultaneously have our unique knowledges heard and valued while collaborating toward liberatory futures.

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## **Chapter 4: A Digital Critical Disability Studies "Care Web": Imagining a Disability Studies Community Archive**

For the past 50 years, North American Disability Studies has been shaping the way we understand and respond to experiences of disability. The theory of the social model of disability, for example, has been transformative in aiding a shift from thinking about disability as a personal, medical deficit to understanding it as the experience of misfit between individual bodyminds and the environments they inhabit. Disability Studies has enabled disability narratives to be understood as stories of historical, sociopolitical marginalization, to push back against social narratives of the supercrip (or just plain crip), and to form community identity and pride. Disability Studies activism has resulted in demonstrable social change, from the Independent Living Movement of the 1960s to achieving national identity and protection through civil rights laws such as The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990 and later Section 508, which requires government organizations to ensure digital communication is accessible to, and usable by, disabled individuals.

In the face of these life-defining narratives, it is also vital to understand Disability Studies as a force of marginalization and harm. Notably, as part of the Western, imperialist university system, it has been complicit as a norming force for white-centric experiences. Despite claiming that disability as an identity is unique in that it exists as an embedded assumption in other identity categories (Bailey & Mobley, 2018; Schalk, 2018), Disability Studies as a discipline has been inattentive to foregrounding intersectional disability experiences. As Piepzna-Samarasinha

laments, “The erasure of the intellectual and activist labor of disability justice activists—particularly disabled BIPoC women and nonbinary people and/or femmes—makes me want to scream” (2022, p. 64)

The whiteness of Disability Studies is further underscored by a tendency of the scholarship to elide its intimate connections with other scholarships of marginalization, such as Black Feminist theory and Critical Race Studies. While some communities of disability scholarship, such as Crip Studies and Neuroqueer studies, acknowledge and actively collaborate with queer scholarship, the discipline as a whole, despite being the product of a diverse network of interdisciplinary scholarship, often fails to acknowledge the knowledges and contributions of outside scholarship. For example, in his most recent book *Disabled Upon Arrival*, speaking on eugenics and disability, Dolmage claims, “At Ellis Island, the categories of defect and disability that adhere today were strongly grounded *if not created*...Ellis Island was perhaps the place where these forces were *first* successfully grafted, and *used*” (2018, p. 10;29; first two emphasis mine, third emphasis original). This claim demonstrates a centering of disability without attending to other categories of intersectional identity by ignoring the same eugenicist machinations occurring three miles across the harbor, in the same time period, for Black communities in Harlem (Hartman, 2019). It also ignores the seminal work of Black Feminist scholars such as Hortense Spillers, (1987) who located US concepts of disability in American slavery, and the ways in which disability scholarship is indebted to this work as foundational for its own theories and praxis.

I offer this critique to the discipline as a whole in the spirit of radical candor, where “you tell people what you believe they need to hear, not want to hear, in a way that allows them to address your feedback, and in the best of circumstances, to grow or advance” (McGovern, 2018, p. 6). In this example and many others, disability scholarship has demonstrated a desire to link itself as intrinsic to larger conversations across scholarships of marginalization without being attentive to its own biased rhetorics. North American Disability Studies has long-standing relationality problem, and I sincerely believe reparative action begins in analyzing the ways we frame our rhetorics.

To address these challenges, I am inviting collaboration, from all scholars and community members with a desire to invest in the futurity of a re-imagined Disability Studies. This essay proposes a collaborative, community-centered, digital humanities project, The Disability Studies Collaborative Archive (DSCA), to (re)trace the network of influences, contributions, and participation within Disability Studies scholarship and community action. This call imagines a futurity for Disability Studies that builds relationships between scholarly conversations and the individuals at the center of that scholarship. I propose a project that not just blurs, but outright ignores, disciplinary boundaries with ‘creative incoherence,’ where “*Incoherence* as I am using it should therefore be thought of as a-coherence, or sometimes anti-coherence; it is turned to strategic advantage rather than accommodated as impairment” (Price, 2011, p. p. 181; emphasis original). I propose a project that specifically centers the BIPoC, multiply-marginalized, and Black Feminist ways of knowing that have always been at the heart of disability

scholarship. And I propose a project that not just learns from, but is the direct product of, relationality and radical empathy as crafted through contributing voices, stories, and perspectives of the community.

This paper offers a beginning framework for the genesis of what is envisioned as a long-term, multidisciplinary, living scholarly project. First, I describe how an open access digital commons network can participate as a solution to address the deficits within current Disability Studies scholarly practices, speculating a future for the discipline that is reparative, collaborative, and centered in intersectionality. I then review the guiding methods from digital humanities that ground the project and how these methods can help foreground a community of care. I also propose an initial manifesto to guide participation within the project; these principles declare the originating positionality and ethos of the archive. Finally, I will briefly describe the technical praxis of the project, which will form a rudimentary skeletal framework to be workshopped and developed collaboratively.

### **A Collective Access Approach**

In order to address the challenges outlined for Disability Studies, I propose a project that returns to the roots of the lived disabled experience: Creating Collective Access (CCA) (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). Of the necessity of mutual care and attentiveness to the myriad of ways disabled communities create networks of interdependence, Piepzna-Samarasinha writes,

We came together as disabled queer and trans people of color, talking, sometimes haltingly, about our intersectional lives, and talking about what disability organizing would mean that didn't leave any part of ourselves behind....CCA was one of the first places I ran into what I would later call cross-disability solidarity, and more than that, the reality of our different disabilities not being a liability, that there could be ways we supported each other. (2018, p. 22–23)

I argue that we can see reflected at a disciplinary level the challenges of its members: a need for support, mutual aid, interdependence, community sensitivity and care, and at the core, a centering of the intersectional experiences of the most marginalized/multiply-marginalized members. We also see reflected in disabled experiences of CCA the challenges of dealing with outside institutional forces that seek to define our experiences and existence for their own purposes and gain.

Imagining scholarship (broadly construed to include artistic, grassroots, and activist works alongside traditional academic texts) as the embodied home of the discipline, this project addresses the call for reparative, engaged scholarship through the creation of an online, open-access, collectively-curated, and interactive annotated bibliography: The Disability Studies Community Archive (DSCA). Designed to be interdisciplinary in nature, this living archive will create a virtual "care web" for disability studies by creating a nexus for scholars, artists, activists, and community members to collaborate, discuss, disagree, and exchange ideas for mutual growth and support. In this way, this project will (re)orient North American Disability Studies in the following ways:

- By creating a collectively-curated and cross-disciplinary bibliography, the DSCA will enable North American Disability Studies to map disciplinary conversations broadly across traditionally siloed disciplinary conversations, connecting scholars and conversations and expanding the known boundaries of the discipline
- By incorporating user annotations, discussion, and collective curation, the archive will address challenges to disciplinary cohesion by allowing for idea exchange; a community- and culturally-situated discussion of terminology, ideology, and perspective; and facilitate both consensus and fruitful diversity and critique within theories and approaches
- By documenting the breadth of interdisciplinary scholarship, as well as incorporating non-traditional texts such as art, activism, and community grassroots contributions, the archive will assist North American Disability Studies in both advocating for its importance within modern university structures while resisting co-option of the disciplinary conversations by university machinations
- By deliberately centering intersectional scholarship, the archive will facilitate the discipline developing sensitivity, awareness, and more mature rhetorics of inclusion, learning from neighboring scholars and disciplines to Create Collective Access through sharing mutual challenges
- By explicitly centering community organizations, activism, and arts, the archive will engage in the transformative work of decentering the Academy as the owner of knowledge and theory, instead inviting community collaboration and

the knowledges exchanged through relationality, to be valued and circulated as equals to academic productions

The centering design that enables these transformations is based on community, relationality, and care; this is not a project that can be realized in isolation, or even within the confines of traditional academic structures. By capitalizing on the affordances of a digital practice, defined by McGovern as “to continually work [using digital technology] to bring content and lessons from the past for the benefit of the present on behalf of the future” (2018, p. 17), the DSCA implicitly argues that

This movement is [about] making it as easy as possible to enter, no matter what passion brought you to the square....We must become the systems we need—no government, political party, or corporation is going to care for us, so we have to remember how to care for each other. (brown, 2017, p. 113)

### **Digital Humanities Frameworks for a Community of Care**

Bibliometric projects and network mapping have been used to trace the lineage and influence of scholarship across disciplines (and most prevalently in the sciences) for over 15 years (Johnson, 2015). Historically, the impact of scholarship has been measured by tracing citation networks, such as in [ConnectedPapers.com](http://ConnectedPapers.com) and [Eigenfactor.org](http://Eigenfactor.org). These citation maps visually trace interaction between scholarship through a who's-citing-who linkage, with nodes growing in size depending on the prevalence of citations. The Eigenfactor Project claims

in science, ideas are built upon ideas, models upon models, verifications upon prior verifications. This cumulative process of construction leaves behind it a latticework of citations, from which we can reconstruct the geography of scientific thought and retrace the paths along which intellectual activity has proceeded. (2022, n.p.)

Bibliometric networks are beneficial to scholarly communities attempting to visualize scholarship in a network of peers, forming interconnected webs of relationships and idea transfer through internal references. As Jensen et al. note, "To be a scholar in the twenty-first century is—as in preceding centuries—to be a networked scholar" (2022, p. 2), and I argue that, similar to how theories of social power such as of bio power and intersectionality bring awareness to personal and community positionality, developing tools to visualize these networks is critical to "mitigate existing power structures" and "place community at the core" (Rogers, 2023, p. 2). However, scholarship in fields such as digital humanities, digital sociology, computers and writing, and other intersecting analysis of digital scholarship has become increasingly concerned with how public digital humanities projects, including citation networks, reify the power structures of academic institutions, "where we are physically, socially, economically, and culturally immersed in structures of white supremacy and colonialism" (Rogers, 2023, p. 2). As Sano-Franchini cautions, digital humanities projects

tend[s] to be partitioned off through the kind of 'lenticular logics' that McPherson (2012) describes as 'a way of seeing the world as discrete

modules or nodes, a mode that suppresses relation and context': 'As such, the lenticular also manages and controls complexity.'" (2015, p. 51)

In particular, bibliographic networks entrench white privilege, colonialism, and the power consolidated in the global north by equating increased citations with increased influence, and thus, prestige. They fail to take into account the multitudinous ways marginalized and global majority scholars have inequitable access to publishing, scholarly conversations, and inclusion within the dominant networks.

While traditional bibliographic projects provide the imaginative spark for the Disability Studies Community Archive, this proposed network re-imagines the potential of such projects through a collaborative and cultural rhetorics lens. Eschewing the traditional colonialist meritocracy that clings to a narrative of intellectual genealogies (Nash, 2018), this digital humanities project is built on a cultural rhetorics ideology that acknowledge a need for

more attention to the relation between cultural difference, identity, and digital production in ways that make clearer why such discussions are relevant not just to scholars of difference but also to digital humanists interested in access, visual production, methodology, audience, and language. (Sano-Franchini, 2015, p.51)

To achieve this goal, the DSCA will borrow the visualization tools of a distributed network, which is both non-hierarchical and non-linear, and marry them with the reparative ethos of an open digital research commons. Digital commons projects,

such as the Humanities Commons at [hcommons.org](https://hcommons.org), are academic and/or community networks designed to employ a concept of 'care', "understood as a diverse set of practices that are both community-minded and intensely opposed to systems or forms of interaction, including economic ones, that threaten the common good of those communities or the individuals that comprise them" (Jensen et al., 2022, p. 2). Often employing both a means for scholars to share research as well as socially network, these projects can drive 'radical collaboration' to empower "coming together across disparate, but engaged, domains in ways that are often unfamiliar or possibly uncomfortable to member organizations and individuals in order to identify and solve problems together, to achieve more together than [they] could separately. (McGovern, 2018, p. 6).

By selecting these approaches, the Disability Studies Community Archive is invested in employing digital humanities and cultural rhetorics methodologies to "attend to...the situatedness of meaning as it is being produced" (Sano-Franchini, 2015, p.52). Specifically, the archive will eschew connecting works based on linkages of citations or chronology, instead choosing to form an interconnected map of scholarship illustrating connections described through *relationships*. So, while a traditional bibliographic project might evaluate the impact of a specific piece of scholarship based on a metric distilled from the number and breadth of citations of that work, this bibliography will instead focus on describing how works might compare across their treatment of terms, ideology, and interaction with each other's theories. By selecting different combinations of variables, users will be able to manipulate a dynamic data visualization of interconnected scholarship and

analyze bibliographic entries to accomplish some of the key goals of cultural rhetorics scholarship:

...exposing and disrupting dominant narratives, particularly those that do damage to historically marginalized cultures; building bridges, making connection and coalitioning for sociopolitical change through teaching, language, and playing with the notion of academic discourse; making space for the work and voices of groups who have traditionally been silenced; and doing the intellectual work of renaming, reconceptualizing, and continually resituating the kind of work the rhetoricians can and should do. (Sano-Franchini, 2015, p. 53)

### **A Methodological Manifesto**

In addition to considering ways in which to combine digital humanities frameworks, the Disability Studies Community Archive needs to consider what research methodologies will guide its approach. Price observed in 2012 that “Disability studies (DS) lacks a unified methodology” (p. 159), and this comment holds true 10 years later. In her chapter, Price notes that methodologies employed in disability scholarship “aim[is] at a radical reshaping of relations of power” (p. 164) and proposes the “guiding capacity” of four ‘contact zones’ for disability research: access, activism, identification, and representation. Contact zones, defined by Pratt as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (1991, p. 34) are a particularly

fruitful framing for a project seeking to foreground relationality as the center of its work.

Access, as articulated by Price, asks, “What kinds of participants are we imagining as we design our studies, and how well do our methods reflect our participant’s strengths and abilities?” (2012, p. 166). Not only focused on who has a proverbial seat at the table, access blends in a disability awareness of how access can be constrained by design, individual ability, and assumptions of capacity. The second contact zone, activism, is framed through “the uneasy relationship between DS<sup>10</sup> as an academic discipline and the activist ‘lay’ community from which it developed” (p. 168). Here, Price not only addresses the tensions between how knowledge and ethos is viewed and privileged, but also cautions “if we deny that the classroom is an active, and sometimes activist, space, we deny the important and sometimes life-changing moves made there” (p. 171). Price explains that her third category, identification, grows out of her own experiences reading disability research, where “I have been puzzled by the frequent failure on the part of researchers to discuss their own positions, identifications, or other alliances with respect to the topic they research” (p. 171). Grounded in an understanding of the criticality of self-awareness and analysis, Price argues “DS research must make more space for explicit identification by researchers—not in a rote, ‘here’s my diagnosis’ way, but in ways that are characterized by creativity, contradiction, and revision over time” (p. 171). Finally, for representation, Price asks “What are, what

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<sup>10</sup> DS is an abbreviation for Disability Studies in Price’s work.

should be, our roles, as teachers and researchers (and teacher-researchers) when we perceive participants' or students' views of disability to be regressive, even self-destructive?" (p. 177). Here she asks us to take up questions of consent as well as dominating ideologies, uncovering the fraught tensions between researcher and participant knowledges, perspectives, and values. As we can see, each of these contact zones is directly linked to the broader tensions within Disability Studies that the DSCA is being imagined into being to address, and as such, they form the backbone of developing DSCA's methods.

In addition to these four contact zones of disability research methodology, an approach to the DSCA also necessitates conscious attention to how other social justice research methodologies are invaluable to "let the 'other' speak," recognizing the importance of "the invention of multiple methods that subvert racist, heterosexist, and imperializing language" (Hurtado, 2003, p. 217). In particular, I suggest turning toward the collaborative authorship of feminist manifestos as a means of articulating the principles that would shape the function of the archive: "In feminist manifestos, the critiques and the visions focus on the concrete, daily consequences of ongoing and possible practices as well as the ideologies behind them" (Weiss, 2018, p. 2). Choosing feminist manifestos as the rhetorical tool to present a methodological approach explicitly acknowledges that any methodology should be developed as an outgrowth of "the collective experience of the oppressed" (Hurtado, 2003, p. 215) and that "the most productive and sustainable collaborations begin with common interests and responsibilities, by defining problem statements together" (McGovern, 2018, p. 8).

The following, then, is a first step toward community authorship of the methods that will shape the operation of the DSCA. Each item is framed in the context of Price's contact zones, interweaving disability methodology with feminist rhetoric. The manifesto as presented serves as a starting place and open invitation, written with the expectation of community contribution and revision.

### **The Disability Studies Collective Archive Manifesto: A First Draft**

1. The archive is explicitly interdisciplinary. Participants may add any reference that they find in constructive relation with any other reference, irrespective of disciplinary home.
2. The archive is explicitly of the community. It will incorporate source material from inside and outside the academic community, including the arts, activism, poetry and fiction, personal narratives, community action, and social commentary.
3. The archive is explicitly consensual. Whenever possible, when a reference is added to the archive, the author(s) will be contacted to invite their participation in shaping the metadata associated with the reference.
4. The archive is explicitly oriented away from the traditional Western, colonialist, white-centric, capitalistic meritocracy. It will explicitly omit analysis of metadata that is designed to encode hierarchical relationships, including citation mapping, titles/accolades, and organizing references along a chronological timeline. While author bios will provide the opportunity to include details about

authorial affiliations and education or accomplishments, these will not be used to place authors or sources in relation to each other.

5. The archive is explicitly oriented toward coalition and collaboration. It engages in this work in two ways:
  - a. Through a refusal to engage with 'defensiveness' (Nash, 2019), territoriality, or 'epistemic border policing' (Castrodale, 2017, p. 52): Rather than engaging energy and resources in attempting to define borders or proscribe appropriation or co-option, this archive instead chooses to turn its attention inward, orienting toward engaging the community in the process of identifying opportunities for mutual support and collaboration.
  - b. Through an explicit support of multiplicity and a culture of "openness, respect, curiosity, and reciprocity" (Castrodale, 2017, p. 57): Community engagement with the archive will encourage the proliferation of differing and even competing perspectives and interpretations, with the understanding that agreement and universality is not a requirement for coalition or collective action.

### **Towards Praxis: An Overview of the Nuts and Bolts**

Having discussed the efficacy, ideology, methodology, and values of the Disability Studies Community Archive, the final step of this proposal is to outline the physical praxis of such an undertaking. Put more simply, how is this all going to work, exactly? The following description will outline the initial structure and design of the archive for the purposes of enabling future collaborators to envision the

functionality of the project. While specific tools to develop these structures have not yet been selected, I offer this overview to establish a 'working definition' of the archive's embodiment, understanding that "when a new collaboration starts, members bring their individual and often idiosyncratic definitions with them, often unaware that others may understand these terms very differently" (McGovern, 2018, p. 7). Especially in the context of a multidisciplinary project that relies on expertise from many disparate fields, I acknowledge that the terminology presented here may vary in the context of different areas of expertise. The goal of this description, then, is to speculate the future of the project by engaging in a type of world building narrative, inviting my reader to view the project through my(our) own imagination(s).

The DSCA will be an independent, open-access website that is built from three interconnected layers: A database, a data visualization map, and a social user interface. The underlying database will be formed through user submissions that will be paired with available bibliographic metadata and supplemented with user-supplied content. Initial bibliographic details will be sourced from existing BibText data when available or salient to the source. For each database entry, identified authors will be invited to ensure accuracy of bibliographic details and supply full-text copies of any associated documents.

In addition to metadata gleaned from BibTex files, the database will also include custom categories to define relationships between entries. Supplied through a combination of textual analysis in the presence of access to full text

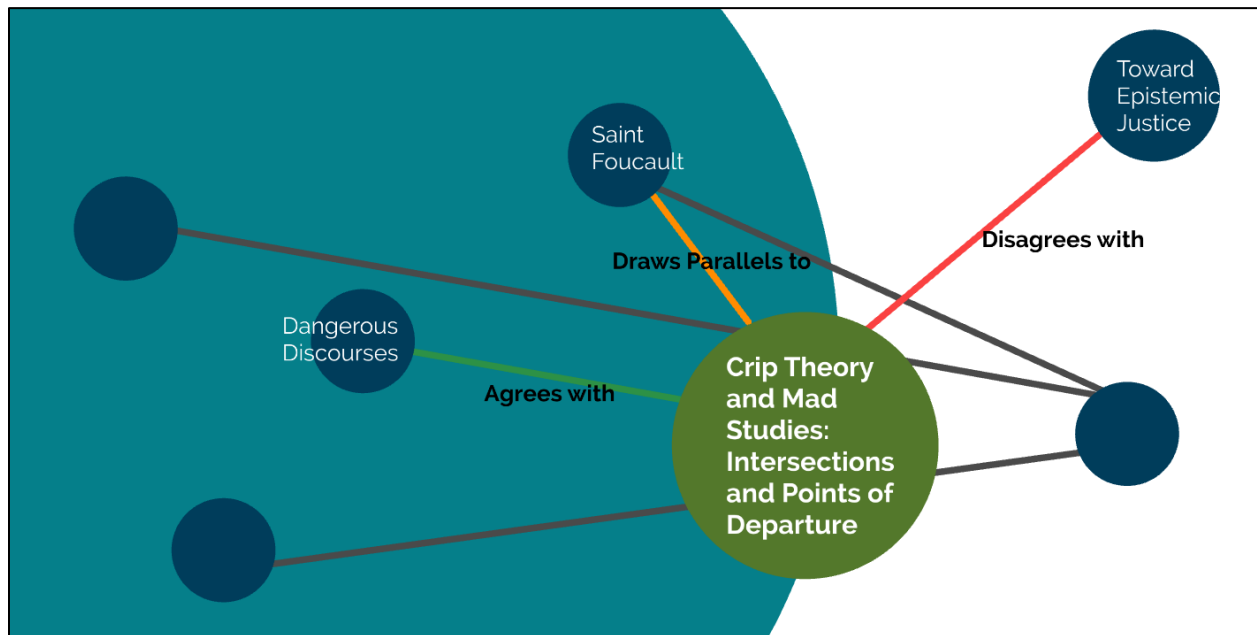
entries and user contributions, the proposed categories of relationships include the following:

- Terminology—as identified through textual frequency analysis
- Concept/Idea—as identified through user-contributions
- Agrees with/Disagrees with/Critiques—supplied through a combination of textual analysis as well as connections determined by users
- Learns from/Draws parallels to/collaborates with—supplied through user-identified connections

Each of these categories will house data that is connected to both an antecedent, or source of the connection, as well as a consequent, or entry being put into relationship with the source. In the case of terminology and concept/idea, entries would be collected into relation through mutual use or identification of similarity of definition or concept in the presence of disparate terms. For example, Price's concept of counter-diagnosis as "us[ing] language to subvert the diagnostic urge to 'explain' an irrational mind" (2011, p. 179) might be identified by a user to be similar or connected to Martinez' concept of 'counterstory,' identified as a methodology that "empower[s] the minoritized through the formation of stories that disrupt the erasures embedded in standardized majoritarian methodologies" (2020, p. 3). Lastly, the database will integrate user-supplied annotations, quotations, or relevant details that expand on the identified relationships. Figure 1 shows a mockup of a database that demonstrates the basic functionality of these categories of relationship.



Figure 2  
Example Network of Connected Sources



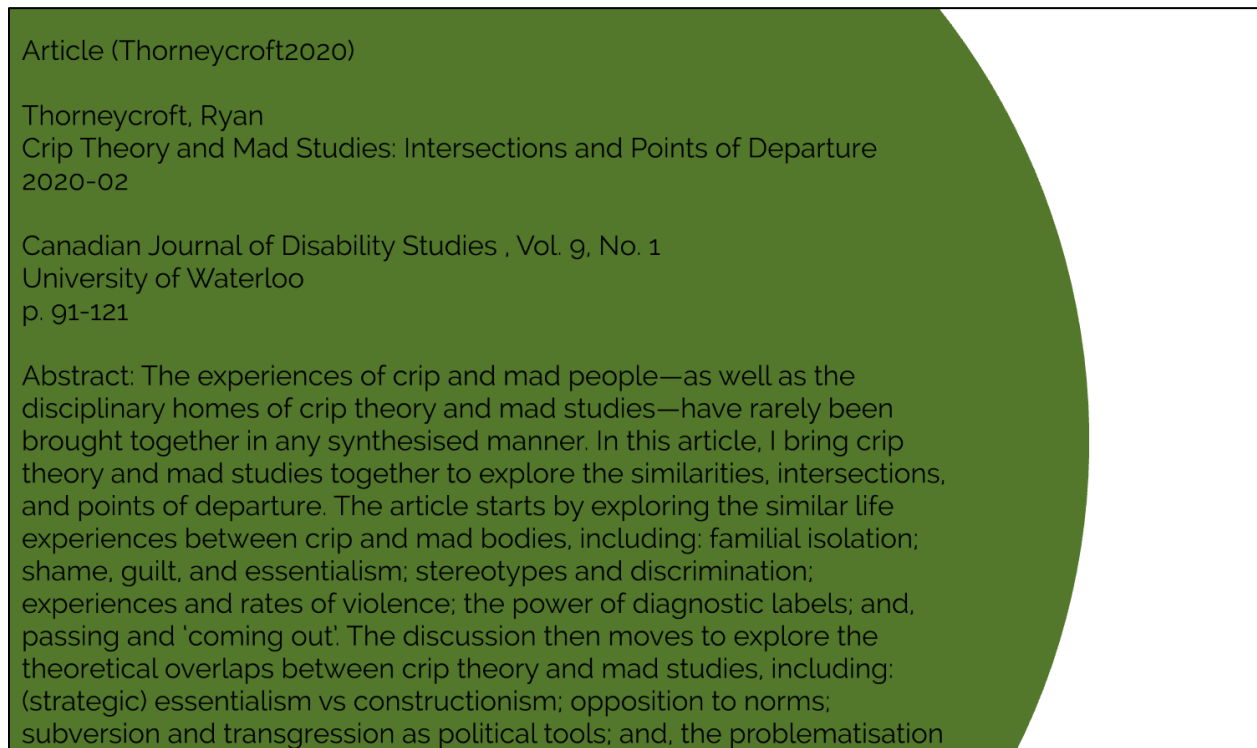
The network map will allow the user to navigate visually between nodes, zooming in and out to trace connections and visualize concentrations of citations, broader loci of clusters, and breadth and depth of relationship maps. Importantly, each node will be presented as equal in size, only becoming larger while zooming in or being centered upon selection. In this way, the map will be designed to avoid “revolv[ing] around questions of status and impact within specific fields...in the process reifying hierarchies” (Buehler & Samer, 2018, p. 29) that is typical of existing citational networks.

A user menu will be integrated into the visualization interface that will allow users to customize the focus of the visualization based on metadata and relationship categories. For example, a user could select a source and the relationship “critiques.” The visualization would then display the core node and any

other sources connected by this relationship. This will allow the collected information on each source to offer differing interpretations and insights based on which data the user is choosing to focus on. An alternative view might select metadata of scholarly discipline and a specific term, reorganizing nodes that are linked to that term into clusters based on discipline. Within these user-defined views, individual sources would still maintain all of their connections as de-emphasized rays. This facilitates a 'rabbit-hole' approach to exploring the data, allowing the user to jump between nodes and discover new sources that might be connected to a source in a way that differs from the current defined focus.

When interacting with a node, users will be able to click through to a description box that will display the base bibliographic information about the source, the applied category labels/keywords, and any user-supplied annotations and/or quotations. Figure 3 demonstrates this source-specific view of a node. As further explained in the subsequent section, the source view will incorporate options for users to contribute additional information to the source.

**Figure 3**  
A Highlighted Node with Bibliographic Data



### *Social Interface*

The final layer of the DSCA is a social platform for user interaction. Users who establish accounts will have access to common features of social networks, including the ability to make personal profiles, upload and link themselves to personal scholarship, and engage in forum discussions with other users. This social interface is planned to be accessible to users both independently of the data visualization and as features integrated within the network map.

As part of each ray defining relationships between nodes, users will be able to access additional content that pertains to the connection. As seen in the example provided in Figure 4, an expandable ray would display additional context for the relationship, such as user supplied annotations, quotations, or details of the

textual analysis that generated the connection. This information would be provided with the initial submission or creation of the connection, while additional contributions would be able to be added through interaction with the source node or expanded connection. Additionally, views of expanded connections would offer users the opportunity to link to a user forum, enabling users to discuss the source and evidence for relationships. This 'living' and additive approach to the database foregrounds a situated and collaborative knowledge production, where "we can come to see our lives as '*relational and constellated*' because our praxes for living 'are built, shaped, and dismantled based on the encounters [we] have with one another within and across particular systems'" (Maier, Hsu, Cedillo, & Yergeau, 2020, n.p., quoting Powell et. al).

#### Figure 4

##### Expanded Connection Providing Context and User Interaction Options

User gxzimmerman:  
"Borrowing from Halperin's (1995: 66) conceptualisation of queer, I also take crip and mad to define disabled and mad identities 'oppositionally and relationally but not necessarily substantively, not as a positivity but as a positionality, not as a thing but as a resistance to the norm.'" (p. 95)

[See \(8\) more annotations](#)  
[See \(11\) discussion posts](#)

Users will also be empowered to actively collaborate on shaping the archive; users will have options to augment database categories by adding hashtags or other forward-looking identifiers as the community identifies the need, facilitating a living archive that adapts to the field as both grow. Through these tools, community knowing-making (Hamraie, 2018) becomes a collaborative and ever-situated effort, attending to the individual work, the intersections of author, place, and community, and the dialog between different nodes as they interact.

### **Toward a Relational Futurity for Disability Studies: A Call to Action**

While I was editing a draft of this manuscript, a new friend, a French literature professor, sent me a link to their most recent publication. Coincidentally, their book chapter focused on developing pedagogical techniques for neurodiverse and disabled students, and while I have now published research twice on the same topic, I had not previously encountered their work. Not particularly surprising, I suppose, considering my friend notes in their article that “after looking in databases...for hours on end, I found only one example of peer-reviewed research on accommodating college-age students with invisible disabilities” (Fronsman-Cecil, 2022, p. 121). This is just one in a multitude of examples of scholars, hard at work on the same projects in the same subject, both completely unaware of each other due to disciplinary silos, differing terms, or the (de)privileging of ideas and contributions by basis of access or connection to dominant theorists or programs.

Now imagine if this same work, and my own work, had been added to the Disability Studies Community Archive. Imagine the collaborative potential of calling up a networked visualization of all sources that include keywords pedagogy and neurodiversity. Imagine further my friend tracing relational connections from a source on neurodiversity that is theorizing the same methods as a source in mad studies, or tracing pedagogy to crip pedagogy to access pedagogy. Imagine this network would enable them to discover not only the frequently cited *Mad at School* (Price, 2011) but also open access publications that are traditionally deprivileged in citation mapping; imagine they are presented scholarship alongside community interventions for those deprivileged in higher education at an equal emphasis. Imagine connecting to an oral histories project that incorporated survivor narratives of life at an institutional school. Imagine all of these sources then connected to a community forum where they could ask for teaching examples or strategies.

In other words, to borrow from Toni Morrison, "I want to draw a map...of a critical geography and use that map to open...space for discovery, intellectual adventure, and close exploration" (Morrison, 1992, p. 3). The DSCA speculates a future for Disability Studies in which we approach the work of scholarship as an opportunity to establish community and connection. It spins a care web from community to theory to personal experience, building relationships as the center of Disability Studies praxis. It deconstructs hierarchies that privilege scholars in the white, Global North, to visually reinforce the foundational and continuing centrality of perspectives from BIPoC, multiply-marginalized community members. And it

tears down the disciplinary silos that have been contrived to lock scholarships of difference away from each other and the systems-altering potential of collaborative, collective knowing-making.

The DSCA is no humble proposal: it is a massive, career-long project that necessitates the contributions of perhaps dozens of professionals from differing communities, disciplines, and perspectives. By definition, this is not a project that can be developed by a single individual. Nothing about the community without the community, eh? But, as Anzaldúa reminds us, "Nothing happens in the 'real' world unless it first happens in the images in our heads" (1990, p. 385). This is my imagination, reaching out to invite all of you to imagine with me. I invite those invested in disability, in community, and in experiences of marginalization and difference to come craft the vision, to step from speculation to reality to shaping the future. I "trust disabled ingenuity as a site of invention and transformative subversion" (currie & Hubrig, 2022, p. 133), trust that if we can care work our way into access over innumerable daily barriers, then we can collaborate this project into existence.

*For readers interested in contributing to the work to develop the Disability Studies Community Archive, please [contact Griffin Zimmerman](#) for more information.*

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## **Chapter 5: (Re)Centering Intersectional Knowledges for Collective Futures**

For me, practicing radical empathy means then, to approach disability as a single Aspen in a grove, to trace its roots to where they entangle, merge, and divide with racism, classism, sexism, queer and fat phobia, xenophobia, the ideological hierarchy of separating Land from Animal from Human, and every other means of Othering, to understand myself (and by extension, the journey I take to advance disability scholarship) as interdependent and connected.

As I deepen my practice of relationality, I often have conversations about the lived experience of being a White, disabled, neurodivergent, queer and trans person. We talk about the complexity of privilege, about how my access to whiteness is always filtered through the perceptions of others and whether they recognize my crip gait or look askance at my sudden echolalic interjection. I have previously written about navigating a world where my access and safety is mediated by whether someone hears my voice and names my masculine presentation a masquerade (Zimmerman, 2019). I try to explain to my similarly crip, queer and trans children that we will still, always, be in a position of privilege and power when placed next to Brown bodyminds, even as we cannot currently legally enter the appropriate bathroom in our state. How that positioning requires awareness and consistent effort to deconstruct Othering barriers in this complex world we reside in. How relationality means that while anyone, anywhere, is subjugated, none of us are free.

While the centering identity in my scholarship is disability, in each of the three essays in this dissertation, I have consistently insisted on the centrality of BiPoC, multiply-marginalized voices to build our understanding of, and praxes against, disability marginalization. While Siebers, Davis, and Dolmage helped me form an initial schema for understanding disability and my own experiences, it has been Gloria Anzaldúa, Octavia Butler, adrienne maree brown, Mia Mingus, Lydia X. Z. Brown, Sara Ahmed, Remi Yergeau, Eli Clare, and Susan Raffo, Saidiya Hartman, Hortense Spillers, and Claudia Rankine, Sami Schalk and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha and Shayda Kafai, that have taught me how to relate and survive and fight and thrive. Without Black&Indigenous&Brown&Feminist&Queer&Crip&NeuroQueer&Mad&Trans voices, I wouldn't have learned how to build community or disability identity, how to practice care work and radical empathy, how to find joy and acceptance and imagine a futurity for myself and my world that was full of disabled brilliance. I cannot overemphasize the transformative, liberatory, femme knowing-making that is collectively shepherding my individual praxis and our community awareness into a/our futurity. I also cannot deny the needed, necessary, and extensive work we, the White minority that is so frequently centered in scholarly conversation, have to do to build a rhetorically inclusive set of praxes that go beyond acknowledgment to listen to, value, and (re)center the BiPoC, multiply-marginalized knowledges that will bring us Home.

In each of these three essays, I have attempted to unpack localized ways in which disability theory can engage in the necessary growth to be (re)centered in

these intersectional knowledges. First, I focus on the classroom, where liberatory pedagogies seek to increase student equity by imagining new methods for dismantling discriminatory and debilitating assessment systems. Here, I suggest that in lieu of focusing on developing tools and systems, emancipatory pedagogies can leverage lessons from Disability Justice to develop habits of mind that rely on building relationships and being in community with students to enable an ungrading praxis. In my second essay, I turn from the classroom to the discipline, exploring the ways in which a siloed, disciplinary approach is driving wedges between differing communities of scholarship on disability. By drawing upon the wisdom of Black Feminist scholar Jennifer Nash, I name the border-policing of disciplinary factions as defensive posturing that works against the goals of our collective scholarship. I instead urge a practice of 'letting go' that enables our differing foci and communities to lean into radical empathy and coalition, building the potential for a collaborative disciplinary future. Finally, in my final essay, I turn from discipline to community, speculating the creation of a collaborative, open-access, and community-constructed digital humanities project for Disability Studies. I argue that, by engaging in a process of mapping relationships between community, research, activism, art, and personal narrative, we can collaboratively create a digital care web that would engender an interconnected disability community centered in the knowledges of the most marginalized. In each of these locations, I call for a turn towards relationality and radical empathy, recognizing the power of knowing-making that is centered in BIPOC, multiply-marginalized

experiences and acknowledges differing experiences of marginalization while embracing the potential of collective coalition and collaboration.

In the words of Piepzna-Samarasinha, "I believe in the disabled future" (2022, p. 17). I also believe that to build that future, we absolutely must name all those who experience difference and marginalization as deeply welcomed kin, as collaborators, fellow dissidents, and care workers whose collective brilliance is the foundation of not just survival, but a thriving future. This work represents baby steps, speculation, dreaming and theorizing and practicing toward that future. The ways in which this work can be expanded are truly limitless. In the context of the classroom, I dream that Disability Studies collaborates with other scholarships of marginalization to develop theoretical approaches to pedagogy that are grounded in emancipatory promise. I wish for the opportunity to write a guide that draws on reflection, relationality, and community to help teachers in higher education to question underlying assumptions and norms and thoughtfully craft their own personal ethos toward education. I wish that readers of this text would feel supported in understanding how their ethos connects to their praxis, enabling them to not just adopt but localize differing schemas and tools to their own students and classroom. For my discipline, I imagine a future that flatly rejects the specter of appropriation to speak in a varied and united voice that will eclipse any effort to conscript, twist, and dilute our stories. I imagine more scholarly work that explicitly links to BIPOC knowledges and eschews disciplinary boundaries to practice inter(disciplinary)(dependent)(linked) scholarship. I imagine community and personal narratives being valued as core narratives of equal importance to

knowledge produced within academic structures. And I wish for anyone engaged in liberatory work to recognize we cannot do so through single-axis politics or pitting the experiences of racism against ableism against sanism against sexism. I imagine a world where we all understand that no individual is an island, where we see the ripples that stretch outward from our stinging hands and meandering, unfocused conversations.

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