Enacting a Culture of Access in Our Conference Spaces

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Symposium

Enacting a Culture of Access in Our Conference Spaces

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Note: Our names are listed alphabetically to convey our shared first-author roles in composing and editing this symposium.

A culture of access, then, is a culture of transformation.
—Elizabeth Brewer, Cynthia L. Selfe, and Melanie Yergeau, “Creating a Culture of Access in Composition Studies”

Access for the sake of access or inclusion is not necessarily liberatory, but access done in the service of love, justice, connection and community is liberatory and has the power to transform.
—Mia Mingus, ”‘Disability Justice’ Is Simply Another Term for Love”

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In every rhetoric and writing studies conference, the authors of this symposium have heard variations of the same sentiment:

*Ugh, scripted presentations are so boring, so no, I didn’t bring any access copies for the audience.*

*You have to consider the cost/benefit analysis of each access expense.*

*Registration costs have increased, but that’s largely because ASL [American Sign Language] interpreters are so costly.*

These phrases are often casually spoken, sometimes quietly just between two people. Other times, these are spoken by conference organizers to a large audience as a justification for increased registration fees. We’ve heard these sentiments uttered so many times, and with every utterance we hear the same thing:

*Accessibility detracts from the conference experiences of nondisabled people.*

*Disabled people are expensive burdens.*

*Your presence is not worth the time, money, or effort required.*

People’s value cannot be boiled down to the expense of their accommodations. We are not costs, and if we want the field of rhetoric and composition to grow, we must make space for the presence of disabled, sick, neurodivergent, and mad scholar-teacher-activists, especially those who embody multiple marginalized identities. We want to reframe conversations about access in our professional spaces and beyond. The kind of access we are talking about is not static, individualized, or bureaucratic. We want to reframe conversations about access in our professional spaces and beyond. The kind of access we are talking about is not static, individualized, or bureaucratic. Rather, we echo Elizabeth Brewer et al.’s call for a culture of access in composition studies, a culture that transforms. We invite you to join us in building a culture that, in the words of Mia Mingus, prioritizes access in the service of love, justice, connection, and liberation (“Disability Justice”).

We believe that access is dynamic. Access is relational. Access is intersectional. Access is political. In the words of disabled women of color Mia Mingus, Alice Wong, and Sandy Ho, access is love.
The authors of this symposium believe that this expansive, intersectional concept of access, cultivated by disabled women and femmes of color Mingus, Wong, Ho, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarashina, Patty Berne, and others, can radically transform the ways our field imagines, discusses, and enacts access in conference spaces. We don’t mean to minimize the often unthanked labor of conference organizing. Throughout this piece, we acknowledge not only the things some conference organizers get wrong but also the things conference organizers in our field get right. Our aim in writing this symposium is to push conversations in our field beyond discussions of legal minimums, expenses, and cost/benefit analyses. We expand upon the innovative, multimodal work of CCCC Committee on Disability Issues volunteers in maintaining the website Composing Access (u.osu.edu/composingaccess/), an act of love in itself, which includes a wealth of concrete, practical strategies for incorporating access into conference planning and attendance. Invigorated by their labor, and that of so many other disability activists in the profession, we call for an “access is love” framework in our professional spaces. Such a framework, we argue, will benefit not only disabled scholars but the entire field of rhetoric and writing studies. Our scholarly conversations about writing, teaching, and rhetoric will become richer, deeper, and more impactful when we ensure our professional spaces are accessible to disabled scholars.

Adam and Ruth begin this symposium by defining access through a disability justice perspective. In this definitional work, we speak to how disability justice principles can enhance our field’s practice of access in professional spaces. We then turn to the experiences, analyses, and theorizations of scholar-teachers who are disabled, neurodivergent, and/or in recovery. Neil Simpkins analyzes the sticky note protest at the 2019 CCCC Annual Convention as a manifestation of the feminist snap; Leslie Anglesey and Ellen Cecil-Lemkin recast the quiet room as a needed space for neurodivergent and disabled scholars; Margaret Fink, Janine Butler, Tonya Stremlau, Stephanie L. Kerschbaum, and Brenda Jo Brueggemann insist that conferences cultivate collective access by honoring individual communication access needs; Anonymous calls out the potentially fatal tradition of linking likeability to drinking alcohol in networking spaces.
Cody A. Jackson and Christina V. Cedillo challenge everyone to assess the material realities of our approaches to disability scholarship and access work, emphasizing the risk this work creates for the most vulnerable of us. Through a feminist ethics of love, these scholars identify access barriers in our conference spaces; at times, they do so in anger, frustration, and hurt. But they also do this truth telling in the hope that we can all do better.

**Defining Access**

Access is more than the ability to physically enter a space in a wheelchair. A disabled person can enter a space yet still not fully participate because of a lack of what Aimi Hamraie calls access knowledge, the “historical project of knowing and making access” (5). While architects can design a building according to the American National Standard Institute’s policy on Accessible and Usable Buildings, the users in the space may lack access knowledge, thus contributing to a culture that ignores, neglects, or disdains the needs of disabled people. Access requires more than a list of legal and architectural standards. As Tanya Titchkosky argues, “access is not really a substance and it is more than a process. As perception, as talk and conduct, as a form of consciousness, access leads us to ask how access can be an interpretative move that puts people into different kinds of relations with their surroundings” (13). Titchkosky’s framework moves us toward a relational, affective understanding of access that asks, how do we foster belonging among people with diverse and divergent bodyminds in our professional spaces and beyond?

Scholars in writing studies have asked similar questions, proposing expansive frameworks for access in designing accessible writing classrooms and professional events. Tara Wood et al. caution that a simplistic “checklist approach [to access] locates disability over there, isolates disability within the body or mind of one student in one class, freezes disability as a set of symptoms rather than as a social process” (147). Wood et al. want to see writing teachers and institutions move beyond a focus on individual accommodations for a handful of students with fixed access needs. Rather, they imagine access as something transformative, rooted in the very culture of learning communities. In turn, Brewer et al. caution against a culture “that ‘flattens’ access as rehabilitation, or as inclusion for the sake of increased consumption,” and, rather, call for a culture of access that “disables the very
design of cultural and institutional spaces” (151). As our contributors show, a culture of access is one that embeds access into the fabric of academic practices, allowing scholar-teachers of rhetoric and composition to create spaces that value disabled bodyminds.

Disability rhetoric’s theorizing of access as something communal, fluid, and transformative echoes the work of disability justice organizers outside of the academy where the most robust, nuanced conversations on access are happening. Disability justice is a framework that works to liberate disabled people by abolishing ableism, understanding how ableism “has been formed in relation to other systems of domination and exploitation,” and creating communities of care that affirm the inherent value of all bodyminds (Sins Invalid 13). Disability justice is not about mere reform but is invested in dismantling and rebuilding exclusionary institutions, and as such, disability justice may always exist in tension with academic institutions. However, we believe its principles can deepen our professional space’s commitment to access as a messy “collective responsibility” that can foster intimacy, joy, vulnerability, and love (Piepzna-Samarasinha; Mingus et al.). Following their lead, then, we define access as the dynamic, collective movement of creating spaces where multiple marginalized disabled people with a wide range of needs can engage in whatever manners they choose. Our contributors emphasize that access necessitates more than the ability to simply enter a physical, digital, or textual space: access, rather, produces the conditions for all people to connect, create, and lead if they so choose. Our definition of access is based on four major principles, which reflect access’s complexity and liberatory potential: (1) access is dynamic, (2) access is relational, (3) access is intersectional, and (4) access is political.

1. Access Is Dynamic (and Sometimes a Little Messy)
You’ve likely seen the image of a person sitting in a wheelchair designating accessible parking spots, bathrooms, ramps. That symbol is the official International Symbol of Access (ISA). While the image’s prevalence marks the presence of disability in powerful ways, it can also flatten access needs by visualizing only wheelchair users (Ben-Moshe and Powell). The ISA in
isolation isn’t the problem but rather a symptom of the larger issue: access is so often described as something static, absolute, and focused on the physical features of a space. This perception of access overlooks the dynamic, sometimes conflicting, ways that access can manifest, leaving pressing questions: What does access look like for neurodivergent folks? What happens when people with different disabilities have conflicting access needs? Autistic activist Lydia X. Z. Brown explains that creating “spaces that are equally and fully accessible for every single person’s possible access needs . . . is actually not possible.” The same disability can look radically different between two people and heck, can even look radically different in the same person from day to day.

To account for the diverse range of disability, a theory of access must similarly be fluid and dynamic (Yergeau et al.). Access checklists might provide conference organizers a place to start, but because they approach access as static and finite, they cannot on their own create a culture of dynamic access. Still, the difficulty of achieving access does not mean we should give up. As Brown insists, “Disability Justice as a framework and imperative allows us to acknowledge and work within imperfections and limitations . . . [to] aim for infinite arrays of ways to communicate and connect.” While conference organizers may never be able to plan for every single access need before an event, access’s complexity provides opportunities to imagine new ways to engage with people, spaces, and community. This symposium posits the question, how might our conference experience transform if all organizers, volunteers, and participants approached access as an ongoing, recursive movement that, while never perfect, moves our communities toward belonging?

2. Access Is Relational
Disability and access are far too dynamic to be reduced into a one-way street. And yet, so often, access is described as a vertical framework: access is given by someone with more power to someone with less power. When individual disabled people have to ask for access to a conference space, their inclusion is dependent on the whims and resources of those in power. The Creating Collective Access (CCA) initiative underscores the need for horizontal and collective models of access:

Access is rarely weaved into a collective commitment and way of being; it is isolated and relegated to an afterthought (much like disabled people). Access
is complex. It is more than just having a ramp or getting disabled folks/crips into the meeting. Access is a constant process that doesn’t stop. It is hard and even when you have help, it can be impossible to figure out alone.

Relational models of access go beyond ensuring individuals can enter a space: they can also cultivate intimacy and love. For CCA cofounder Mia Mingus, deep and meaningful access creates what she calls “access intimacy,” the “eerie comfort that your disabled self feels with someone on a purely access level” (“Access Intimacy”). Access requires vulnerability, the vulnerability of disclosing, of asking for help, and of exposing embodied needs and/or traumas. And, of course, the ability to be vulnerable (especially in professional spaces) is a function of positionality, privilege, and power (Jones et al.). Not all folks can ask for help in straightforward ways or at all.

When we move toward access, as Mingus illustrates, we invite others inside the borders that close off our bodyminds from the world around us. Conferences are where we share our work and, thus, ourselves. Access can bring people together and move them toward liberation—liberation that our authors show our field desperately needs. But for that liberation to occur, disabled scholars need to feel safe in communicating their access needs to the community. As Osorio argues in “How to Be an Access Advocate,” “too often, disability advocates bear the burden of advocating for increased accessibility. But our calls for greater inclusion would be stronger and more persuasive if everyone joined in.” For access to be fully realized in our conference spaces, all attendees must commit to making space for each other in a spirit of care rather than obligation. We thus invite readers—disabled or not, invested in disability studies or not—to join us in creating a culture of access where all scholar-teachers can thrive.

3. Access Is Intersectional

It’s no coincidence that the activists who founded the Creating Collective Access movement are disabled women of color. Models of access that focus solely on disability threaten to exclude disabled people who occupy multiple marginalized identities. Unfortunately, in much of disability studies (DS) scholarship and the mainstream disability rights movement, disability has been discussed as a parallel—rather than intersecting—identity to race (Bell 278; Hamraie 68; Sins Invalid). The presumed whiteness of disability establishes racism and ableism as separate oppressive forces, erasing the lived experiences of disabled people of color. Thus, both disability activists
and DS scholars of color have long advocated for an intersectional approach to disability, which Sami Schalk defines as follows: “as a dynamic form of matrix (as opposed to single-axis) thinking, intersectionality provides an important means for untangling the mutual constitution of oppressions such as racism, ableism, and sexism” (8). An intersectional approach to understanding disability complicates the model of disability as an isolated, static identity and, furthermore, demands an intersectional approach to cultivating access.

Approaches to access that presume whiteness (and straightness and cisness) neglect to consider how racism and other oppressive ideologies impede access for queer, trans, and/or disabled people of color. Indeed, an understanding of access isolated to just disability overlooks how an undocumented autistic person may not be able to fly to a conference, or how a Black disabled person may feel unsafe in a heavily policed conference venue. Understanding the importance of intersectional approaches to access, Mingus asks, “how are we re-imagining access in ways that include, but are not limited to disability; that encompass class, language, gender, mamas, parents and children?” (“Reflections”). For Mingus, this question isn’t hypothetical—it’s a call to action. If our conference planning only accounts for access designed for white cisgender disabled people, our field will leave queer and trans disabled people of color brilliance behind—a detriment to our field’s conversations.

4. Access Is Political
A dynamic, collective, and intersectional approach to access goes beyond ensuring entry for an individual disabled person; it can transform worlds. For this reason, disability activists see access as a political project. We don’t mean this to say that access is partisan, but, rather, that access work can expose the injustice, barriers, and exclusions that keep disabled people subjugated in an ableist society. As Hamraie argues, “how we structure knowledge, interact with material things, and tell stories about the users of built environments matter for belonging and justice” (3). Titchkosky identifies the transformative potential of access, writing that “access as a form of oriented social action” can enable people to “question the organization of social life, especially in its bureaucratic configurations” (11). In this way, access provides a framework to question assumptions about which bodyminds are permitted to participate in various spaces, communities,
and texts. Such questioning makes room for writing new stories about who belongs and what belonging can look like, ushering in liberatory paradigms for organizing social life that value disabled bodyminds.

Disability activists create models of access that challenge bureaucratic frameworks of access that focus on neoliberal buzzwords, such as inclusion, diversity, and equality, concepts that promise to make space for individual people with disabilities while maintaining traditional power structures. Mingus describes the world remaking powers of access that goes beyond inclusion:

Access for the sake of access is not necessarily liberatory [sic], but access for the sake of connection, justice, community, love and liberation is. We can use access as a tool to transform the broader conditions we live in, to transform the conditions that created that inaccessibility in the first place. Access can be a tool to challenge ableism, ablebodied supremacy, independence and exclusion. I believe we can do access in liberatory ways that aren’t just about inclusion, diversity and equality; but are rather, in service of justice, liberation and interdependence.

Access can be world making. As Mingus writes, broad, liberatory approaches to access can help cultivate worlds in which all people who want to can participate, lead, and create. Political understandings of access provide methods for identifying the larger social forces that prevent access and organizing about eradicating those forces. A political understanding of access within academia, for instance, may prompt questions about why so many precarious scholars are forced to spend money on and travel to conferences in the first place. How can we create new accessible methods of sharing our work, of listening across institutions, of making knowledge among grad students and different ranks of faculty? Asking such questions may develop multiple modes for scholarly sharing and engagement—thus transforming the landscape of scholarship in the US academy.

The following contributors examine specific case studies based on their experiences of access at conferences in rhetoric and writing studies. They speak to the limits and costs of a static, bureaucratic approach to access while challenging our field to reimagine access as an ongoing, collective practice grounded in disability justice. Adam and Ruth invite the readers of CCC to read these pieces with a stance of openness, so we can all ask ourselves, each other, and our professional organizations: how can
we collaboratively create a culture of access in composition studies that prioritizes access for nonnormative bodyminds?

**The Sticky Note Snap**

*Neil Simpkins*

University of Washington-Bothell

I first saw the sign declaring “The CCCC Convention is accessible!” at the 2018 conference. That CCCC was the second conference where I had participated in the Committee for Disability Issues in College Composition (CDICC). I knew from both my experience as a conference goer and as a participant in access conversations for the organization that the claim “The CCCC Convention is accessible!” was a bold move.

At CCCC 2019, the sign returned. In the CDICC meeting, we snapped. After discussing for an hour different access failures we had experienced, which we knew that we would continue to experience, conversation shifted toward that sign. The repetitive, frustrating work we do every year—and the existence of our group itself—was evidence against the assertion that “The CCCC Convention is accessible!” In our room full of composition teachers, sticky notes and markers came out of backpacks and bags. We spent several minutes freewriting different access needs that hadn’t been fulfilled. We gathered our notes and went on with the rest of our meeting. Afterward, we walked and rolled out of the room, across a skyway, down an elevator, across the bumpy street, up another elevator, and then down to the main hallway of the conference to stick our response to the sign. There, as conference goers watched, we left more sticky notes and markers for others to add their own commentary to the sign.

This moment was, as Sara Ahmed calls it, an instance of “feminist snap.” Faced with a rhetorical claim that profited off our hard work and that was also unfulfilled, members of the CDICC and other disabled conference goers had to respond. The feminist snap is a reaction to pressure, to the “mild irritations” and the major conflicts one encounters moving through a sexist, racist, and ableist world (188–90). The snap is an unanticipated moment of rebuttal. While the entity snapped against might not see it coming, the snapper holds a long legacy of holding it in or working for change
(or both) before the snap. Ahmed writes about how the snap is a “feminist communication system” that circulates work for change. As she describes:

Snap here is not only about individual action, those moments when she doesn’t take it anymore, when she reacts to what she has previously endured, though it includes those moments. Snap is also what is necessary for “it” to come to the surface as some tangible thing, as a situation that should not be patiently endured, as a situation that demands our collective impatience. (211)

Our sticky note snap at the CCCC sign was a moment of collective reaction to the acceptance of ableism in our conference spaces. In other words, our group continually works hard to reveal how academic conferences are fundamentally inaccessible. This snap, like many others, was an angry reaction, and it can seem hard to move forward from it. However, the snap is an example of the collaborative anticipatory thinking required for building accessibility; a snap can be pedagogical. Here are three things the sticky note snap teaches us.

First, rather than a checklist, the sticky notes modeled the complexity of creating access. For example, here is the text from three sticky notes posted on “The CCCC Convention is accessible!” sign that take up the same access need (using the microphone):

• “I don’t need to speak into the mic—you can hear me, right?”
• There must be microphones for questions!
• Access Check 101: how’s the lighting? We could turn some lights on/off. How’s the sound? (Not can you hear me). Any other changes before we start?

The first note, which I wrote, models an ableist action performed over and over at conferences, one that irritates me because I have to raise my hand and say, “No, I won’t be able to hear you.” The second note makes an emphatic demand that highlights one way that CCCC is indeed not accessible. The last note, however, informs and teaches the reader how to perform an “access check” at the beginning of a conference presentation. Around this one issue, interpersonal and structural solutions are provided even within the snap back against the claim.
Second, the sticky note snap asks CCCC-goers who are not involved in disability access to acknowledge the hard work that goes into building access at a conference site. The CDICC continually negotiates how fundamentally inaccessible academic conferences are. We work every year, many of us without financial recompense, to make attending CCCC doable within its inaccessibility. For example, we help create an access guide that maps the conference site and inventories potential problems for access, made anew each year. We staff an Access Table the whole duration of the conference that works as a port of call for conference goers moving (or attempting to move) about the conference. We fight ongoing battles about getting enough interpreters and computer-aided real-time transcriptionists each year. The declarative statement that “The CCCC Convention is accessible!” wasn’t only frustrating because it was inaccurate. It caused a snap because it papered over the continual work done by disabled members of CCCC to make space for each other.

Ahmed reminds us that we should emphasize how the snap is a reaction, not an action coming from nowhere (189). As a final lesson, the snap reveals a need for a paradigm shift: we needed people to understand that accessibility is always an ongoing, negotiated process that is never complete. Even within each of our CDICC meetings, we have to negotiate the conflicting access needs we bring to the table, learning to announce our names before we speak so that regardless of how our brains process sound or sight we know who is speaking, growing comfortable with the way bodies move around and in and out of the room, learning to speak slowly enough for interpreters to follow. As Shannon Walters describes in *Rhetorical Touch*, these negotiations as we come together in the meeting space are part of the process by which we rhetorically identify with one another as disabled people across our different embodiments; we acknowledge how we need to support one another beyond our own personal needs, to retrain ourselves to be open to changing how we exist in a space together (65). When we snapped with our sticky notes, it wasn’t just because we were facing physical exclusion; it’s that we knew a sign claiming “The CCCC Convention is accessible!” could convince conference goers that they did not need to participate in the work of disability access, as the “problem” was solved. We need our allies and accomplices to not only listen to what we ask for, but to practice the mindset of caring about how spaces are created, participate in
the maintenance of those spaces, and listen to what we need. We want you to move forward with us—but you have to attend to the snap.

The Importance of Keeping Conference Quiet Rooms Quiet

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After a few conference sessions, Ellen is beginning to feel the strain of ignoring the buzzing anxiety swirling around in her head. Knowing that she needs her service dog to perform deep pressure therapy in order to make it through the rest of the day, she checks the conference’s program to determine where the quiet room is today. She could go back to her hotel room, but it’s a forty-minute round trip, and she’d miss the conference presentation she wants to attend. After some searching, she figures out the quiet room location and heads there. Upon arriving, she sees that it’s set up as a traditional conference room—chairs lined up in rows facing the front of the room with barely any open space—but the lights are dimmed. It’s not ideal; Ellen needs to lie down for her service dog to perform her task, but there’s some open space toward the front. After she lies down and positions her service dog on her chest, two scholars come into the room, chatting loudly as they switch on the lights and sit down. Feeling vulnerable in a prone position, Ellen tries to ignore the other scholars, but her anxiety continues to rise with the sound of their voices. She doesn’t have the energy to ask them to be quiet, so she gets up, heads back to her hotel room, and misses the presentation she wanted to attend.

The move toward providing quiet rooms at conferences is born out of disability scholars advocating for an increased culture of access within and among our professional organizations. As Susan Naomi Bernstein explains, the development of quiet rooms in institutional contexts serves an essential access point by providing safe spaces for individuals who experience sensory overload connected with diverse bodies and minds. The relative silence of the room offers a necessary counterpoint to the “cacophony of emotion and sensation” that characterizes our conference spaces (Bernstein). These
spaces are often necessary for disabled graduate students and contingent faculty who cannot afford to rent a conference hotel room.

Groups such as Composing Access and the Committee on Disability Issues in College Composition have long advocated for our professional organizations to work on accessibility at conferences. Elizabeth Brewer et al. argued in 2014 that composition studies has been slow and inconsistent in our professional commitment to accessibility. To illustrate this disconnect, they highlight the publication of Brenda Jo Brueggemann et al.’s “Becoming Visible: Lessons in Disability” in 2001. “Becoming Visible” highlighted the need for greater disciplinary awareness of the presence of disabled scholars and students in the classroom, in our scholarship, and in our professional organizations. Despite Brueggemann et al.’s acknowledgment nineteen years ago that our professional organizations (including CCCC) “have begun to imagine richly the ways that an awareness of and attendance to disability furthers much about and in our field” (370), providing much in the way of accessibility has been slow, especially for invisible disabilities. For example, based upon our review of publicly available archived conference programs, it is only within the past five years that our national conferences have started offering quiet rooms. CCCC first offered a quiet room for attendees in 2015, and since then other conferences have followed suit, such as the Rhetoric Society of America, Feminisms and Rhetorics, and the Thomas R. Watson Conference.

Unfortunately, Ellen’s experience with quiet rooms that aren’t quiet isn’t unique. Scholars who need them have witnessed and circulated narratives of quiet room misuse. These narratives can signal to other disabled scholars that, despite their intention, the rooms are not always safe places. This has been the case for Leslie, whose knowledge of what often happens in quiet rooms has prevented her from ever setting foot in one as a first-time graduate student attendee at a national conference. Leslie was experiencing all her personal telltale signs of the onset of an episode related to her anxiety disorders. Because her conditions are often triggered, in part, through excessive auditory stimuli, she decided to leave a panel and take a short break in which she could engage in the practices that calm her overstimulated bodymind in order to rejoin the conference as soon as possible and in a way that met her needs. She tried to escape to a quiet hallway, but quickly learned that all the peripheral conference spaces—hallways, elevators, and even lines at Starbucks—extended the work of the conference and, with
that, the same social circumstances and sensory outputs. Seeing a fellow graduate student, Leslie shared her need to find a quiet place, to which the student told her she should go to the quiet room, then shared how he had just been working on his dissertation in the room and found it to be a perfectly adequate space.

Other stories about quiet room misuse circulate within the disability community. One of our colleagues, for example, shared an experience of attending a conference in which the lactation room and quiet room were in the same space. While such uses of quiet rooms may not seem disruptive, neither of us can access the intended benefits of a quiet room—what we need in order to attend the conference—when they are used in this way. For example, even the mundane ticktack of a keyboard disrupts Leslie’s ability to work through the processes of de-escalating her anxiety. When her anxiety rises, Leslie experiences bodily sensations that remind her of an exposed electrical wire dancing over a puddle of water. Energy sparks from the top of her head to her toes, hot and tingling. During these times, noises are altered: voices become hollow and compressed, as if the sound has been concussed, while atmospheric elements (the clinking of cups, shuffling feet, etc.) can become amplified. Quiet rooms provide Leslie with the physical, emotional, and mental space to curtail her anxiety. But this work cannot happen when the space is misused as an extension of the conference space.

Narratives of the misuse of quiet rooms have kept Leslie from ever setting foot in one, a frustrating situation because of the important points of access they offer. Instead, Leslie has found that she must create her own quiet room by staying in hotel rooms in the conference location, which enables her to slip upstairs and then back to the conference as needed. But this places an unnecessary financial burden on disabled scholars: paying for rooms in a conference hotel (especially as a graduate student) to re-create a point of access (even when conferences have attempted to provide one) because other attendees do not understand quiet rooms. When the burden of creating access rests upon disabled scholars, it reinforces the notion that disability is a personal tragedy (Siebers) or is isolating and individuated (Dolmage Disability Rhetoric). We experience conversations about access at professional conferences couched in cost/expense rhetoric, in language that suggests access is a disabled scholar’s obligation, or as something that can be checked off a list by assigning a room to be a quiet room and then moving on with conference planning. Part of the ways in which our profes-
sional organizations can work to dismantle these myths is by embracing access as a relational process (Kafer) or, in other words, as love (Mingus et al.). When treated as a relational act of love, access is no longer about cost, is no longer an individual’s obligation, is no longer something that can be checked off a list by assigning a room to be a quiet room and then moving on with conference planning.

Quiet rooms, when treated as a relational act of love, are no longer about cost, are no longer an individual’s obligation, and are no longer something that can be checked off a list by assigning a room to be a quiet room and then moving on with conference planning.

Quiet rooms, when engaged as an essential function of ongoing access during conferences, have the potential to modify conferences into more accessible spaces; however, as our narratives suggest, they are frequently misused. While we hope we have begun to clarify the purpose and need of quiet rooms, we know that there is still work needed to expand the implementation of and maintain the accessibility of quiet rooms. As such, we encourage conferences to add quiet rooms and also work to ensure these spaces retain their intended purposes. To begin with, quiet rooms should remain in the same location throughout the entire conference. Having conference attendees reorient and relocate the quiet room daily or hourly is an unnecessary obstacle that undermines access. Second, conference organizers should include a quiet room attendant who can ensure that the space is used as it is intended. As Ellen’s narrative demonstrates, those who need quiet rooms do not always have the energy to devote to regulating the proper use of quiet rooms. Furthermore, it is not the responsibility of disabled scholars to regulate these spaces. Disabled scholars are frequently called upon to do the labor of creating accessible environments, in much the same way as marginalized groups have long been required to do the invisible labor of cultivating a space that is less hostile to their presence.

Finally, we call upon scholars working in rhetoric and composition to learn more about quiet rooms and accessibility. Part of this work can be aided by conference organizers, who can include a description of the purpose of quiet rooms in both the program and on the quiet room doors. Beyond these opening recommendations, we call upon conference organizers, attendees, and scholars to bear in mind that access, at the end of the day, is a community project that is ongoing and that requires firm commitments—in word and in action—to just professional practices.
Honoring Access Needs at Academic Conferences through Computer Assisted Real-Time Captioning (CART) and Sign Language Interpreting

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Our goal is to underscore the importance for conference organizers and attendees to honor deaf attendees’ diverse access needs. We write as deaf academics who have different relationships to and experiences of deafness as well as different communication access preferences and needs. Even as we all require accommodations in order to fully access and participate in conference spaces, we use sign language and/or spoken English in different capacities, with different degrees of comfort, and we take different approaches to working with interpreters and/or captioners in professional settings.

Academic conferences are often inaccessible spaces for deaf attendees because of how much conferences depend on spoken presentations and oral-aural social interactions. When there is ineffective communication access, there are significant consequences not only for us, but for all conference attendees.

Academic conferences are often inaccessible spaces for deaf attendees because of how much conferences depend on spoken presentations and oral-aural social interactions. When there is ineffective communication access, there are significant consequences not only for us, but for all conference attendees. For instance, one year one of us decided to read her paper aloud instead of signing it, as she would normally, because she judged the interpreters’ skill level as inadequate to accurately translate from Ameri-
can Sign Language (ASL) to English. Unfortunately, the interpreters failed to inform this presenter that the microphone was not working properly, compromising the ability of audience members to access the presenter’s message. This example underscores how much access is not a one-way transmission of information but involves all members of the communicative situation.

We see communication access as an integral element that can help create what Elizabeth Brewer et al. describe as a culture of transformative access within conference spaces. Building on their work, we support the conception of access as love that transforms orientations to access that formerly only imagined it as an added cost or burden. For access to be understood as love involves two key concepts: (1) centering deaf and disabled people’s lived experiences and knowledge about effective communication practices, and (2) valuing deaf and disabled people’s presence and participation. Access as love (Mingus et al.) recognizes that communication access moves in more than one direction. For us this means that instead of understanding qualified interpreting and captioning services as something only deaf attendees use, we should recognize how it enables communication for all members of the conference space.

Our experiences of access as love have been frustrated when our communication access requests have been overwritten by event organizers. The nonlove we’ve experienced is based on an understanding of communication access that is stuck in thinking of deaf academics as consuming, or taking, and giving nothing back. In our long histories with academic organizations, conference organizers have resisted paying for particular kinds of access provision and, in some cases, have gone so far as to engage cheaper alternatives even when those alternatives do not actually work to provide access for the requester. When cost is the bottom line, we are forced to engage in awkward and difficult conversations defending our access needs or justifying what we know works for us. How much is inclusion worth? This focus on cost portrays communication access as extra or burdensome and inaccurately implies that there is a one-size-fits-all accommodation for deafness that can be provided by the lowest bidder. Such rhetoric not only excludes deaf academics from conference spaces, but it also asks deaf academics to access communication not according to their needs, but according to the needs of the budget. These messages exact a heavy emotional toll.
We need our professional community to understand that overwriting specific access requests is not a matter of eliminating equally useful, interchangeable options; refusing to honor deaf attendees’ particular requests is to deny communication access. To illustrate, let us briefly explain some differences between computer assisted real-time captioning (CART) and sign language interpreting. Sign language interpreters translate spoken English into the visual-temporal-spatial elements of signs. Professional interpreters also translate signers’ contributions when they present or join in a discussion by voicing in spoken English. By contrast, CART transliterates spoken English into written English on a laptop or tablet screen (see Dukes et al.). These access processes are not interchangeable because relationships, rhetorical exchanges, vocabularies, and communication values (and deficits) shift between them. Thus, some access services may not in fact provide access for a given conference attendee.

When conferences work with deaf attendees to provide the best access services for them, access to our disciplines improves for all attendees. As deaf academics, we are used to collaborating on access. In turn, our knowledge of access strategies and practices means that we need to be actively involved in the process of determining what access moves will be most effective and useful. We recognize that resources are not infinite, and we seek to collaborate proactively with event organizers to work within budgets while ensuring the efficacy of access services. The complexities of scheduling and arranging high-quality communication access does require advance planning and coordination. But we also invite conference attendees to collaborate with us in bringing access copies that support interpreters’ and captioners’ work, practicing reading from scripts at a slower pace, and performing access checks for panels and events in which they participate.

In writing this piece, we encourage readers to view access services not as an expense to list in the conference budget, but as an asset that benefits the growth of knowledge, relationships, and disability/social justice in our field’s shared spaces.
specialized language and rhetoric across spoken English, sign language, and written captions to reach and connect with each other. When we practice access as love, we understand that communication access benefits all attendees because each of us uses it to access one another.

**Please Stop Asking Why I’m Not Drinking: Academic Conferences, Alcohol, and Access**

*Anonymous*

Content Warning: discussion of dangerous situations, addiction, and suicide

It’s been a long day of conferencing, and I’ve been invited to a networking event at a local bar. I’m assured that this event will be great for meeting people before going on the job market and offers “free drinks!” as I’m handed a drink ticket. My mind clicks it together: go to bar = get a job. That seems easy enough.

Outside the bar, I watch from a little way off. The laughter of those who have/can give/need jobs swings with the door. I’m reminded of playing jump rope on the playground years ago and swaying my arms rhythmically, innocently, round and round waiting for the right time to jump in. I put my hand in my pockets. In my left pocket, I can feel the now-fuzzy drink ticket worried at and coiled tightly. In my right pocket, I can feel the cool, round, brass coin. I run my finger over the numeral on its face representing years of recovery.

The last time I drank alcohol, I almost died.

Standing outside this bar, I have to remind myself of this fact. The details do not matter except for this: it all started with the seemingly innocuous choice to have “just” one. I can’t have just one—even if someone in power whom I desperately want to impress offers.

I do a self-check: I’m tired, but right now I’m “good” to be hanging around people who are drinking. I’m reminded of one cliché repeated in recovery meetings, “If you hang around a barbershop long enough, you’ll eventually get a haircut.” It’s corny, but it’s true. I text someone in recovery back home and tell them I’m about to go into a bar “for a work thing” and
promise to check in when I leave. I make an exit strategy, perhaps an allusion to some looming deadline, in case I feel tempted to drink and need to leave abruptly. I put on some bright red lipstick to help with prying “why aren’t you drinking?” questions: “It took me forever to get this lipstick on right (beat: quickly look side to side, shrug, and smile conspiratorially), and I don’t want to ruin it!” That usually gets a light chuckle, and chuckles are good. Never tell anyone that the last time you drank you tried to kill yourself—no one chuckles at that.

I do this extra labor every time I attend professional networking events where “social” drinking happens. If it is a “good” day (meaning: I think I can get through the networking event without drinking), I can access these types of opportunities smiling brightly and ready to give my scholarly elevator pitch. If it is not a good day, then it is not safe for me to access these types of opportunities; I could die if I mess up. Social networking events are incredibly valuable to junior scholars and should not all include literal life-or-death risks.

Unfortunately, I don’t have the power to create meaningful alternatives to alcohol-related networking events at conferences that will draw a crowd. I do, however, have suggestions for those of us who need some red-lipstick deflection techniques when asked rude and inappropriate questions about drinking:

Do:

- Think of something truthful and innocuous you can say before you enter the event. If you’re driving, say that you’re driving.
- Make an exit strategy in case someone gets persistent or you get uncomfortable.
- If possible, have a safe “partner” at the event with you—someone whom you trust that knows that you don’t drink because of recovery-related reasons.

Do not:

- Do NOT disclose that you’re an alcoholic/addict. Though we need to change the stigma surrounding addiction, professional networking events are not the place for this work.
• Do NOT lie. Lies are something you need to maintain; it’s way too much work to put toward someone else’s lack of manners.

While booze-soaked “professional” networking events are likely to persist, there are simple ways to make these events safer and more accessible for people who identify as alcoholics, addicts, or nondrinkers:

• Do NOT frame alcohol as the main attraction of your event. Be creative; there are many nondrinkers who will attend your event, too.
• Do NOT pressure anyone to drink, even in a teasing way. You have no right to put someone else in potential danger.
• Do NOT use someone’s lack of drinking as a lazy, intrusive way to make conversation. It is none of your business. Period.

Here’s the truth: we go to conferences to present our work and get a CV line, but we also go to conferences to meet people with power who can help with our ambitions. It is through these types of social events that one can be propelled from nobody status to “somebody” by being likeable. People consider others “likeable” if they are easily identifiable as part of their in-group. This identification involves the scanning for compatible vectors of identity, ability, and modes of presentation, filtered through implicit biases, to determine if someone seems relatable and useful. We all want the people with whom we work and spend time to bring out the best in us, and we often believe that likeable people will do that labor for us most effectively. It is from hanging out and having fun—not presenting research to small audiences at conferences—that people get tagged as “likeable,” and that tag is often key to getting a job. Junior scholars need their job application packets to make it through the first round of cuts, and the easiest way to strengthen an application is to be known as someone likeable. Being likeable involves socializing, and activities designed to provide “comfortable” spaces for socializing too often prioritize alcohol.

Critically considering the role that alcohol plays in the academic job market can help make this process more equitable, accessible, and safe.

Alcohol is a drug. Scholars on the job market are vulnerable enough—there
is no need to keep “sociable drug use” on the long list of unspoken hiring requirements.

**We Are Here to Crip That Shit: Embodying Accountability beyond the “Word”**

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*Christina V. Cedillo*
University of Houston–Clear Water

“Fuck you, settler. Pay me.”
—Les Hutchinson, “Performing Chicana Cultural Futures”

If you bristle while reading this essay, then perhaps this essay is about you. We write to you as people who have to live with academia’s refusal to hold itself accountable to students, faculty, staff, and communities that it claims to champion (Cedillo; Jackson) and your/our complicity in academia’s privileged and privileging structures. After all, all *isms* and *phobias* are structural, or so scholars have been claiming for decades. Yet, social inequity isn’t simply toxic ideologies but the material conditions that make those (our) lives difficult to live.

What happens when a “structure” is a person, organization, or set of practices? What happens when a “structure” is a set of meetings that continues to cycle back and forth without any accountability? What happens when we specify our critiques at the level of the body in relation to space? To put this another way: *Who* is held accountable and *how*? If accountability ends at the mention of “structural” issues, how can we reframe accountability politics as a profoundly localized, embodied endeavor (Mingus “Dreaming Accountability”)? We cannot, we won’t, tolerate any longer your throwing your hands in the air and deeming injustice beyond your control.

Everyone in our discipline performs complicity with/in its structures in some way. Some of us do so to gain access to professional spaces. With that access, we conspire to enact change, a form of resistance to the damage wreaked by policies decided for us without us. Some of us do so to gain access to professional spaces where we conspire to enact change in resistance to the damage wreaked by policies decided for us without us. We do
so to practice *survivance*—survival and resistance to colonial forces—and to build alliances crucial to our physical and mental well-being (King et al. 7; Powell). In contrast, some scholars practice complicity to reap their rewards by speaking *over* us as though they speak *for* us.

Conferences, for instance, often prove inaccessible to marginalized communities; disabled people face a mountain of barriers to participation in our fields. If readers recall the ephemeral moment of CCCC 2019, they may remember the sticky note protest that disabled activists initiated in response to a poster advertising the conference’s “accessibility.” The sticky notes were each an iteration of a kind of accountability politics we’re gesturing toward. We’re moving toward more capacious understandings of accountability that go beyond words and toward action. In Audre Lorde’s words, “Where does our power lie and how do we use it in the service of what we believe?” (6). That’s what we’re asking here.

If we are serious about implementing the principles of disability justice in our everyday personal, professional, and academic lives, we would do well to follow Sins Invalid’s lead and foreground leadership by those “most impacted.” As the Sins Invalid collective states, “We know to truly have liberation we must be led by those who know the most about these systems and how they work (16). Othered people enter places already hostile to our bodies via designs that never included us; then the assertion of “centralized privilege” by non-Othered colleagues compounds the damage by reminding us we don’t really belong. Centralized privilege includes the “rights to space and the very privileged assertion of comfort in said spaces” (Martinez 223). You don’t have to assert these claims deliberately. Indeed, you do so most often without ever talking to us.

Certainly, nondisabled scholars can write about disability, non-POC (People of Color) scholars can write about race, and cishet scholars can write about queer or trans issues. Many do so well, but they also do the work. In the words of Jay Dolmage, “space and institutions cannot be disconnected from the bodies within them, the bodies they selectively exclude, and the bodies that actively intervene to shape them” (Academic Ableism 79) not only in words but in deeds. They mentor, make space, and speak out. They
have our backs, even when it’s not convenient or comfortable. They do not make our presence a diversity retrofit. They call others out and in. They take risks.

We must cultivate a politics of risk and such a politics is necessarily what some disabled disability justice activists call a “prefigurative politics.” In the words of Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, “Prefigurative politics is a fancy term for the idea of imagining and building the world we want to see now” (149). As disabled scholars, we’re attuned to the ways our field, and our institutions, present accessibility and justice as projections into obscure horizons of futurity. In other words, if those who maintain the status quo continue to have their way, disability justice will always be a distant shimmer on the horizon while the lived realities of disabled people in the here and now are disavowed. Resisting this projection and deliberate delay (see Ahmed’s “The Time of Complaint”), a prefigurative politics of risk requires able-bodied scholar-teachers to productively and generatively take up space in conversations about access, discrimination, and ableism in the discipline and in their departments. In other words, “Vulnerability is how we experience precarity, it is our response to institutional infrastructure” (Passwater), but be aware that that “vulnerability can manifest in resistance” (Ho et al. 138).

With divergent manifestations of vulnerability and resistance in mind, how can we reshape our approaches to vulnerability, risk, and politics in ways that transform our discipline as well as local contexts? Who has the privilege of avoiding risk, and to whom is risk and vulnerability an imperative for participation in academic life? How can we transform our conference going and structuring to carve space for explicit conversations about disability justice in real time, in our departments, and at our “home” institutions that so often refuse to be held accountable for the violence they perpetuate on the bodyminds of disabled people, women of color, and BIPOC (Black and Indigenous People of Color) scholar-teachers?

Crippling our discipline requires a politics of risk—one accountable to and with disabled people at both the macro and micro levels. Accessibility may well not itself be disability justice, but the only way accessibility work is oriented (Kerschbaum) toward disability justice is by centering and foregrounding work by disabled disability activists. In other words, conference sessions, planning groups, and campus organizations whose mission is “accessibility” should be led, facilitated, and directed by equitably
compensated disabled disability justice activists. Anything else is another example of “talking about us without us.”

We know who takes action and who’s just acting. Survival makes us hyperaware.

When the strategizing happens, you’re not there. Your name doesn’t even come up when we discuss coalition building or the need to gather around vulnerable peers.

You don’t know we exist except as tenure fodder or nuisances, and your “tolerance” serves as “charitable justification” (Price “Access Imagined”) that proves you are proactive and our disciplinary spaces are supposedly “progressive.” We need you to ask yourself: why do you research us but refuse to work with us? And, again, if you bristle at this question, or have no answer, or refuse to justify yourself, you should ask yourself why.

That proves you are proactive and our disciplinary spaces are supposedly “progressive.” We need you to ask yourself: why do you research us but refuse to work with us? And, again, if you bristle at this question, or have no answer, or refuse to justify yourself, you should ask yourself why. After all, if institutions value your voices over ours, as has been proven time and time again, perhaps it’s also past time to reorient the economic inequity that is fueled by who and what entities get funded at the expense of expelling and excluding disabled people from the profession altogether.

**Conclusion: Notes toward Creating a Culture of Access**

Through their insights into in/accessibility in our shared conference spaces, our contributors offer us a gift. Their writing highlights ableism and other interlocking systems of oppression, and in doing so it not only center issues of accessibility but moves us toward a culture of access, not only for disabled bodyminds but for all people (Yergeau): As Mia Mingus writes, “disability continues to push the envelope and challenge us in our thinking of what justice and liberation mean” (qtd. in Withers et al. 181). Through their essays, our contributors help us—as a field—begin to challenge unjust norms.

By approaching the Disability Caucus’s response to the 2019 “The CCCC Convention is accessible!” sign through the framework of Ahmed’s feminist snap, Simpkins offers a lens through which our field might better understand the critiques and complaints of those bodyminds that are not abled, cisgender, white, and otherwise privileged. Simpkins nods to how the work of creating a culture of access will be an ongoing, unfolding project and how conference organizers and others in the field will need to meet
criticisms and critiques of inaccessibility with acceptance and a willingness to change. The importance of this willingness to continue to adapt our approaches to access to create a culture of accessibility is highlighted by Anglesey and Cecil-Lemkin in their critique of the misuse of quiet rooms. They establish that simply setting aside the space isn’t enough, but that a culture of access demands that we continue to attend to access needs. In taking up the unethical reduction of accessibility to a cost/benefit analysis, Fink, Butler, Stremlau, Kerschbaum, and Brueggemann refigure the concept of accessibility. Their insight demonstrates how it is not simply their access to conference spaces that is blocked when proper accessibility measures aren’t provided, but everyone at the conference is denied their perspective. The supposed access-neutrality of our professional spaces—and attendant concerns about the politics of likeability—is challenged through our Anonymous contributor’s critique through their position in recovery. Anonymous’s insight about how centering social events around alcohol creates extra labor and unequitable, untenable positions for those in recovery demonstrates how creating a culture of access inherently means challenging our field’s culture. Jackson and Cedillo urge all of us to take stock of how we are complicit in the ableism of our field, pointing to how talking about disabled people without committing to material and risky access work is meaningless.

Our contributors offer us the opportunity to collaborate toward a culture of access—both in our conference spaces and in the field more broadly. Throughout this symposium we have focused on issues of accessibility in our conference spaces, though we neither mean to belittle the labor of conference organizers nor do we mean to imply that this is the only (or primary) space we need to create a culture of access in our field. Creating a culture of access isn’t just about putting a quiet room sign on a door or using inclusive language in a conference program. Creating a culture of access requires a change in our own values and practices. A culture of access requires us to understand, as the disability justice performance group Sins Invalid reminds us, “able-bodied supremacy has been formed in relation
to other systems of domination and exploitation. The histories of white supremacy and ableism are inextricably entwined, created in the context of colonial conquest and capitalist domination” (18). As a movement, disability justice has been created through the labor of queer, disabled, femmes of color (Sins Invalid, 12). Creating a culture of access means reckoning with how these same legacies of white supremacy, of colonial-capitalist domination and exploitation, are interwoven and replicated in our field. Creating a culture of access means more than coughing up the funds to provide CART and ASL at our events—although it definitely means doing that, too. Creating a culture of access means dismantling the interlocking systems of oppression that center frameworks that rely on neoliberal cost/benefit analysis of human connection. Creating a culture of access is messy, difficult, and unending work.

And it is work. But it has to be work we all do, not just those among us who face barriers to access for any reason. In Asao B. Inoue’s 2019 Conference on College Composition and Communication keynote address, he spoke about racism in the field. An important thread of that conversation was that good intentions are not enough: “If our goal is a more socially just world, we don’t need more good people. We need good changes, good structures, and good work that make good changes, structures, and people” (356). To dismantle the interlocking systems that prop up oppression in our field, we need to move toward these good changes, good structures, and good work that a culture of access—that is, access for all bodyminds—demands.

Notes
1. Black disabled activist Vilissa Thompson started the trending hashtag #DisabilityTooWhite in 2016 to make visible “erasure of people of color within our [disability community’s] history and what we do as [disability] advocates” (qtd. in Blahovec). The tweets within the hashtag chronicle the intersectional oppressions disabled people of color experience in their day-to-day lives.
2. Ruth Osorio photographed and transcribed the sign and the notes, which are found at “Accessibility at #4C19,” https://www.ruthosorio.com/accessibility-at-4c19/.
3. Deep pressure therapy is a common psychiatric service dog task where the dog uses its body weight and warmth to relieve symptoms and ground an individual.
4. See Teresa Blankmeyer Burke, “Choosing Accommodations,” for more on the complexities of sign language access.
5. We necessarily invoke colonialism since academia’s Eurowestern knowledgemaakt “structures” have made some of you fully human at the expense of our humanity.

6. Helen Rottier, PhD student at the University of Illinois at Chicago, addresses “prefigurative politics” in her work and disability justice activism. See her work and portfolio at www.helenrottier.wordpress.com or on Twitter (@HelenRottier).

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