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Disabling Citizenship: Rhetorical Practices of Disabled World-Making at the 1977 504 Sit-In

Ruth Osorio

On April 5, 1977, approximately 150 disabled people and their nondisabled accomplices entered a federal building in San Francisco. They came holding canes, food, and sleeping bags, and yet the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) staff did not anticipate what would happen next. Over the next twenty-eight days, the protestors would take over—first, the office and, then, the entire building—in the longest nonviolent occupation of a federal property in the United States’ history. For these twenty-eight days, they camped out in elevators and on steps, washed their hair in the bathroom sinks, wrote press releases and poetry, dispensed medicine and changed out catheters, and communicated with a growing contingent of protestors raising visibility outside the building. They were fueled by a singular policy goal: to urge the Carter administration to sign regulations and enforce Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, landmark legislation that barred institutions receiving public funds from discriminating against people with disabilities. And as they articulated their demands, the protestors also found ways to sustain their historic occupation, and in doing so, created a world that embraced disabled forms of expression, caregiving, sexuality, performance, and art.

For centuries in the United States, disabled people had long been shut out of citizenship through institutionalization, immigration policies, and a myriad of legal and cultural practices intended to force disabled people outside the public sphere (Shapiro; Baynton; Simplican; Hirschman and Linker). Passed four years prior to the 1977 sit-in, Section 504 promised the inclusion of disabled people in

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civic practices and buildings, and thus, a long-awaited entrance into citizenship. When the federal government declined to enforce 504 after its passage, disabled activists took it upon themselves to rewrite cultural scripts on disability and political belonging through a very visible act of civil disobedience. These protestors exemplified what Stacy Clifford Simpican observes: “[T]he story of disability and democracy is not only a monolithic tale of oppression, as vulnerability also invites solidarity, strength, and new ways to imagine citizenship” (*The Capacity Contract* 4). Indeed, the protestors advocated for inclusion into traditional models of citizenship while building a world that replaced individuality, capability, and normative forms of expression with solidarity, collective care, and difference inside the HEW offices. The protest worked to expand the very notion of what kinds of bodies can and should be granted full participation in society.

Questions of citizenship—who gets to be a citizen and how—are often at the heart of discussions about writing instruction, rhetorical theory, and literacy in English studies. For Christian Kock and Lisa S. Villadsen, the mark of citizenship is public deliberation, and thus, “rhetoric . . . is at the core of being a citizen.” A rhetorical approach can unearth how citizenship is constructed discursively and enacted materially. Because deliberation, engagement, and literacy are so strongly linked to citizenship, Amy Wan argues “the will to produce citizenship through the teaching of writing is strong” (“In the Name” 28). Our field often emphasizes citizenship as the heart of literacy and humanities education, often to justify the virtues of first year composition courses.¹ And yet, Wan cautions against celebrating citizenship without probing its complexity. She warns, “while citizenship has become a super-term, one that can encompass many definitions, the lack of specificity that often accompanies it allows us to elide critical concerns about the access, impact, and exercise of citizenship” (29). Wan’s reminder emphasizes that if we laud citizenship without defining it, without critically engaging with the ways that discourses of citizenship are used to exclude, we may unintentionally perpetuate those same exclusions in our classrooms and disciplinary spaces.

It is citizenship’s exclusionary power that prompts recent skepticism about its utility as a mode of inquiry in rhetorical studies. Political theorists Danielle Allen and Renato Rosaldo have drawn attention to the rhetorical, cultural, and affective dimensions of belonging, arguing that even if someone is legally a citizen, there can still be cultural barriers to political belonging. Still, they use the language of citizenship to describe these practices of belonging, a move that some scholars of rhetoric interrogate. Ana Milena Ribero asserts that citizenship can never be inclusive of difference because “its essence is built on exclusions that are largely based on racialized, gendered, and sexualized identities . . . citizenship is always already exclusionary” (32). For Ribero, citizenship will always be linked back to

nationhood, and thus, always exclusionary. This is why Karma Chávez questions the impetus in rhetorical studies to equate political belonging with citizenship: “to talk about all modes of belonging through the language and logic of citizenship functions to reify the status of modern nation-states that endow legal citizenship . . . [and] reinscribes the norms of urbanity, whiteness, heterosexuality, maleness, ability, and middle-classness” (*Queer Migration Politics* 13). Chávez suggests that when rhetoricians talk about political belonging as citizenship, they perpetuate the exclusions and harms of citizenship. Therefore, she declares her own interest in what she calls world-making, rhetorics “where people can figure out new relationalities; where people can think together: how would we govern ourselves, if we had the option to govern ourselves?” (“Reflections on Rhetoric and Citizenship”). Chávez is interested in the rhetorical practices that create connections, realities, social structures, and community and in divorcing those practices from the government. These debates about citizenship’s place in rhetorical studies indicate that more research is needed to probe into its status, meaning, and effects in the field.

Because traditional definitions of citizenship value able-bodiedness, particularly as it relates to productivity, disabled activists are particularly posed to expose the fissures in, oversights of, and alternatives to citizenship. Traditional understandings of citizenship exclude disability; to belong to a *polis*, Enlightenment conceptions of citizenship insist, one must be healthy and capable of contributing meaningfully and consistently to society (Minich; Simplican; Hirschman and Linker; Baynton). In other words, citizenship requires normative productivity, the ability to contribute to the health of the nation-state; something disability can, by definition, prohibit (Garland-Thomson). Before federal legislation like Section 504, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and the American with Disabilities Act (ADA), it was acceptable and common to exclude people with disabilities from civic spaces and practices, like public school, immigration, polling places, and federal employment. Moreover, just as disabled people have long been excluded from citizenship, they have likewise long been excluded from traditional conceptions of rhetoric, labeled as unable to produce trust-worthy or legible speech (Brueggemann; Dolmage; Yergeau; Price; Lewiecki-Wilson). The 504 sit-in addressed both these omissions and so utilized the disabled forms of expression that are stigmatized by nondisabled society: rolling in wheelchairs; communicating in American Sign Language and with letter boards; and speaking openly about medical needs, mental health, and disabled sex. These practices allowed the activists to practice disabled world-making as they protested for inclusion into citizenship.

Disability, as both a lived experience and political identity, can illustrate the generative tension between citizenship and world-making, providing criti-

cal nuance in how citizenship is taken up in English studies. Outwardly, the protestors called for a disabled citizenship, one in which state-based rights are not based on an individual's *ability* to contribute but rather on their humanity. Inside the building, the protestors practiced disabled world-making, rhetorical practices that upheld interdependence, non-normative expression, and disabled intimacy as avenues to political belonging. As my analysis will show, the protestors believed that disability liberation in the United States requires both legal protection against discrimination *and* world-making practices that embrace disabled people, their bodies, and their expressions. My goal is not to redeem or condemn citizenship as a commonplace in English studies, though I do share Ribero and Chávez's concerns. Rather, my goal is to illustrate how a group of disabled activists practiced disabled world-making in their quest for civil rights, and in doing so, complicated dominant definitions of citizenship and offered models for disabled world-making. I begin by outlining citizenship theory, focusing particularly on how traditional models of citizenship fail to account for difference in the polity. The history of disability and citizenship provides critical context for the activists' habits; therefore, I describe the promise and potential of Section 504 as well as the activists' arguments for legal citizenship. Then, I move to my examination of the three core practices of disabled world-making at the 504 protestors sit-in: practicing collective care, embracing disabled forms of expression, and facilitating physical intimacy. To do so, I analyze personal photographs, news coverage, and oral histories from various sources, including HolLynn D'lil's book *Becoming Real in 24 Days: One Participant's Story of the 1977 Section of 504 Demonstrations for Disability Rights*, the Paul K. Longmore Institute on Disability's virtual tour *Patient No More*, Corbett O'Toole's memoir *Fading Scars*, and oral histories collected in Fred Pelka's *What We Have Done*. I conclude by imagining what a disabled citizenship/disabled world-making might look like in writing classrooms and professional organizations, amplifying the protestors' call for integrating care, frailty, and collaboration in spaces that have been traditionally constructed to exclude disability.

DIFFERENCE AND THE LIMITS OF CITIZENSHIP

Citizenship is at once seemingly straightforward and incredibly complex to define. Someone is either legally a citizen of a nation-state or not, right? And yet, as scholars of citizenship have long argued, seemingly straightforward definitions of citizenship can quickly disintegrate in practice. Renato Rosaldo, for instance, observes that even Latinx US citizens who were born in the US are still treated as if they are cultural outsiders. Rosaldo, thus, distinguishes between legal citizenship and cultural citizenship, the latter granting "the right to be different

and to belong in a participatory sense” (402). Cultural citizenship illustrates that citizenship is much more expansive than simply a legal status: for many political and rhetorical theorists, citizenship encapsulates the rhetorical practices that foster political belonging in a pluralistic society, what Danielle Allen identifies as habits of citizenship. These habits, rhetorical practices people use to interact with each other, establish the limits of and opportunities for political belonging for different groups.

Historically, disabled people have encountered hostile habits of citizenship from an ableist society, positioning them outside of legal and cultural citizenship. Stacy Clifford Simplican traces dominant models of citizenship to John Locke, who proposed a capacity contract “which bases political membership on a threshold of capacity and excludes anyone who falls below” (*The Capacity Contract* 27). In other words, if people lack the capability to understand a ballot, and if they cannot communicate in normative ways in the public sphere, they lack the capacity to engage in society as full citizens. Furthermore, disabled rhetorical practices, such as signing (Breuggemann), stammering (Yergeau), and stuttering (Dolmage *Disability Rhetoric*), have largely been stigmatized as less legitimate forms of addressing the public sphere. Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson articulates the tension among disability, rhetoric, and citizenship, arguing that

the Western tradition of rhetoric creates a barrier excluding the severely mentally disabled not only from rhetoricity but also from full citizenship, tied as traditional rhetoric is to the liberal ideology of the public forum, where good men (*sic*), speaking well, engage in civic debate. (158)

Lewiecki-Wilson specifies the challenges “mentally disabled” rhetors face when practicing citizenship, but I argue that her observation pertains to speakers utilizing various forms of disabled expression. Because the model of citizenship and model of rhetoric both emphasize individualism and reason over community and divergence, disabled people are thrown to the margins of the polity—with queer and trans disabled people of color pushed even further from the center.

Attention to disability can further the ongoing critique of the literacy and citizenship myth in English studies, the myth that states marginalized people can gain full access to citizenship if they learn to speak, read, and write standardized English. Wan and Candace Epps-Robertson already complicate this myth, noting how the promises of literacy acquisition are not often fulfilled for immigrants, workers, or Black people. As Epps-Robertson asserts in her work on race and literacy in Virginia, “the belief that access to literacy can offer an opportunity for full participation in a democracy presents a history of struggles, as access is often met with legally sanctioned opposition and empty promises” (2). Furthermore, efforts to teach rhetoric and literacy to marginalized people as a

pathway to citizenship often emphasize individualism, assimilation, productivity, and allegiance to the nation-state (Wan, *Producing Good Citizens* 10). This is one of the reasons why Ribero argues, “citizenship is always already exclusionary, therefore [. . .] our decolonial imaginings must envision an alternative to citizenship as a rights-bearing state of being” (32). For Ribero, citizenship, no matter how it’s framed or expanded or complicated, will always grant rights to some based on the exclusions of others. While Wan and Epps-Robertson both question the *mythos* of citizenship in literacy and rhetorical studies, Ribero takes a step further and calls for rhetorical scholars invested in decolonial, equitable futures to disregard the framework entirely.

Because of the confines of citizenship, scholars have advocated for new models of belonging that don’t conjure relationships to the nation-state. Chávez describes this shift in epistemologies as essential for the field of rhetoric:

[I]t is imperative that we break from [Rhetoric’s citizenship narrative], not in order that Rhetoric may become a more inclusive discipline but so that it may become something entirely different: a discipline constituted through non-normative, non-citizen, non-Western perspectives and ways of knowing and being. (“Beyond Inclusion” 163)

What Chávez is interested in, instead, is world-making, the rhetorical practices that are required “to create the kind of community [people] want to live in.” The concept of world-making has its roots in queer theory, with José Esteban Muñoz describing queer world-making as performance that makes “a utopia in the present” (37). In rhetorical studies, the concept of world-making can draw attention to the rhetorical practices that cultivate the kind of belonging that sees “the imminent humanity in everyone, and attend[s] and honors[s] the vulnerabilities that we share” (Palczewski qtd. in “Reflections on Rhetoric and Citizenship”). As an analytical lens, world-making allows rhetoricians to examine the rhetorics of belonging and community without perpetuating the exclusions of citizenship. As my following section will illustrate, disabled people have a unique vantage point to critique traditional models of citizenship while making a world that embraces disabled bodies, perspectives, and forms of expression.

EXIGENCE: 504’S POTENTIAL AND PROMISE

Because of disability’s seeming incompatibility with citizenship, disabled people in the United States historically have been legally, culturally, and rhetorically excluded from full citizenship. In the United States, disabled people have been excluded from legal practices of citizenship due to immigration policies that “deny entry to anyone judged ‘mentally or physically defective’” (Baynton 26),

ugly laws that banned the sight of non-normative bodies from the public, and inaccessible architecture that worked to keep disabled people in the shadows, and thus, outside of the *polis*. Additionally, disabled people had been (and continue to be) excluded through habits that force disabled people out of the public sphere. For instance, since public schools were not required to accommodate d/Deaf and hard-of-hearing students until passage of the IDEA in 1975, deaf children were often sent away to deaf residential schools. For the deaf community, the exclusion from public spheres necessitated deaf world-making. Deaf residential schools became the birthplace of American Deaf culture:

The residential school was the crucible in which American Deaf culture was forged. More than a new language was formed; from the countless daily interactions and negotiations of life in a small, intimate community, a new culture emerged. (“The Formation of a Community”)

Because deaf children were not entitled to the civic practices of public schooling, residential schools became opportunities for deaf world-making. And because of segregation, the deaf cultures created in these residential schools were racialized, with Black American Sign Language and deaf culture circulating still today. Disabled citizenship and disabled world-making, thus, share a complicated and interconnected legacy, illustrating the need for multiple forms of belonging in the pursuit of disabled liberation.

Passed and signed into law in 1973, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 established disabled people’s right to access to federal buildings and agencies receiving federal funds. The first federal legislation to acknowledge the rights of people with disabilities to participate in civic life, 504 intended “to empower individuals with disabilities to maximize employment, economic self-sufficiency, independence, and inclusion and integration into society,” specifically focusing its efforts on institutions that receive federal funding (29 U.S.C. Section 701). By focusing on employment and education, Section 504 promoted the same kind of citizenship Locke described, one that centers individual contributions to the whole through productivity and values independence—core values that can be incompatible with the disabled experience. Still, despite its limited, neoliberal conception of citizenship, 504 ushered in a realm of possibility for disabled people who had been denied educational and employment opportunities for centuries.

And yet, Section 504 was not immediately implemented; the law lived in the books but was lifeless in practice. By 1977, people with disabilities were frustrated with the lack action from the federal government. President Jimmy Carter deferred all decisions about Section 504 to the HEW secretary, Joseph Califano, who had no intentions of signing regulations. And that’s when disability organizations began to organize. On March 18, 1977, the American Coalition

of Citizens with Disabilities (ACCD) released a nationwide call to make April 5, 1977 “a national day of reckoning for HEW” (Pelka 266). They demanded that Califano sign Section 504 regulations. The ACCD instructed people with disabilities to take over HEW offices in ten cities all over the US, and they did so on April 5. Very quickly, protestors were starved or forced out of nine of the HEW buildings. Soon, only the San Francisco contingent remained active. Over 100 activists camped out inside the building, shutting down HEW business during their occupation, while demonstrators outside protested with bullhorns, protest signs, and rallies. This dual-space protest—the occupation of the inside and the rally on the outside—allowed the protestors to occupy the space for twenty-eight days, leaving only once Califano signed regulations and 504 was finally enacted.

The protestors utilized the civic iconography and the material structure both inside and outside the building to make their argument. In their overt arguments for participation in legal citizenship, activists leveraged their bodies in a civic space (the exterior protest took place in the UN Plaza with the iconic San Francisco City Hall looming in the background) to expand the parameters of citizenship to include disabled people. The imagery of visibly disabled people with protest signs featuring slogans from the Civil Rights era highlighted the political power of disabled bodies, a power previously ignored by ableist conceptions of citizenship. Seeing disabled people occupying a civic space was a new image for the United States:

[T]he sight of people in wheelchairs, people who were Deaf or blind or who had multiple disabilities, willing to risk their health and even their lives to make a political statement brought national media attention. It also catalyzed disability activists across the country and around the world. (Pelka 262)

In this way, the protestors embraced the contradictions surrounding their bodies and citizenship.² While an ableist society framed disability as a reason for removing disabled people from public life, the protestors leveraged their visible difference as a method for expanding citizenship to include disabled people. Using their visibly disabled bodies and the setting of the UN Plaza, the activists created a seemingly contradictory tableau that merged disability and citizenship.

DISABLED WORLD-MAKING IN THE PURSUIT OF CITIZENSHIP

While the protestors’ outward arguments focused on the state-based rights of legal citizenship, they devoted time to cultivating habits of disabled world-making inside the building. Disabled world-making consists of rhetorical practices that foster belonging not in spite of difference but because of it. Within the building,

the habits of collective care, disabled forms of expression, and disabled intimacy modeled a new way to structure society, one that would uplift disabled people rather than cast them out. Disabled activist and 504 sit-in participant Corbett O'Toole reflects on how their practices of disabled world-making enabled their success:

We won doing everything the way we had succeeded as disabled people: we created an interdependent support system, we relied on knowledge and expertise of other disabled people, we worked cooperatively, we came to our decisions by consensus, and we created the opportunity for everyone to participate. (67)

The interdependent support system, cooperation, and consensus—these are all habits that foster belonging. Belonging isn't just about feeling good, though that is important on its own; the sense of belonging sustains rhetorical work. The habits of disabled world-making explored in this section reveal a more just, inclusive world, one in which disabled and nondisabled people collaborate across difference to compose new frameworks for political belonging.

Practicing Collective Care

As critics of citizenship argue, expanding legal citizenship might give some disabled people the right to participate in the *polis*, but it does not guarantee it. Queer disabled activist of color Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha asserts that without collective care, many disabled people cannot build community, love each other, or reimagine new ways of living (*Care Work* 33). Therefore, disabled world-making approaches collective care as a shared responsibility and a rhetorical practice that facilitates belonging. This understanding fueled the rhetorical production within the HEW building.

To maintain the occupation, the 150 occupiers of the HEW offices had to create a culture of care that would sustain disabled people with complex medical and caregiving needs for twenty-eight days in a cold, sterile office building. One 504 participant, Bruce Oka, recalls the bedsores many participants received because of the uncomfortable living arrangements: “Our disabilities were not able to be cared for properly because who can do that while you’re doing something that is totally out of the norm?” (“Life Inside the Building” 00:04:05–00:04:15). The sit-in, then, required reciprocal care across disabilities: creating an infirmary, washing each other’s hair in the sinks, bringing each other food and coffee in the mornings (Cone qtd. in Pelka 268–69). O’Toole describes the protestors’ morning schedule: “[A] typical day in the first week consisted of everyone slowly waking up and helping each other with our different morning routines. That might mean emptying someone’s leg bag [catheter] or finding a cup of water so they could take their medications” (61). In addition to medical

care, the protestors tended to each other's aches and pains related to the protest through daily massage trains (D'Lil 124; Owens qtd. in Pelka 277). For the protestors, providing care for each other's bodies was the core of their activist praxis. Selma Sevenhuijsen argues that traditional conceptions of citizenship emphasize independence and autonomy, casting out those who need caregiving, such as disabled, sick, and elderly people, outside of the polity. While traditional forms of citizenship demand contributions to the nation-state, disabled world-making requires and celebrates relationships among people, regardless of what people can produce. The 504 protestors developed a new model of belonging, one that prioritized carework as core to building a deliberative body.

The sit-in depended on the reciprocal care performed by the protestors each day; such care was indeed a central rhetorical practice, one that enabled them to continue their protest. As Piepzna-Samarasinha and other disability justice advocates argue, carework is deeply political because it facilitates survival, community building, and political organizing. Many of the participants, such as Mary Jane Owen, became voluntary attendants for other participants, learning how to care for someone with different disabilities as they carried out their movement work. Owen explains, "[T]hat was an interesting experience for me because, of course, I was blind, although I didn't have any movement or mobility problems. I had never been an attendant before" (qtd. in Pelka 277). For the activists, attending to the various needs of their co-conspirators was just as important to the cause as writing protest signs and press releases. As Shannon Walters has argued, physical touch itself can be rhetorical, piercing the boundaries between bodies and identification (6). Walters explains how the daily acts of care performed at the 504 sit-in performed an important rhetorical function: "Using their bodies, [the protestors] joined their identities together to form identifications with each other and to demonstrate this identification to a largely nondisabled audience" (68). Touch, through collective care, enabled the protestors to foster connections across disabilities and to formulate a political identity centered on disability rather than relationship to a nation-state.

As a habit of disabled world-making, collective care fostered a sense of belonging across difference—and not just in terms of disability. The activists occupied different marginalized identities and called upon their various communities to support the sit-in.³ Most notably, Brad Lomax, a disabled member of the local Black Panther Party, called upon the Panthers to support the sit-in. In response, the Black Panther Party⁴ served meals to the activists every single day, even though only two of the mostly white 504 protestors (Lomax and his nondisabled attendant, Chuck Jackson) were Black Panthers. O'Toole reminisces, "By far the most critical gift given us by our allies was the Black Panthers' commitment to feed each protester in the building one hot meal every day" (qtd. in

Schweik). By providing warm food, the nondisabled and disabled Black Panther Party members performed care and advocacy for diverse and divergent bodies, many of which were different from their own. Feminist rhetoricians have probed into the importance and strategies of building solidarity across differences, particularly focusing on the power of sharing stories and listening (Foss and Griffin; Ratcliffe; Jones Royster; Glenn). The Black Panthers' commitment to feeding the 504 protestors, most of whom were white, expands feminist rhetoricians' conception of solidarity across difference to include the material and embodied acts of caregiving—even when faced with risk. When the FBI attempted to prevent the Black Panthers from entering the building, the Panthers stood their ground, empowered by the shared struggle for liberation across disability rights and Black Power movements (O'Toole 60). The disabled protestors and the Black Panthers both occupied a position on the periphery of citizenship in the United States, and their distinct but shared marginalization provided a foundation for disabled world-making through collective care. O'Toole credits the Black Panthers' support with the demonstration's success: "we would never have succeeded without them" (59). Collective care fosters deliberation across categories of difference as a habit of disabled world-making—and fuels political power.

The habits described by the participants illustrate the discursive, embodied, and relational aspects of political belonging. Chavéz describes world-making practices as the vernacular rhetorics that create "the kinds of communities we want to live in" ("Reflections on Rhetoric and Citizenship"). If we seek out moments of political deliberation that occur outside of public, civic spaces, we can study the world-making practices of people figuring "out new relationalities; where people can think together: how would we govern ourselves, if we had the option to govern ourselves?" ("Reflections on Rhetoric and Citizenship"). Inside the HEW offices, the disabled protestors established their own practices of governance, practices that integrated collective care into their deliberative process. By honoring each other's needs, the protestors embodied an argument about the inherent value of disabled people apart from the ability to produce independently. At the same time, their practices of collective care provided the foundation for their efforts to expand citizenship; by giving and receiving care, the disabled protestors were able to continue their occupation and collaborate to craft press releases, protest signs, and congressional testimonials. Collective care could not be separated from the working groups or preparations for the next day's demonstrations and statements. To continue the sit-in, the community developed rhetorical practices that allowed disabled people not only to participate but also lead in political deliberation while nurturing their own and each other's embodied needs.

Embracing Disabled Forms of Expression

World-making of any kind requires symbolic communication, whether it be spoken, written, visual, gestural, facilitated, etc. While traditional models of citizenship often revolve around a singular linguistic identity, disabled world-making establishes avenues for creating meaning across languages, modalities, and speeds. In his work on Asian American literacy and citizenship, Morris Young explains, “the ability to participate in public discourse, to be perceived as fully literate (and without an accent) often becomes a marker of citizenship and legitimacy” (6). If we were to add a disability lens to Young’s apt discussion of literacy, race, and citizenship, we could expand it to read: “the ability to be . . . perceived as fully literate (and without an accent, *interpreter, stammer, stutter, letter board, or mediator*) often becomes a marker of citizenship and legitimacy.” The longstanding association between English mastery and citizenship in the US frames disabled people who communicate via disabled speech as outside of the citizenry because of their inability to be understood by nondisabled people (or, more accurately, the unwillingness of nondisabled people to learn disabled forms of expression). Shut out of citizenship outside of the HEW building, 504 sit-in protestors were able to develop habits of disabled world-making that embraced disabled forms of expression inside their occupation.

The 504 protestors illustrate that, despite the traditional model of citizenship and linguistic performance, people don’t have to communicate the same language or via the same modalities to practice political deliberation. D’lil describes the decision-making process inside the building, noting how everyone had the option to participate because language differences were accommodated and even embraced as an activist strategy:

[E]veryone [got] a say. Meetings could not begin until [American Sign Language] interpreters arrived. Those with speech impediments were given a voice. No one uttered a word while Hale Zukas or Frank Moore “spoke,” even though pointing at a letter board to spell out what you have to say can be a lengthy process. We waited. Judy responded with a question. We waited for an answer. (130)

Rather than situating people who sign or point to letter boards on the periphery of the polity, the polity was not considered complete until everyone’s communication needs were accounted for and incorporated into the decision-making process. By embracing disabled forms of expression, the 504 protestors recognized that wisdom does not always come in the form of the dominant language or from a single voice but rather can be sourced by creating the space to collaborate across modalities and languages.

The protestors practiced disabled forms of political deliberation that emphasized collaboration over individualism and presumed competence. Too

often, in a political body, disabled forms of expression are cast as impossible to understand by nondisabled people or too burdensome to integrate into the polity because of the time required to co-create meaning. The 504 protestors, however, rejected normative ideas of communication and efficiency, creating a model of deliberation that honored the value of disabled perspectives and interdependent meaning-making through interpreters and letter boards. Collaborative speech, Lewiecki-Wilson argues, disrupts the “autonomy, intention, the essential stability of something called intelligence linked to a core self” at the heart of liberal subjectivity (160). This disruption, though, can transform the very core of deliberative democracy. Simplican argues,

While integrating disabled speech is necessary to fulfill deliberative democratic norms of inclusion, this integration offers more than expansive membership. . . . It offers a new foundation of equal status, moving away from requirements of communicative competence, and towards recognition of shared vulnerability and dependence. (“Making Disability Public” 225)

Clifford describes integrating disabled speech as a transformative habit of citizenship, one that welcomes reciprocity, interdependence, and listening. Such welcoming benefits not only disabled people but all people, Clifford insists, by disrupting “the idea that our own social world and our own opinions are always transparent to us” (223). In other words, through collaborative speech, disabled and nondisabled people work together to discover their own realities and political needs. The process described by D’Lil ensured that everyone could contribute to the discussion—no matter how long it took to interpret each other’s communication. And that process had reciprocal benefits, enhancing everyone’s understanding of disability and citizenship.

The multilingual space inside the building fostered a sense of belonging among the protestors—and it also helped them to subvert interference from the state and distribute their calls for civil rights widely. Deaf expertise in American Sign Language (ASL) was key to the success of the protest largely because of the ignorance of nondisabled law enforcement. Early in the protest, the FBI turned off the office phones in an attempt to cut off communication between the occupiers and the media. The protestors exploited the ignorance of the FBI, utilizing the visual-spatial modality of ASL to communicate through the windows of the building. O’Toole explains that outside the building, interpreters would get on the stage and ask for an update. Then, inside the building,

Someone from the communications committee would formulate an answer and one of the Deaf folks, usually Olin Fortney (disabled) or Steve McClelland (disabled), would sit on the deep granite windowsill and sign our answers to the interpreter on the stage, who would speak them into the microphone. It was an

elegant solution that came directly from the disability experience and completely confounded the FBI with its simplicity and its effectiveness. (60–61)

The FBI had assumed that all communication between the occupiers and supporters outside had to be aural, an assumption grounded in hearing privilege and ignorance of Deaf and disabled forms of expression. But, in fact, ASL provided an opportunity to communicate even when phone lines were cut.⁵ The protestors took advantage of the FBI's lack of knowledge surrounding disability and leveraged disabled forms of expression to subvert law enforcement attempts to suffocate the protest. As O'Toole notes, the protestors practiced strategies of disabled world-making that emerged from their experiences as disabled people, inventing rhetorical practices that valued communication differences rather than excluded them.

Monolingual models of citizenship often emphasize sameness, framing communication as a tool to express different ideas in similar fashion so the widest possible group can comprehend. Wan explains that literacy training for immigrants in the early twentieth century associated “the ability to speak, read, and write in English” with “how one can participate as a citizen and how citizens can understand one another”—a commonplace, she observes, that continues today (*Producing* 52). However, disabled world-making practices question the value of linguistic assimilation by creating habits that embrace disabled forms of expression. Here, then, the protestors modeled what English studies scholars Bruce Horner, Min-Zhan Lu, Jacqueline Jones Royster, and John Trimbur describe as a translanguaging approach: seeing “difference in language not as a barrier to overcome or as a problem to manage, but as a resource for producing meaning in writing, speaking, reading, and listening” (303). English studies scholars have long noted the value of difference in language in the writing classroom, and the 504 sit-in protestors demonstrated the democratic value of processing different languages, modalities, and speeds. As the protestors took the time to interpret and create meaning together, they developed a model of political deliberation that draws power from speaking across difference, making time to interpret, and valuing divergent forms of expression.

Facilitating Disabled Intimacy

Through collective care and disabled forms of expression, the protestors created a polity that provided access to intimacy and pleasure for disabled people—access that was often denied to them outside of the building. Disabled world-making, then, highlights the rhetorical, political nature of pleasure for non-normative bodies, and creates opportunities for pleasure, intimacy, and desire for disabled people. So often, sex is framed as a private act, one that stands in contrast to the

public work of citizenship and protest and thus outside of the realm of rhetorical studies. However, as queer studies scholars have long argued, it is dangerous to ignore the political and rhetorical nature of sex; sex education, sodomy laws, government incentives for marriage and procreative sex establish which sex acts are considered normative and private, and which are non-normative and up for public debate (Richardson; Eng; Berlant; Berlant and Warner). Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner argue that by casting “intimacy as a private act [and] making sex seem irrelevant or merely personal, heteronormative conventions of intimacy block the building of nonnormative or explicit public sexual cultures” (553). Because sex has been described as personal and private, people who have and/or desire non-normative bodies have lacked opportunities to create “public sexual cultures.” The discourse of non-normative sex, therefore, is relevant to English studies, as we study the material, embodied impacts of the discourse of public cultures. Such study can highlight how public discourse determines the ways non-normative bodies intermingle—and how people write new public scripts to allow for non-normative pleasure.

Though Berlant and Warner’s argument focuses on queer communities, disabled people (many of whom are also queer) have also been denied access to a sexual culture—and this is what makes the physical intimacy among the 504 sit-in protestors a transformative habit of disabled world-making. Outside of the building, sexual education in schools rarely talks about disability, people locked in institutions are rarely granted the privacy to practice intimacy with themselves or others, and few images exist of disabled people as erotic, desirable subjects. In the introduction to edited collection *Sex and Disability*, Anna Mollow and Robert McRuer observe that “rarely are disabled people regarded as either desiring subjects or objects of desire” (1). They follow this observation up with a question: “but what if disability were sexy? And what if disabled people were understood to be both subjects and objects of a multiplicity of erotic desires and practices?” (1). Within the HEW offices, disabled people were able to flip the dominant scripts, positioning themselves and each other as objects and subjects of erotic desire.

Inside the protest, disabled sex and pleasure were regular parts of life. The protestors had sex, massaged each other, and cuddled. 504 participant Herb Levine describes, “there were about one hundred people, which means there was sex, there was marijuana, there was wine, there was prayer, there was singing, there was crapping around. You know, it was a community” (“Life Inside the Building” 00:01:36–00:01:50). Sex and intimacy were parts of the daily lives of the protestors occupying the building, a part of the community. These acts not only sustained their spirit during the protest, similarly to collective care, but they also facilitated desire, intimacy, and pleasure. Levine’s observations

highlight the importance of pleasure in disabled world-making. José Esteban Muñoz describes queer world-making as methods for “dream[ing] and enact[ing] new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds” (1). Similarly, disabled world-making fosters rhetorical possibilities for talking about and experiencing pleasure among disabled people. At the protest, the activists designed opportunities and spaces for pleasure, and pleasure was not seen as something shameful or distinct from their activist work. Judy Heumann, a central leader of the protest, talks about co-opting the freight elevator as a place of rest, sex, and intimacy: “I had a boyfriend at that time, and that’s where we *went*,” she says with a coy lift in her voice and eyebrows (qtd. in “Life Inside the Building,” Patient No More). D’lin’s recollections of the protest suggest that everyone seemed to know that the freight elevator was “Judy’s room,” a place for rest, intimacy, and pleasure for one of the leaders of the sit-in.

Uninhibited by normative frameworks of sex, the protestors were able to create a world that combined political protest *and* erotic association, because for (all but especially) disabled people, sex and the politics of disability are not neatly separated. Tobin Siebers describes what is required to establish a sexual citizenship for disabled people:

Integral to sexual citizenship for people with disabilities is the creation of a safe space with different lines of communication about disabled sexuality; they need in effect to invent a new public sphere receptive to political protest, public discussion, erotic association, and the sharing of ideas about intimate practices and taboos, erotic techniques and restrictions, sexual innovations and mythologies. (154)

Siebers’s description of sexual citizenship for disabled people highlights the public nature of disabled sex. It cannot happen in a vacuum, apart from political discourse and community support. Disabled pleasure is political, and thus, disabled sex requires what adrienne maree brown calls “pleasure activism”: “the work we do to reclaim our whole, happy, and satisfiable selves from the impacts, delusions, and limitations of oppression and/or supremacy” (13). Like everyone, disabled people need access to public space to meet sexual partners, accessible spaces to practice intimacy, and public discussion about safe and pleasurable intimate practices, and the 504 sit-in provided opportunities for pleasure activism within their disabled world.

The protestors’ embrace of disabled sex inside of the building illustrates the messy intersections of disabled citizenship, world-making, and intimacy. Siebers’s description of sexual citizenship emphasizes the political nature of disabled sex: disabled people need structural access to discuss, learn about, and practice sex. Through the language of *citizenship*, disabled sex is framed as a civil rights issue, providing leverage for policies that activate access for disabled

pleasure. At the same time, some queer activists have sharply critiqued state-based civil rights as an avenue for queer sexual expression, noting that same-sex marriage, for instance, perpetuates heteronormative, assimilationist, colonial norms rather than queer sexual liberation (Mattilda and Sycamore). Such activists echo Chavéz and Ribero's critiques of citizenship, stating that a civil rights approach to queer sex will always be exclusionary, designating queer relations that serve the nation-state as legitimate and others as not. While the intimate practices of the 504 protestors do not settle the role of citizenship in validating sexual cultures, they do highlight the political, rhetorical nature of pleasure—and the shared responsibility of community members to facilitate opportunities for pleasure, desire, and intimacy. Disabled world-making transcends questions of who has the “right” to state-sanctified sex and moves toward collective “dreaming and enacting new and better pleasures,” as Muñoz proposes, among non-normative bodies and the non-normative relations required to produce such pleasure. By creating and honoring spaces for disabled sex, the protestors practiced vernacular rhetorics that facilitated erotic intimacy among disabled people and wrote new norms of disability, sex, and pleasure with their bodies.

AFTERMATH: DISABLING CITIZENSHIP AFTER 504 AND IN ENGLISH STUDIES

The sit-in only ended once the demands of the protestors were met. On April 28, 1977, Califano signed the regulations, vowing to enforce the antidiscrimination clause of Section 504. By the end of the protest, the activists had demonstrated their civic power and, in doing so, successfully expanded the discourse and policies of civil rights to include disabled people. But their victories weren't isolated to their policy accomplishments. As they transformed citizenship, they transformed themselves. Heumann recounts that the protestors were initially unwilling to leave the building, even after achieving their goal, because “they'd made friends, had fun, fallen in love, and felt fully free to be themselves. And in the process, something magical had happened. In the cocoon of the building, a metamorphosis had occurred” (*Being Heumann* 147). Echoing Heumann, O'Toole explains that the lessons she learned at the 504 sit-in inspired her lifelong disability activism in the decades that followed: “I learned that when disabled people come together, work cooperatively, and stay focused on our goal, we can accomplish anything. That message got encoded in my 26 year old brain and gave me the confidence to reach for all my dreams” (73). Heumann's and Cone's observations emphasize that increased civil rights for disabled people was not the only victory of the sit-in. The protest ushered in a new era of civil rights for disabled people, but also a new era for disabled world-making.

For the following decades, disability activists would employ disabled forms of expression, protest, and care to further expand civil rights for disabled people, winning pivotal victories such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990. In the twenty-first century, however, multiply marginalized disability activists leveraged the same critiques of civil rights and citizenship I've summarized throughout this article. Patty Berne, a disability justice activist, artist, and writer, explains the limitations of a civil-rights approach to disability liberation:

While a concrete and radical move forward toward justice for disabled people, the Disability Rights Movement simultaneously invisibilized the lives of peoples who lived at intersecting junctures of oppression—disabled people of color, immigrants with disabilities, queers with disabilities, trans and gender non-conforming people with disabilities, people with disabilities who are houseless, people with disabilities who are incarcerated, people with disabilities who have had their ancestral lands stolen, among others. (Sins Invalid 12)

Berne acknowledges the importance of a citizenship approach to disability rights; it provided access for disabled “people who can achieve rights and access through a legal or rights-based framework” (11). But because of its reliance on policy and litigation, a disability rights focus excludes those who will never be entitled to legal rights. In response, twenty-first-century Disability Justice activists have created performance projects centering queer and trans disabled people of color (Sins Invalid), collective access co-ops (Creating Collective Access), and grassroots prison abolitionist advocacy focusing on disabled people (HEARD: Helping Educate to Advance the Rights of the Deaf). Disability justice as a framework focuses less on state-based rights (though it doesn't disregard their importance) and more on what I've been calling disabled world-making: practices that create pleasure, venues, and agency for multiply marginalized disabled people. In the final paragraphs of this article, I will pose opportunities for applying such disabled world-making practices to teaching, research, and service in English studies.

By attending to disability, English studies scholar-teachers can probe the harmful, ableist frameworks of citizenship that are often upheld by the university and trickle into our scholarship and teaching. For instance, as Wan's analysis of university strategic plans illustrates, higher education discourse often conflates citizenship with productivity (*Producing* 154). Wan is critical of this framing because it deemphasizes aspects of cultural citizenship in favor of practices that have “an immediate economic payoff” (*Producing* 154). I agree with Wan, and I further her critique of the productivity-as-citizenship framework; too often, productivity rhetoric is weaponized against disabled people (Giles). If a person's worth to the *polis* is tied to their ability to produce, how do disabled people who might not be able to produce through normative methods or normative paces measure? Thus, English scholar-teachers should be wary of reproducing

frameworks of citizenship that equate human value to the ability to consistently produce a certain kind of literacy. Chavéz warns about the “excessive use of and reliance upon citizenship in Rhetoric for what it obscures and implies about whose rhetorical practices are worthy of engagement” (“Beyond Inclusion” 164). To uncritically evoke citizenship is to evoke its baggage, including its ableist emphasis on normative forms of productivity. A disability-informed approach to citizenship asks us to reconsider whose engagement, and whose forms and paces of literacy production, we prioritize in our universities, our classrooms, and our research.

Integrating disabled world-making in the writing classroom can transform how we think about the teaching of public writing. Rhetorical practices of disabled world-making trouble the private/public binary so often assumed in public writing instruction. Here, I am echoing Susan Wells, who argues that publics are not static or simple, and thus, we should guide students in locating, analyzing, and eventually building their own publics as they write. I further Wells’s important push by suggesting we as writing teachers question the distinction between public writing and private actions and invite our students to do the same. The practices the disabled world-making 504 protestors developed in fact destabilized the binary between public and private. Through these practices, disabled protestors revealed that private acts are often dictated by public discourse; the care they receive—or don’t receive—in private determines how much they can engage in the public, and private acts of care and affirmation enable public interventions. What happens, then, if we ask students to examine how public discourse impacts how they relate to themselves and others at home, in their communities—and vice versa? When we invite students to reflect on the politics of seemingly private interactions, we invite them to create worlds that honor their embodied needs, joys, and relations. Students might craft self-care manuals for their friends, compose guidelines for roommates that ensure an equitable distribution of carework, or create consent checklists and worksheets for future partners. Such expansive writing projects can help students excluded from traditional markers of citizenship, such as voting or marching in a protest, realize the political power they can harness within themselves, their families (chosen and biological), and their communities.

Rhetorical scholarship on citizenship and protest so often focuses on public interventions; by considering disabled world-making practices, rhetorical studies can expand its study on the transformative power of language to include the vernacular rhetorics of survival, pleasure, and access among disabled and other minorized people. Nathaniel Rivers and Ryan Weber have called for English studies to evolve its understanding of public rhetoric to include the ecologies of seemingly mundane, yet critical, behind-the-scenes texts (meeting minutes, permits, press releases, etc.) that facilitate public interventions. Disabled world-

making furthers their model of public rhetoric ecologies to include embodied needs, shared trauma, pleasure and pain, care, and collaborative speech across different languages and modalities as integral components to writing social change. When we consider disabled world-making, we invite ourselves to seek out how seemingly private acts of survival, joy, and care transform the symbolic practices, *ethe*, and political orientation of disabled communities. By attending to disabled world-making, we can further explore how people who are excluded from citizenship develop embodied, relational, and affective writing ecologies to activate political agency and discourse.

Finally, disabled world-making can help English studies ensure our professional organizations go beyond the legal requirements and ensure the full participation of disabled scholar-teachers in our fields. As Jay Dolmage (*Academic Ableism*), Margaret Price, Tanta Titchkosky, Stephanie Kershbaum, James M. Jones, and Laura T. Eisenman have documented, academia is often hostile to disabled people, with institutions often only offering the bare minimum of legally mandated accommodations, and sometimes not even that. In a symposium published in *College Composition and Communication*, Adam Hubrig, and I ask, “how can we collaboratively create a culture of access in composition studies that prioritizes access for nonnormative bodyminds?” (95–96). The authors of the symposium grapple with this question by offering rhetorical practices, which I see as practices of disabled world-making, such as conference organizers funding and facilitating communication across languages and modalities. Deaf writers in the symposium, Margaret Fink, Janine Butler, Tonya Stremlau, Stephanie L. Kerschbaum, and Brenda Jo Brueggemann, understand that “communication access [such as ASL interpretation and real-time captioning] benefits all attendees because each of us uses it to access one another” (Hubrig and Osorio 93). Just like the 504 protestors, academics in English studies can structure conferences to account for the time, technology, and support needed to communicate across languages and modalities. The more we see access as a shared responsibility among members of our scholarly community, the further we move toward a disabled world that facilitates the sharing of knowledge and decision making across difference in English studies.

The rhetorical practices of the 504 protestors illustrate how communities denied citizenship create world-making practices to foster belonging. They also highlight the rhetorical richness and power of disabled wisdom—and this lesson continues to reverberate in disability activism. Despite the critique of the disability rights movement, contemporary disability justice activists express gratitude and admiration for the 504 sit-in protestors—not for their expansion of civil rights, though important, but because of the practices they embodied inside the building. In a poem dedicated to the 504 protestors, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, a queer, disabled poet and leader in the disability justice

movement, writes, “you didn’t know what you would give birth to. occupying the department of rehab. making out / reaching to us almost forty years later. all our sweet drooling brokenbeautifulugly danger. a cosmos of crip story, all these moments are stars in the disabled genius sky” (“Cripstory” n.p.). As Piepznasamarasinha’s poem illustrates, the 504 sit-in activists mapped out disabled world-making for future generations, providing a model for rhetorical practices that affirm the value, beauty, and pleasure of disabled people.

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NOTES

1. See, for instance, John Duffy’s widely circulated editorial “Virtuous Arguments,” in which he hopes that students will bring the virtues they learned in their first-year writing courses to the “civic square,” “moving us toward healthier, more productive, and more generous forms of public argument.” As of 2017, this essay was taught at the University of Maryland, College Park’s first-year writing course as a way of establishing the course’s exigence and connection to civic engagement.

2. In *Reading Embodied Citizenship: Disability, Narrative, and the Body Politic*, Emily Russell writes, “[I]t is particularly those with visible bodily difference whose political participation is read as inescapably embodied. The features that exclude those with anomalous bodies from full access to the national ideal are the same features that make their acts of citizenship legible” (4).

3. The Gay Men’s Butterfly Brigade, Cesar Chavez, owners of a local lesbian bar, worker’s unions, and leaders of the famously progressive multiracial Glide Memorial church all found ways to provide care for the activists in the building (“Building Networks of Support”).

4. For an in-depth examination of the 504 sit-in through the lens Lomax and Jackson’s role in the protest and Black Power, see Susan Schweik’s article, “Lomax’s Matrix: Disability, Solidarity, and the Black Power of 504.”

5. The FBI’s ignorance of ASL would be exploited again. After the FBI had stopped allowing people to enter the building, they FBI agreed to allow attendants and ASL interpreters into the building for safety reasons. Deaf protestors taught hearing protestors enough ASL to pretend to be interpreters, so they come and go as needed (O’Toole 59).

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