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# Awe of What a Body Can Be: Disability Justice, the Syllabus, and Academic Labour

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Article abstract

This article explores the practice of critically and lovingly manifesting access in syllabus construction and examines how axes of oppression shape our classrooms via the syllabus. We are a collective of multi-racial queer and trans disabled academics writing from our personal experiences and our engagements with performance studies and Disability Justice. We argue that the academy must shift from discussions of accommodations to access, surface questions of Disability Justice and teaching labour in graduate school and higher education at large, and offer a series of questions for teachers to examine their approach to disability in their classrooms.

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# Awe of What a Body Can Be: Disability Justice, the Syllabus, and Academic Labour

Jess Dorrance, Julia Havard, Caleb Luna, and Olivia K. Young

### Introduction

Hi! We are a multi-racial group of sick and disabled queer and trans graduate students, post-docs, and early-career faculty who are friends and who think a lot about art, performance, and collective liberation. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have been meeting online once a week to support one another around our chronic illnesses and disabilities, as well as our personal struggles and wins. Working against the isolation that so often accompanies sickness and disability, we have felt deeply grateful to have a place to bring the minutiae of the ups and downs of our bodies and our journeys within and outside of the medical system (insert stool test joke here) and the academy (insert joke about shitty working conditions here). Over the time we've been meeting, two of us came out as autistic, three graduated, three survived fire season, two moved, and four promised to make the academy safer for our bodies to work, care, imagine, and rest. Our care labour for each other has produced many reflections about what it means to try to manifest Disability Justice magic in the academy.

As scholars invested in both performance studies and disability studies, we view these fields as ones that have many productive overlaps which can be mutually instructive. Both fields think complexly and intersectionally about various kinds of embodiment, examining how bodily norms and identities are produced and resisted. Both fields interrogate how power structures and bodies interact. Indeed, there is a rich scholarly history of these two fields intersecting.<sup>1</sup> The performance studies syllabus, then, is an opportunity to harness this interdisciplinary dialogue to create more accessible spaces for learning and art-making.

In this article, we've come together to explore how to more critically and lovingly manifest access in syllabus construction. The syllabus, we argue, can be one site to work against how ableism, racism, cisheteronormativity, xenophobia, and other axes of oppression shape our classrooms. Enacting the syllabus as a tool of liberation recentres our own bodies in the classroom and raises bigger questions of Disability Justice and teaching labour in graduate school and the academy at large. We examine how accommodations offer a limited model of access in the academy, reflect on the primacy of undergraduate students in disability offices and centres, and offer a series of questions that could be used as a checklist for teachers to examine their approach to disability in higher education. Throughout this essay, we move between our shared Disability Justice politic and the nuances of our individual experiences as people who are differently sick and disabled, raced, sized, and who have different citizenships. When we speak as individuals, the text is indented with the writer's name parenthetically cited at the end.

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Articulating our personal experiences, we believe, is necessary toward generating what Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha calls “collective access”—where needs for access and care are shifted away from “an unfortunate cost of having an unfortunate body, to a collective responsibility that’s maybe even deeply joyful” (2019a, 33). Our needs are not only “our own.” They point to the needs of a multitude of other people who are participating in higher education or might want to. They point to an opportunity for academia to collectively practise what it might feel like to care for one another better and, in so doing, create more revolutionary spaces to learn and grow.

## Crippling Accommodations

As noted by the editors of this issue, a syllabus can reflect ways of knowing and philosophies of teaching and learning that reveal an approach to education. It follows that the accommodations statement—often the one moment in the syllabus where disability is dealt with explicitly—is a salient demonstration of a teacher’s approach to disability in the university setting. The ways accommodations are dealt with in the syllabus offer insight into the larger political complexities of the disability rights movement’s fight for institutional accommodations and how this struggle has been taken up by the university.

Accommodations, as Elizabeth F. Emens details in *Keywords for Disability Studies*, has its roots in early civil rights discourse (2015, 18). The concept of accommodations first referred to a process of gradual integration and compromise, a strategy referring to the white supremacist logics of accommodation of the minority by the majority. The term experienced a shift with the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), a law that was leveraged for “reasonable accommodations” for disabled people across workplaces and educational institutions alike (19). This concept of accommodation holds the racial capitalist valences of productivity—normatively construed—as a central value that refigures the disabled body toward maximum efficiency and output. Rather than continuing to think of accommodations as simply holding class in a physically accessible classroom or providing more time for exams (which are still elements of access that disabled students must fight for on a daily basis), we ask: what shifts when we imagine our classes as spaces where bodyminds across a range of difference can experience the utmost presence, safety, and respect? Instead of trying to reform the standard academic experience, which asks bodies to conform to so-called universal norms, we dream of building learning spaces that honour and respond to, as Caleb Luna writes, the “awe of what a body can be” (2018).

An accommodations statement most often points disabled students toward an accommodations office where they can register themselves while also perhaps offering vague platitudes about how welcome disabled students should feel.<sup>2</sup> Students are sometimes asked to communicate their access needs directly to the professor or via their accommodations specialist. Either way, accommodation statements hold a legal valence that largely displaces the responsibility for access onto a designated office.

Legal accommodations are a necessary and hard-fought-for mode of access for disabled students that we do not take for granted. However, legal accommodations only scratch the surface of the care networks we dream of building in a more accessible classroom and university environment. Anne-Marie Womack suggests that rather than comprising a fragment of the experience of teaching, “accommodation is the most basic act and art of teaching. It is not the exception we sometimes make in spite of learning, but rather the adaptations we continually make to promote learning”

(2017, 32). Here, Womack puts the *how* of teaching at the centre of its practice, arguing for a classroom that prioritizes the whole of the learning community over the needs of those that already happen to succeed within normative educational conditions. Her conception of accommodations as the constant responsive changes in our teaching that allow us to grow in efficacy as teachers asserts that our classrooms must ever evolve to encompass our students' shifting needs.

The responsibility for crafting accommodations cannot be displaced solely onto disability offices, as there can be significant barriers that prevent students from using these offices' resources. Most significantly, disability offices are often dependent on diagnosis as part of registration, and diagnoses can be burdensome, financially inaccessible, and time-consuming to acquire. This is particularly true for students without health insurance, child care, or transportation or who face other obstacles that prevent just and equitable access to health care. In addition, doctors and their offices are shaped by racism, misogyny, ableism, and fatphobia that often prevents patients of colour, disabled, and/or fat patients from seeking treatment and receiving the quality medical care that is necessary to diagnose and treat a condition in an appropriate and timely manner.

If a diagnosis *is* procured, shame and stigma can follow the coming out necessary to register oneself. The registration process itself is another step that may be inaccessible for spoonies.<sup>3</sup> Registration is a logistically complicated and laborious process, and offices are often understaffed, sometimes taking months to process a request. Finally, it is important to note that registering our disabilities allows them to be tracked, observed, surveilled, and policed.

I did not register with the Disabled Students' Program in graduate school for multiple reasons. My disability shifted during graduate school, intensifying after I had finished my coursework and was mostly teaching and writing my dissertation. The university struggles with how to conceptualize ABD graduate students' access needs. When I was assigned to teach in a classroom that was inaccessible for me, I was fortunate enough to have a quick response from my department who shifted the room based on my requests. Most departments would not have had the willingness or capacity for such a response. We need a system that takes into account instructors as well as students—that considers our workplace accommodations alongside educational ones. The graduate student workers' union ultimately became a more apt place to fight for my access needs and those of my peers, but most graduate schools lack this resource. In the end, most of my resources for surviving graduate school were cultivated in disability communities and disability culture-centred spaces. (Julia)

Because many of us consider disability an identity and/or a culture, an accommodations office without a space for students to gather in community, learn from one another, share resources, and organize when resources are scarce is not an office built to respond to the fullness of disabled students' needs. Spurred by student activism, disability cultural centres such as the one recently created at UC Berkeley are emerging across academic institutions.<sup>4</sup> In what follows, we consider ways that the syllabus can lay the groundwork for the classroom to be a space where not only academic work but also disability culture can thrive. The performance studies classroom offers an opportunity to interrogate the assumptions present in cultural spaces alongside educational ones and thus is a particularly apt space for these conversations.

While accommodations are the changes teachers make to respond to students' needs within a class, *access* is the preemptive set of tools and strategies instructors use to craft the most inclusive

classrooms possible with the resources and information we have. Access is a political commitment that ideally influences our entire pedagogical process. In their syllabus, Olivia Young incorporates access into what they call a “classroom ethos,” a set of values that inform the syllabus as an agreement between teacher and student (see Appendix). Moments in the syllabus that highlight teachers’ valuation of access and familiarity with disability culture can serve as powerful sites of solidarity with sick and disabled students, reframing disability as an issue that impacts all students. These moments can also serve as teaching tools for students that have not yet had to (or who have not had the resources to) think deeply about these issues.

Thinking access radically asks us to respond to a wide swath of needs and experiences that can sometimes prevent students’ full participation in classroom environments. These needs and experiences can be related to economics, sensory issues, trauma, care of dependents, housing, immigration status, and so on. When setting up a class or event, some common access needs might include varied seating, desks/tables, adapters for different kinds of technology, a microphone, presentation slides, childcare, children’s activities, dietary needs, scent-free spaces, ASL interpretation, lighting sensitivity, nonvisual options for visual materials and/or audio describers, wheelchair accessibility, all-gender bathrooms, and armless seating. What else might a body need to participate more fully in your performance studies course?

During one meeting of a disability and sexuality working group at UC Berkeley, participants went around introducing ourselves and sharing our names, pronouns, and access needs. In response to comments proclaiming, “I don’t have any access needs,” a friend, Bay Area disability activist Jack Sanders, reminded us that many access needs of nondisabled, neurotypical people are so normalized that they are a “given.” They reminded us that needs such as lighting, seating, tables, speaking loudly and clearly enough to be heard by everyone, food, restrooms, and water are all access needs that we collectively benefit from. Every bodymind, no matter their proximity to ablebodiedness and neurotypicality, deserves to have their needs met. (Caleb)

Disability Justice teaches us that our differences can be thought of as resources that create a richer learning environment as opposed to being detriments. Rather than merely building a new statement to be inserted in place of the accommodations statement, we ask readers to consider: What are the values we hold around access in our classrooms? How can our syllabi and pedagogy function as a form of Disability Justice praxis? How can we reimagine classrooms as places where sick, disabled, fat, and all other marginalized bodies can be welcomed in their complexities?

### **Graduate Students, Instructors, and Professors Are/Become Sick and Disabled Too!**

All of us are navigating or have navigated graduate school as sick and disabled people, and during this time, one thing became eminently clear: accommodation concessions in the university are conceptualized almost entirely with the undergraduate student in mind. In our experience, the most common formal accommodations universities offer students are extensions on exams, essays, and assignments. These tools might be helpful to sick and disabled graduate students when in coursework; however, as simultaneous educators and students, the bulk of our labour lies in

teaching, researching, and writing. These commitments fall outside of the purview of accommodation as currently imagined by the university.

In other words, normative conceptions of disability accommodations register a very narrow scope of what it can mean to be disabled in the academy. While these standardized accommodations are important, they clearly fall short of creating a truly accessible environment for undergraduate and graduate students, as well as for instructors and professors. It is important to note that we could also consider graduate school *itself* to be disabling: a job of five to eight years or more, with few benefits or protections, whose high-intensity, productivity-driven work environment often renders students sick and disabled.<sup>5</sup>

From the position of graduate students, who (at least in some institutions) are often tasked with performing the majority of access labour, we want to highlight how much work is involved in creating an accessible classroom. *Access labour is real labour*. Access consultants are a part of an entire specialized field informed by extensive bodies of research. The expectation that graduate students perform all access labour for a class is misplaced. As disabled graduate students and junior faculty, we long for a syllabus that recognizes the complexity of access and strives to integrate it into all aspects of the classroom structure. As teachers, we seek to fill the lack that shaped our experiences as students.

As a kid with early diagnosed learning disabilities, I was often called on to create the infrastructure to make my learning spaces more accessible. However, it was not until graduate school that I began to process this work as Disability Justice. Up until the authors of this piece first met as a support group, my disability spaces of care as an adult had mostly been cancer support groups. My first care network was a young adult group at the Gathering Place in Cleveland, Ohio, and my second was a morning meditation circle at the Women’s Cancer Resource Center in Berkeley, California. Logging onto my weekly Zoom calls with Caleb, Jess, and Julia brought up years of (un)processed grief about friends who had passed away from cancer during my early years of graduate school, my cancer returning during qualifying exams, and my own fear and shame of being chronically ill and neurodivergent while teaching and writing my dissertation. In April of 2020, one month away from graduating with my PhD, I was relieved to find a space where I could share openly about what it felt like to be a disabled student. To me, being *crip* in a doctoral program felt like a metaphor for my bodymind neurodivergence—a cancer survivor, newly identifying as Autistic, who has multiple learning disorders. I always felt ten steps behind other people’s rationalization of my marginalization: brain fog, confusion, and slow and complicated processing. One day, Julia shared with me a reflection that felt like a sentence from a *crip* mission statement or set of slogans I had forgotten or tucked away somewhere: “People get defensive when you bring up accessibility. They just do. They take expressions of inaccessibility as a moral failing on their part and often react with anger, shame, and blame.”

As a graduate student instructor, most of my Disability Justice work was invisible to nondisabled students, faculty, and departments. At the end of each course I instructed, I would often share tears with disabled undergraduates as we collectively expressed grief about how inaccessible learning was on campus. Many shared with me how in our classroom, for the first time, they felt able to show up as their most authentic *crip* selves. Outside of the classroom, I had to learn over and over again

the boundary of who was safe to do Disability Justice work with and who was not. My first requests for access, either interpersonally or infrastructurally, were always filled with feelings of grief and nonbelonging. As Julia noted, asking for my access needs in graduate school to be better met often provoked resistance, confusion, and shame in my interlocutors. Right now, my black, queer, disabled, nonbinary, femme practice of processing this fear is writing down the words that my friends share with me every week in our support calls and underlining them in my journal for tender keeping and radical repeating: “I’m at capacity for growth right now.” “This is a pro-bragging space!” “I wish I didn’t have to make all these decisions about my body.” “How much de-adulting does it take to compassionately parent yourself? “Labour looks like getting through the day; it’s not legible, but it’s real work.” “You forget again and think that your current bodymind state is always your bodymind state.” “We don’t only get more disabled.” (Olivia)

### **Choose Your Own Crip-Venture! Some Questions and Considerations for Access**

Below we offer a list of provocations to use while going through your syllabi that have emerged from questions we have asked ourselves about our own access practices. Some of what we articulate derives from crip pedagogy studies, and some from the embodied experiences of teaching disabled students and teaching as disabled professors and instructors. We ask how performance studies as an (un)discipline can push back on academic ableism in ways that further the goals of performance studies as a whole. Readers can go through their syllabi and use these questions as a checklist or explore the list nonlinearly. Reader’s choice! However, we also urge readers to consider access more broadly as something deeply embedded in the architecture and theories that inform classroom space. We organized these questions to help reimagine the classroom dynamic from its very conception, beginning at the micro level of course design and moving outwards to end at the structure of the university at large.

#### **COURSE DESIGN**

- **As we try to figure out what teaching means in the midst of an ongoing pandemic—a mass death and disabling event—how can we build syllabi, classrooms, and a world that strives to be more accessible than previous norms?**

The COVID-19 pandemic has pushed discourse on sickness and disability further into mainstream consciousness. During this ongoing health crisis, some people discovered in-person learning was an access need. For others, the possibility to attend class, dance parties, poetry readings, and more from home opened up worlds of possibility for connection. For all of us, the need to live in a world of universal healthcare that simultaneously allows for rest and grief became clear. For those of us who have survived, how do we continue to conceptualize access in a world that is increasingly attempting to force a pre-pandemic “normal” back onto us—a “normal” that fails to consider so many? How can we integrate what we’ve learned about hybrid and virtual learning in order to take into account the increasing number of students who are sick and disabled? What has the pandemic taught us about our needs and students’ needs that we can integrate into our classrooms? Can our syllabi create space for slowness amid ongoing grief, illness, and trauma?

- **How are our pedagogy, syllabi, and classroom praxis working against white supremacy culture?**

Promoting radical access in the classroom begins with understanding that “access” is intersectional. As Disability Justice activists Patty Berne, David Langstaff, and Aurora Levins Morales note, “We cannot comprehend ableism without grasping its interrelations with heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, colonialism, and capitalism. Each system benefits from extracting profits and status from the subjugated ‘other’” (2015). For example, colonization and racial capitalism produce chronic illness through social and environmental destruction. If we want to make a classroom as supportive as possible to all bodyminds, we must address the ways that the higher education system is hostile not only to fat, sick, and disabled people but also to BIPOC, queer and trans, undocumented, and otherwise marginalized folks.

In her well-circulated article, Tema Okun (1999) identifies a number of values that drive hegemonic white supremacy culture.<sup>6</sup> Unsurprisingly, so many of the values she names also produce ableism in the classroom. For instance, Okun argues that generating a constant sense of urgency is part of white supremacy culture. The dedication to moving quickly at all costs, she argues, perpetuates power imbalances by privileging those who “process information quickly (or think they do)” (Okun 2021, 27) and sacrificing and erasing the “potential of other modes of knowing and wisdom that require more time (embodied, intuitive, spiritual)” (28). These other modes of knowing may be racialized, fugitive, and decolonial, and, building on Okun, they may also be crip. Valuing individual and collective well-being over speed, quantity, and normative ideas of “productivity” works against both white supremacy and ableist culture. How does the often unquestioned commitment to “getting through” a jam-packed syllabus or lesson plan end up creating inaccessible learning spaces?

- **How can centring access resist productivity culture while also fostering a deep engagement with course material? What could a more livable syllabus look like? Is the workload of your syllabus disabling?**

The most liveable semester I had during all of grad school thus far was this one semester during coursework, when our professor Trinh T. Minh-ha announced on the first day of class that she was refusing to participate in the racial-capitalist productivity culture of the neoliberal university. Instead, our final paper was a maximum of 1000 words. We read about 100 pages or less a week. We had one class presentation and one small assignment. And guess what? I still learned a lot. Her class is one of the classes I remember the most from coursework. What’s more, the fact that one professor refused to replicate the one-book-a-week, multiple assignments, long-final-paper structure of grad courses meant that all of a sudden, I didn’t come home every day, do my homework, and crash exhausted and worn out into bed. I had time to do dishes, clean my room, start a love affair, go to the swimming pool. Life was pretty good!

Every time I’ve taught undergraduates, it’s been patently clear that they are subjected to a system that produces the same feelings that I’ve felt throughout all grad school: there’s too much to humanly do; no matter how hard I work, I feel constantly behind; I’m working myself to the bone. We believe that accessibility at the



university requires us to do what all of us who seek to resist racial capitalism also need to do: deliberately slow down and plan to do less. Sure, faculty can tell us we need to learn to “manage our time better” or have “more targeted” reading practices. And, yes, there can be value in exposing students to a lot of materials through a “robust” syllabus. But at the end of the day, we need to recognize that the demands of undergraduate and graduate school education in the 2020s are simply too much. As healing justice advocate Cara Page argues, “our movements themselves have to be healing, or there’s no point to them” (quoted in Piepzna-Samarasinha 2019a, 97). Similarly, if we are interested in helping to create collective liberation, we need to figure out ways to manifest more healing educational spaces and practices. We need to leave time for students to have a life outside of school, make some art and dance ‘til dawn, do some activism, and be part of vibrant, interconnected communities of friendship, mutual aid, and care. (Jess)

- **Have you considered opting for a grading contract and other labour-based frameworks for evaluation? This can create less work for both us and students!**

Labour-based grading contracts are a form of anti-racist pedagogy that breaks down assessment hierarchies created by grades that disproportionately benefit students with class and educational privilege. Peter Elbow and Jane Danielewicz (2018) and Asao Inoue (2015) are experts on this subject and created templates for this type of anti-grading work.

## THE SYLLABUS

As disability, sickness, and impairment are ever-changing, access must be an ever-evolving process rather than an end product. That said, there are small technical changes we can enact to make our syllabi more accessible as documents. For detailed instructions and models of how to restructure our syllabi, see the “Accessible Syllabus” project spearheaded by Anne-Marie Womack (2015). Here are some considerations for this process:

- **Is your syllabus formatted in Universal Design?**

The principles of Universal Design (UD) are meant to make environments, practices, and materials more widely usable by people with an enormous range of abilities, capacities, and preferences (Centre for Excellence in Universal Design 2020a).<sup>7</sup> Formatting course documents according to UD makes them more accessible for students who use a screenreader as well as for students with learning disabilities. In fact, UD makes documents more searchable and content more easily readable for all students, including nondisabled ones. There are many excellent guides for how to make documents accessible (see, for example, Centre for Excellence in Universal Design 2020a), but it can be helpful to connect with an expert. Your tech accessibility liaison can be an excellent person to start this conversation with if your institution has such a resource.

- **Do you have image descriptions?**

We include images in this article as a way of gesturing toward the kinds of syllabi we like—ones with different points for access and ones that depart from the dry academese of conventional syllabi. One of the many reasons undergrads tend not to read syllabi closely, we think, is because they are often

overwhelming or intimidating. While images can make syllabi more visually stimulating, they can also be a barrier to access for some. Image descriptions can temper this by translating visual representations into language in order to render them more accessible to blind and visually impaired students. In addition, image descriptions can be excellent examples of what it means to close read images, thereby serving as a way to teach visual analysis. Blind scholar Georgina Kleege (2008) argues that the power of the image description is that it can create a feeling and frame of analysis; Kleege and Scott Wallin (2015) also address the use of audio description as a pedagogic tool.



Image Description: A watercolour painting with thin, black, opaque lettering forms the contours of four words vertically aligned on a single letter-size piece of paper. On the page, the slightly italicized uppercase script reads “ASKING IS FEMME MAGIC” and sharply contrasts the colourful, semi-transparent blotches of watercolour that fill the background. Uncontained red and pink paint runs along the top of the image. Below, large stains of maroon, mauve, and deep purple form enclosed, semi-circular formations behind the word “ASKING.” Each drop of watercolour grows in texture and density, creating thick rings of rich colour to mark its exterior bounds. The reds overlap large patches of blue, grey, and green, which mark the background of the word “FEMME.” Green touches mustard, earthy yellows that sit underneath the word “MAGIC” and traverse to the bottom corners of the image. The result is a series of circular lines that overlap, contrast, and fade into each other, marked most distinctly by the rainbow trail they leave behind the text. This is a watercolour by Jess Dorrance from her in-progress oracle deck of queer-feminist quotes she is making with Chani Bockwinkel. The text is a quote from Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha’s poem “Crip Magic Spells” (2019b, 43).

How can our syllabi work less as contractual documents and more as fun resources for learning? Syllabi can be places where instructors are actively doing teaching work by instantiating Disability Justice praxis, citing our intellectual lineages, calling in our ancestors, and performing the kind of academia we want to take part in. There is no one way to do an image description, and we encourage you to be as creative as you want when trying it out for yourself. For examples of what image descriptions could look like, take a look at the ones that accompany the images in this essay.

- **Does your attendance policy reflect your pedagogical goals? Have you considered flexible due dates that embrace crip time?**

We work to reflect on how attendance policies reflect pedagogical goals of access. As Clare McKinney (2014) suggests, overly strict and inflexible attendance policies may convey to sick and disabled students that their participation is not welcome. What shifts if we consider due dates as suggestions that can be modified with appropriate communication? As academics, we expect that we will miss deadlines and receive extensions in our personal work. Instead of having a default policy of deducting points for late assignments, could we instead ask students to proactively communicate their need for extensions with us and not penalize them if they meet this criterion? This could allow students to practise both identifying their own needs and limits and communicating them responsibly.

- **Have you made all readings and assignment-based materials available to students either at the beginning of the semester or far in advance of the assigned due date?**

Something as simple as providing materials ahead of time can give students more opportunities to make sure the materials meet their access needs and allows them to open a dialogue with you if they do not. Providing materials ahead of time also benefits students who must be intentional about their time management due to work, care obligations, school activities, and so on—another example of how access for some benefits all.

## **IN THE CLASSROOM**

- **Is your course assigned to a classroom that has controllable lighting, functioning equipment, fat-accessible seating, and wheelchair accessibility? How can you create an environment that encourages all bodyminds to do what they need to do in order to take care of themselves?**

How a classroom is structured functions as (dis)invitations for certain bodyminds and, thus, is important to attend to if we want our classrooms to be as accessible as possible. In addition to the architectural and equipment questions listed in the above bullet point, teachers can promote a more accessible classroom environment by normalizing various human needs and behaviours, for example, stimming, sitting on the floor, stretching, eating and drinking, moving around, and using the restroom when needed. Encourage students to meet their own access needs and emphasize permission is not necessary to do so. When facilitating embodied or somatic exercises, we try to be aware that being present in one's body is not always available for people who have experienced trauma or are sick and disabled, and to think about various methods of offering consent and ways of opting out.

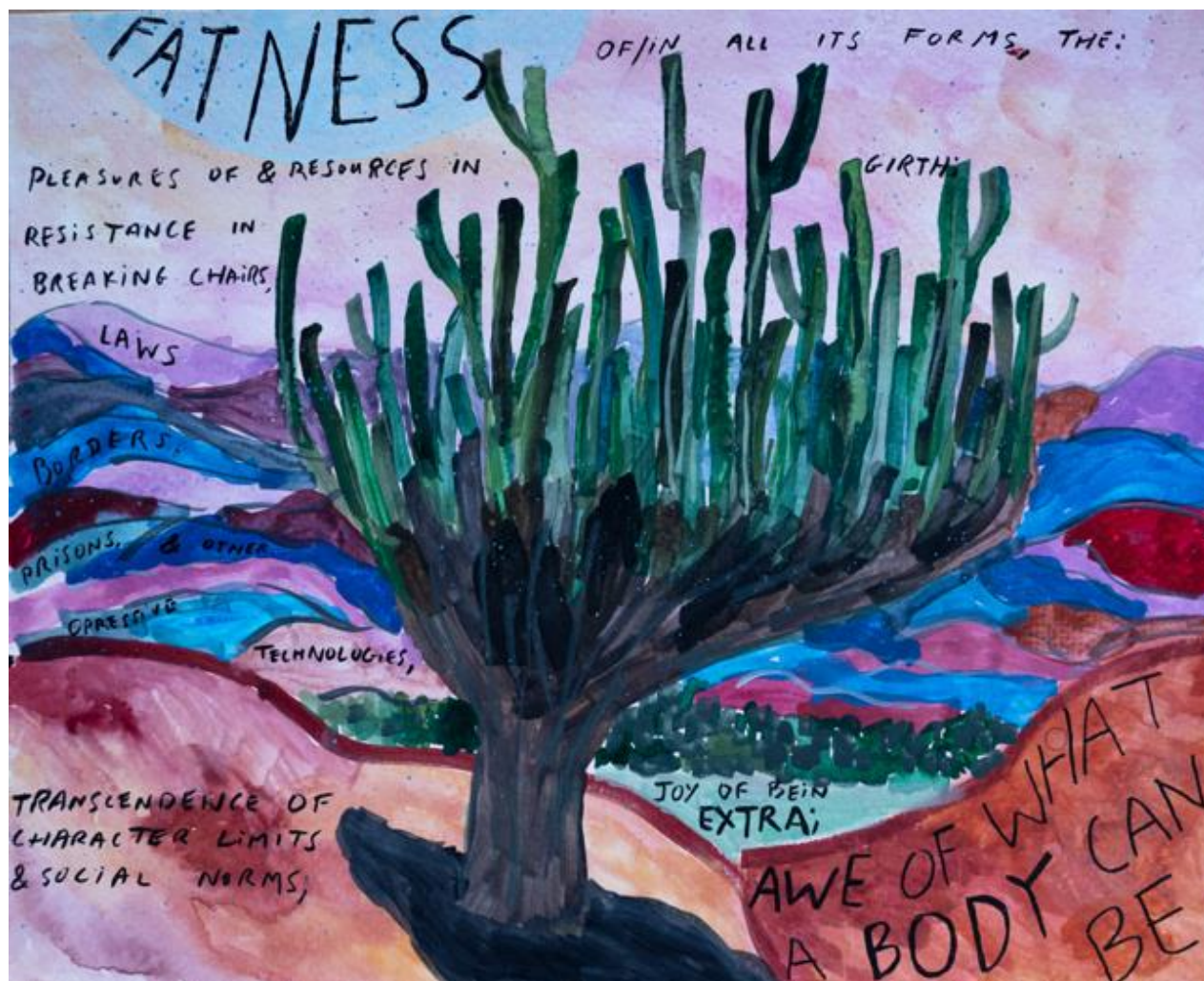


Image Description: A watercolour painting with a quote from Caleb Luna (2018) reads: “fatness of/in all its forms, the: pleasures of & resources in girth; resistance in breaking chairs, laws, borders, prisons & other oppressive technologies; joy of bein extra; transcendence of character limits & social norms; awe of what a body can be.” The text is embedded across a desert landscape, the sky painted in muted pink and orange, while the hills are exuberant blues, pinks, and purples that suggest sunset and an emerging night. In the foreground, a vibrant green desert plant resiliently carves out space for itself as it reaches its fingers into the sky. This is a watercolour by Jess Dorrance from her in-progress oracle deck of queer-feminist quotes she is making with Chani Bockwinkel.

I entered graduate school as fat, disabled, and neurodivergent. As a superfat<sup>8</sup> undergraduate and graduate student, the most commonly encountered barrier to accessing the classroom space is seating. When classrooms, meetings, and trainings are held in auditorium spaces, which often have narrow seats and immovable and containing armrests, and when rooms only have seats with attached desks, these spaces are inaccessible to fat people. Moreover, not all restrooms come with accessible stalls. While I encountered this less regularly at the graduate level, I do not navigate the university with the assumption that I will comfortably fit in any given space. In other words, throughout my experience as a graduate student, I moved with the knowledge that, although I was accepted into graduate school and, by extension, invited to enter this space, I was painfully (sometimes somatically) aware that I was not welcomed.



Work in the field of fat studies has offered me awareness that this inaccessibility is connected to which bodies are imagined to enter the space of the university—white, straight, ablebodied and -minded cis men that are not fat. Perhaps fat students are less visible because we are accepted to university at lower rates, funnelling us into lives of impoverishment at higher rates.<sup>9</sup> More historically, we can think of the university within the genealogy of Enlightenment thinking that produced white supremacist frameworks of thinness as the product of “rational” thinking and control of the body, imagined to be absent from the impulses of Black and Indigenous people globally, bolstering rationale for enslavement and colonization from the metropole.<sup>10</sup> It is impossible to think of either of these without the context of the higher incidence of fatness in communities of colour and the twinned experience of universities historically and presently remaining inaccessible to students of colour of all sizes and abilities. (Caleb)

- **Are your required performances, theatres, and stages physically accessible? Have you organized transportation for those who need it? Do the films and videos you assign have closed captioning?**

As performance studies and art history scholars, we are often taught to heroize “the performance” and “the art object” themselves as discrete objects of analysis, but as Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (2019a, 150) argues, a Disability Justice lens on art-making disrupts this framework, emphasizing that *how* art is created and *which* bodies are able to attend performances or art shows is equally as important as what is on display. A fight for accessibility in the performance studies syllabus is a fight for accessible theatres. We will never create performance worlds built for every body without collective action, and we need every person to leverage their institutional power when they have it.

My disability progressed over the course of graduate school such that I now need a mobility device to perform some activities like standing, walking, and dancing. Though my graduate department strove to become more accessible over my time there and was met with institutional blocks, I continued to come up against the most basic and frustrating issues like inaccessible stages, theatre houses, and classrooms. The marginalization of disabled students from these inaccessible spaces meant that fewer of the students in performance studies classes were disabled, with most disabled students participating in theatre and dance outside of the department. Being a disabled graduate student puts you in the very challenging middle position of having to advocate for yourself and your students and having to mediate the frustrating failures of administrative bureaucracy, digging through the placating “yeses” to eventually find a well-disguised “not for you” at the bottom of the bullshit barrel.

The physical accessibility of a space is a microcosm. If the space isn’t even architecturally accessible, how could it possibly be safe for those with both visible and invisible disabilities? When I look out at an inaccessible space that I am expected to navigate with my ever-changing and unpredictable disabled body with chronic pain, I wince with preemptive nerve pain in my hip for the journey up unexpected stairs. I feel the shame of hypervisibility, of being the only one in the theatre or studio with a visible disability: my limp in the spotlight rather than my teaching. I feel

the anger of being in a theatre space not built for me and the fury that my disabled students are unwelcome there. I feel tired. (Julia)

- **What are your access needs as an instructor?**

All teachers have access needs, whether we are sick and/or disabled or are currently mostly able-bodied. Clear boundaries around email response times and office hour availabilities count as access boundaries! By integrating our own access needs into our syllabus, we show our students that it is not shameful to have access needs, and, in doing so, our class becomes more accessible for us too. We strive to take time to identify our access needs and how we might proactively address them and make them explicit in our syllabi. As Sarah Chinn and Ellen Samuels (2014) discuss, being a teacher is not only a powerful position, it is also a vulnerable one. Our performances of disability and disclosures about our identities and capacities are our own, and our choices around how much of ourselves to show our students have rippling implications. This is one aspect of access in the classroom where we truly need wider disability teaching community to debrief, troubleshoot, and hold each other in our complexity.

As a neurodivergent instructor, I incorporate my own access needs into teaching. This includes setting strict boundaries around communication— notifying my students that I check email once every weekday morning and to manage their expectations around response time accordingly. I also try to be transparent that it may take me longer than other instructors to learn people’s names and that I will undoubtedly occasionally call students by the wrong name until the end of semester. I ask students to have patience with me and try to not take these misspeaks personally. Finally, I also ask students to have patience with me around grading. I communicate with them about where I am with grading each assignment, as well as when I expect to have grades returned. This open communication keeps students in the loop, manages their potential anxiety about feedback, and models how to communicate boundaries and access needs as neutral. This process of addressing some of my own access needs as a teacher brings with it an awareness that my needs may conflict with the access needs of a student, which is an honest and regular occurrence within disabled communities. (Caleb)

## **ACROSS THE UNIVERSITY AT LARGE**

- **Beyond the syllabus, what infrastructure is required at the level of the university to support current sick and disabled students at both the graduate and undergraduate levels?**

I fell gravely, chronically ill at the end of the fourth year of my graduate work. Too sick to teach or work on my dissertation, I was suddenly entirely without income, and my ability to stay in the US legally was under threat. As an international student, the first messaging I received from the university was essentially to “go home.” Whereas all grad students know they will need to move from the site of their PhD work eventually, the idea that a grad student has an alternate “home” to return to belies many assumptions: that the student has some kind of social/kinship security net in their place of citizenship that is safe to rely on; that this net is able to

financially support them while they are unable to earn income, will care for them while sick, and will possibly house them; that the student has enough money and spoons to uproot their life and do an international move; that the student will have enough money and spoons to acquire new health insurance and assemble a new healthcare team in a new setting (and that inevitable lapses of care during this transition will not prove harmful); and that the student does not have meaningful social ties to their place of study (friendships, romantic relationships, housing) they are entitled to preserve and draw upon while dealing with a serious health crisis. At UC Berkeley, I was allowed to be on medical withdrawal and remain in the country for up to one academic year, and this possibility only emerged after a great deal of advocacy. After this year, I needed to either be a full-time registered student or leave the country.

Meaningful access accommodations at this time would have included financial support while being ill, the ability to remain in the country and preserve health insurance and care while ill, and a disability office that actually understood the specificities of being a graduate student and an international graduate student. Like everyone at some point in their lives, (international) graduate students become sick and disabled! This experience revealed to me that the second I was unable to teach, I lost all support, both materially and legally. Though I am grateful for the meaningful support of certain individuals in the university's bureaucracy that I have worked with during this crisis, on a structural level, I was made to feel like I was the only international grad student ever to be in this situation, which of course cannot be true. No one knew what to do with me or how to help. I was given tons of information that, months or years later, turned out not to be fully accurate and turned out to be biased in favour of protecting bureaucratic priorities. In the throes of extreme bodily disarray, which included a huge amount of brain fog that compromised my ability to function cognitively, I was forced to spend hours and hours contacting different university offices in a desperate attempt to simply stay in my home and keep my supportive community, therapist, healthcare team, long-term girlfriend, etc., while incredibly ill. There was little support around how to make the system work for me in this time of crisis. Instead, the system strove over and over to push me out and, effectively, to punish me for getting sick.

What would a university system look like that acknowledged that the ability to undertake ablebodied, uninterrupted full-time work for six to eight years is an anomaly and not the rule? All people deserve the right to be nonfunctional for periods of time without the threat of immediate material precarity and social and physical displacement. As Sunny Taylor (2004) argues, all people deserve the right not to work: to not have our value and stability determined by our ability to perform wage labour.<sup>11</sup> We deserve the right to be supported and maintain our place in our communities regardless of whether or not we have the ability to hold down a paid job or choose to do so. (Jess)

- Have you built community and networks around access work? Have you asked for help?

Wow, this seems like a lot of work, you might say! It is. It really, really is. Many of these tasks are labour-intensive and therefore are often overlooked or side-stepped in course design. We approach this work as a routine practice that spans our teaching careers, and we try to build relationships of collaborative exchange in the process.



Image Description: This is a watercolour painting with a quote from Stacey Milburn (2019) that reads: “People sometimes assume ancestorship is reserved for those of biological relation, but a queered or crippled understanding of ancestorship holds that, such as in flesh, our deepest relationships are with people we choose to be connected to and honor day after day.” The text is set off against abstract geometric shapes that in some places bleed together and in others stand in stark contrast. The shapes are filled with liquid jewel tones that seem to quiver and sparkle from the watery texture of small brush strokes. The shapes flow down the page, resting at the bottom in an infinity symbol. This is a watercolour by Jess Dorrance from her in-progress oracle deck of queer-feminist quotes she is making with Chani Bockwinkel.



Ask for help! Set limits based on your own capacity for labour. If you don't know the answer, consult an expert! This offers a great opportunity to resist white supremacist cultural norms of individualism and bootstrapping and returns us to Disability Justice values of interdependence. We have benefited from creating collaborative work sessions with our colleagues to make our class materials accessible and share the access labour. Other things we have tried include teaching access while creating it for our classrooms; having one group of students audio describe a performance while another group captions it; sharing the work of making our pdfs accessible with a coworker who assigns the same texts; applying for a grant to fund an access consultant for a show or class; and creating an environment where cultivating communal access is embedded in classroom culture.

This work is not easy, simple, or fast. Take it slow. Every semester, we aim to establish more forms of accessibility in our classrooms. In performance studies, when we ask for the complex and radical work that is students bringing their whole bodyminds into the space of the classroom, we must put greater emphasis on making sure that when students meet us in this ask, their whole selves are as welcome as possible. If the classroom or class material is inaccessible to one student, it is inaccessible, period, and needs to be cancelled, rescheduled, or reformatted. Though universal accessibility is impossible to achieve because access needs contradict and fluctuate, consider the fact that when we decide not to provide access in some of the straightforward modes listed above, we are dictating who belongs or doesn't belong in the classroom space. Disability Justice means we move forward together, or we don't move forward at all.

These questions just graze the surface of what access in the syllabus could look like. What are further creative strategies we can dream of to make our syllabi, classrooms, and the university more accessible?

## **Acknowledgment**

Thank you to the special issue editors for giving us the space to think and write about this topic. Thank you to all the sick and disabled folk out here in the university and our wider communities. We see you and are so glad for your presence and solidarity. Thank you to all our sick and disabled ancestors who have taught us so much and forged the paths for us to be who we are today.

## **Notes**

1. For the tiniest sliver of this lineage, see works by Jina B. Kim, Moya Bailey, Eli Clare, Mel Chen, Tobin Siebers, Cam Awkward Rich, Sins Invalid, and many more!
2. Here is a relatively standard example of an accommodations statement: "Students with Disabilities: Your access in this course is important to me. Please request your accommodation letter early in the semester, or as soon as you become registered with SDS, so that we have adequate time to arrange your approved academic accommodations." Student Disability Services (2022).
3. The term "spoonies" emerged out of "Spoon Theory," created by Christine Miserandino (2013) and refers to the limitations on time, energy, and capacity experienced by sick and disabled people.
4. Alice Wong interviews student leader Alena Morales on the importance of building disability cultural spaces at university campuses in her Disability Visibility Project (Wong 2021).
5. See, for instance, Puri (2019).

6. Okun (2022) updates and reflects on the history of the circulation of the original article, first published in 1999. Okun also recently launched a beautiful website: <https://www.whitesupremacyculture.info/>.
7. See Hamraie (2017) for a discussion of the history of Universal Design and disability politics.
8. Superfat is one designation among many within fat communities to highlight the fat experience as a spectrum and locate ourselves within this spectrum. I am referring to the scale devised by Ash of the Fat Lip Podcast, which indexes small fat, mid fat, superfat, and infinifat as subcategories within the fat experience that bring their own unique proximities to privilege and oppression.
9. See Ernsberger (2009).
10. See Strings (2019).
11. As Sunny Taylor (2004) argues, “Disabled people are brought up with the same cultural ideals and ambitions and dreams as their able-bodied counterparts; we too are indoctrinated to fetishize work and romanticize career and to see the performance of wage labor as the ultimate freedom. Shouldn’t we, of all groups, recognize that it is not work that would liberate us . . . but the right to not work and be proud of it?”

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## Appendix

### HART 352: Black Contemporary Art: Speculative (un)Making

Dr. Olivia K. Young (they/them)

Department of Art History and The Center for African & African American Studies  
Rice University, Fall 2021

**Visual Description of the Professor:** I am a black, lightly melanated, queer, non-binary, disabled femme. I have thick, curly brown, shoulder-length hair with bangs. I sometimes wear large, round, silver-framed glasses.



**Image Description:** In the direct center of the photograph, a camera lens points out towards the viewer. The camera covers parts of two bodies, both nude, one facing out towards the viewer, the other, arms wrapped around and behind the first. The dark brown skin of the man holding the camera up against his face, fades into the black background at the bottom left edge of the image. His exposed chest and arms are visible, covered only by the arms of the other person whose body comes from behind, presses against his, wraps one arm securely around his neck and the other gently around his face. This person, whose medium-toned skin brightens with contact with light coming from the left, turns their head away from the viewer and hides behind the head of the man staring directly outward through the lens of the camera. Their hair, a loosely formed fro, fades into the black of the background at the top left-hand corner of the image. Flecks and smudges across the ground of the photograph expose another surface of touch: a mirror raveled with the capture of the camera. The photograph cuts both bodies off above the waist but gives the impression of a seated position and a posturing of a more intimate stance. The black background wrinkles a bit in the light, revealing itself as a thick cloth hung intentionally behind them. The keen lines of skin against cloth become a second center of the image—blurred and slightly out of focus. These disconnected semi-vertical lines, emerging from contrast, run up the image and cut the photograph in disproportionate halves—tangled bodies on the right and vacant, emptied yet flowing blackened background on the left. Paul Mpagi Sepuya, *Darkroom Mirror* (\_2070386), 2017. Acrylic pigment print, 32 x 24 in.

## Access & Resources

### Class Ethos:

Decolonizing Language: In this class, we support each other in the careful work of removing colonial, ableist, racist and binary language from our writing and speech. What does this look like? How can we support each other in this?

Decolonizing Learning Practices: We nurture out of each other the disciplined practice of capitalist productivity and logic-based homework and instead center collective learning, joy-based lessons, and consensual work practices. What does this mean and how can we begin doing this work?

If students are interested, I will hold a group reading hour where students can come together and read assignments once a week. Collectively reading can sometimes strengthen memories of terms and concepts and help disburse the stress of completing homework assignments.

Additionally, this class does not have an attendance policy. I teach because this is part of the work I want to do in the world. I trust your ability to care for your schedules and hope you will join me every week in class as we learn and build something together this semester.

Deconstructing Gender Binaries: We work toward understanding that not everyone in this class identifies their gender within the binary of male/female.

In this class, we work to remove gender-based language from our conversations. This can look like replacing gendered terms with expansive language such as “everyone”, “people”, “human” and “y’all.” This helps us to avoid gendering the classroom and misgendering any student in the classroom.

Sometimes misgendering happens but was not intended to cause harm. If we misgender someone, we apologize, correctly gender them and continue on with the conversation.

Access and Disability: Everyone has access needs! These are the resources or support structures that make accessing a space possible. However, not all access needs are built into the environment of our classroom. Additionally, our access needs can change day-to-day.

At the beginning of each class, we will go around and share our access needs of the day. This is done so I can work to abundantly meet your needs throughout the semester. If you have access needs that might need advanced planning, you can get in touch with me via email or talk with me before or after class.

Flexible Due Dates for ALL Assignments: All assignments are due virtually in canvas on Wednesday; however, as long as you turn the assignment in by Friday at midnight of the same week, it will be counted as on-time. Please note that canvas might report the assignment as late until I go in manually and report it as on time.

Fragrance-Free Classroom: This is a low-to-no fragrance space. Please avoid putting on fragranced lotions, body sprays, perfumes, colognes, or hair products in class or directly before class. This also includes using only fragrance-free hand sanitizer.

Attached to this syllabus is a resource written by disability scholar Alison Kafer, Associate Professor at The University of Texas at Austin, entitled “How and Why to be Scent Free.”

Campus Disability Resources: The Disability Resource Center is located at Allen Center, Room 111, and can be reached via email at [adarice@rice.edu](mailto:adarice@rice.edu), via phone at 713-348-5841, and at <https://drc.rice.edu/>. I will work directly with the Disability Resource Center to make my classroom, my lesson plans, my teaching, and my assignments accessible to everyone. This class does not have exams, but I will work with each students’ accommodation plan to expand access measures to all assignments.

Learn more about what modes of access are available to you:

Campus Access: <https://drc.rice.edu/campus-access>

Technology-based Access: <https://drc.rice.edu/students#Adaptive>

### **Plagiarism and Rice’s Honor Code**

Contemporary artist Indira Allegra writes in a collection of ‘ethos’ on their website:

“Poaching creative ideas from studio assistants, students, lesser known or marginalized artists is an act of colonialism.”

Find their full artist statement here: <https://www.indiraallegra.com/about>

Decolonizing the writing and testing process is first and foremost the responsibility of the professor— to, first, formulate assignments that remind students of their creative potential and, second, teach students how to cultivate their own opinions rather than rely on the words of others. In this class, we will do just that.

After that, it is each student’s responsibility to decolonize their own writing process. Do not appropriate the words, ideas, creative moves, or suggested frameworks of other people. Citations can be a radical form of collective activism. Cite the people who inspire you properly. Build an archive for others who read your work.

Always consider who you cite and why. You can find information on the Cite Black Women Collective here: <https://www.citeblackwomencollective.org/> and in the “File” tab in our canvas classroom.<sup>[1]</sup>

Rice University has strict guidelines regarding plagiarism including but not limited to failure of assignments, failure of the course, suspension and expulsion. Read more about what plagiarism is and how to avoid it, as well as Rice’s policies, here:

[https://gpsdocs.rice.edu/orientation/Plagiarism\\_Hewitt\\_document.pdf](https://gpsdocs.rice.edu/orientation/Plagiarism_Hewitt_document.pdf)

In this class, you can refer to any source, including the required text, posted notes, your own notes, texts not assigned in class, or people not in this class, such as conversations with others, seminars or artist’s talks, as long as you properly cite any and all information using Chicago Manual of Style format.

If you have any questions about the Honor Code for this class, or are wondering if a certain course of action is acceptable, please send me an email before assuming anything.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Gratitude to [Dr. Victoria Massie](#) in the Department of Anthropology at Rice University for sharing the resource “Cite Black Women: A Critical Praxis (A Statement)” with me so that I am able to share it with you! You can find this statement in the “File” tab of our shared Canvas classroom