Beyond Accommodation: Disability, Feminist Philosophy, and the Design of Everyday Academic Life

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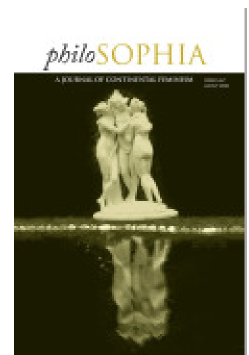

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SHORT CUTS

"KNOWLEDGE . . . IS MADE FOR CUTTING" (Foucault 1998, 380). With this proclamation, Michel Foucault calls us to a "slanted perception" (382) whose "deliberate" aim is to "appraise, to say yes or no, to follow all of poison's traces, and to find the best antidote" for it (382, trans. modified). A cutting knowledge cuts to the chase, cuts the crap, occasionally cuts up with laughter. In that cutting spirit—*touché*!—we are pleased to introduce here a new regular feature of *philoSOPHIA*: "Short Cuts." As the title implies, this section of the journal provides a forum for brief, incisive, explicitly slanted commentaries that cut: reflections, ruminations, rants, appraisals, and agitations on theoretical issues that speak directly to contemporary concerns. We hope these "Short Cuts" will agitate you, our readers: arouse your interest and, as the Latin *agitare* suggests, set things in motion for other exchanges and short cuts. We encourage you to write your own "Short Cuts" (maximum three thousand words) for consideration in future issues of the journal.

—The Editors

Beyond Accommodation: Disability, Feminist Philosophy, and the Design of Everyday Academic Life

Aimi Hamraie

Disability has become a hot topic for feminist philosophy in recent years. Special issues of *Hypatia* and *Disability Studies Quarterly*, multiple conference keynote addresses, and a growing cadre of scholars are exploring the intersections of feminist and critical disability thought. As a disabled feminist scholar, I perceive these trends as a signal that the field of feminist philosophy is taking up disability concepts and theories in valuable ways. There is certainly much that feminist philosophers can learn from disabled scholars and critical disability scholarship and activism. Unlike dominant medical models of disability, which treat disabled minds and bodies as objects of knowledge for science and biomedicine, critical disability theories foreground disabled peoples' knowledge and lived experiences. Often in conversation with feminist theories, they define disability as a valuable form of human variation, cultural diversity, situated knowledge, and a basis for relational ethics that should be preserved, and even desired (Mitchell and Snyder 2006; Kafer 2013; Garland-Thomson 2011).

Like the feminist imperative to consider the personal as political, a central feature of critical disability scholarship and activism is the integration of our scholarly principles into material practices of access-making, whether in the classroom, at conferences, in web space, or in our writing. To do justice to disabled people's existence, knowledge, and politics, feminist philosophers

should avoid making disability a mere theoretical resource for their work. Simply developing feminist philosophy with reference to disability is not meaningful or accountable unless feminist philosophers transform the material and cultural arrangements, real-time interactions, and physical spaces in which feminist philosophy takes place. To work toward meaningful access, feminist philosophers could follow Shelley Tremain's statistical and interview-based documentation of structural inequalities that disabled philosophers experience, and Laura Davy's suggestion that philosophers "redesign" the questions they ask about disability (Tremain 2013; Tremain, 2016; Davy 2014). To build upon this work, I argue that feminist philosophers must understand their labor as the design of everyday academic spaces and interactions, and accordingly become more accountable for material practices of accessibility.

Access, Academic Space, and Material Labor

As numerous sources have documented, the lack of meaningful access is particularly severe within the real-time interactions and physical spaces in which academic conferences, including feminist philosophy conferences, take place (Tremain 2013; Perry 2015; Bain 2016b). Disabled philosophers attending or presenting at conferences where disability is a focus of inquiry have found themselves excluded by seemingly neutral and normal physical aspects of the built environment, as well as norms of academic presentation. For instance, the presumption of conference presenters and audiences with normative cognitive, sensory, and physical characteristics governs the norms of oral speech, visual aides such as slides, the presentation of logical arguments, the assertion of expertise, and the analysis of texts—particularly when scholars practice these norms without providing multiple means of accessing their content. The norm that scholars are nondisabled and not chronically ill (and frequently also people with race, economic, and gender privilege) materializes in the ways that we hold conferences within particular types of spaces: conference centers, hotels, and university lecture halls with forward-facing chairs and inaccessible stages, lecterns with microphones, fluorescent lights, scented products, long hallways, narrow doorways, confusing layouts, and ramps that only appear at back doors near freight elevators.

Because communities are often defined by shared spaces, these norms also render less apparent those of us for whom these material features of the built environment determine the extent of our participation. For some participants, inaccessible conference spaces and classrooms may preclude their presence in a room. For others (particularly those whose disabilities are not apparent to others), the exhausting labors of passing may make some semblance of presence possible, but with significant hidden costs to the participant.

Because privilege, as Sara Ahmed writes, is "an energy-saving device" (Ahmed 2013), the emotional and physical labors of creating access, like many forms of devalued labor, often go unnoticed. When features of built environments remain unmarked in conference accessibility statements and other practices, the labor of seeking out and creating access often falls upon disabled people (Bain 2016a; Price 2009). For instance, the lights, carpeting, air quality, overhead projectors, fragranced soaps, and mechanical noises so prevalent in classrooms and conference spaces, while often unnoticeable to others, require me to invest significant labor to learn about the space ahead of time, pack items that will help decrease exposure, manage overstimulation while listening to a formal presentation, give my own presentation through brain fog and exhaustion, and take time to recover afterward (often for days or weeks). To gain access to academic conferences, I am often asked to perform the labor of creating access for myself, whether by lending knowledge, sharing resources, or devising solutions. These significant investments of time and energy on my part are not counted as part of valuable academic labor. My fellow conference attendees do not perceive these labors because my body and ways of moving through the world do not appear to mark the presence of disability in a recognizable way.

Feminist Philosophers as Designers

Valuable academic labor often appears immaterial and disembodied: feminist philosophers hold one another accountable for what we say and think, but infrequently for what we make and materialize. For all of our training, we do not often understand ourselves as agents with the skills, power, or responsibility to alter existing material arrangements—even arrangements such as the classrooms, conferences, and journals that we frequently create in order to propagate our scholarship. In academic settings, we create barriers and accommodations for one another, whether in the ways that we design our classroom layouts, write assignments, deliver presentations, organize slides and visual aides, or interrupt epistemic violence. If feminist philosophers are to address disability in any meaningful way, I argue that they must understand themselves as *designers* and *makers* who are accountable for the material arrangements and practices upon which their scholarship depends. In the case of disability, feminist philosophers must understand themselves as responsible for designing a more meaningfully accessible and inclusive scholarly community, and not simply for being rigorous thinkers and knowers.

While it may strike some as odd to expect feminist philosophers trained in rhetoric, discourse analysis, logic, argumentation, and the history of ideas to consider their labor as *design*, my argument is entirely consistent with decades of feminist scholarship concerning the social construction

of knowledge, the epistemic and conceptual work of material structures, and the imperative for more accountable research. Even when feminist theories turn away from the materiality of sex and gender, a commitment to ethical and material practices (when it comes to certain feminist goals) remains a hallmark of feminist methodologies. Admittedly, feminists have had to fight for recognition as technological makers and architectural designers (Lange 2014). Undeniably, though, feminist pedagogies, methodologies, and epistemologies *redesign* the material arrangements of knowledge production.

Karen Barad's useful notion of "onto-epistemology" suggests that by studying the entanglement of concepts and material arrangements, we can understand "how differences get made, what gets excluded, and how those exclusions matter" (Barad 2007, 30). Likewise, a commitment to practicing meaningful access offers feminist philosophers a bridge between feminist research questions and strategies to address structural inequalities.[1] Designing meaningful access requires better engagements with the types of ontological, epistemological, and ethical questions with which feminist philosophers have been concerned for decades: Whose "bodyminds" do our scholarly communities anticipate (Price 2014b), which bodyminds appear to disrupt or "misfit" the space when they seek inclusion (Garland-Thomson 2011), and who becomes accountable for access denied?

But while the material practice of accessibility should be considered a core feminist project, the process of designing access requires additional conceptual and methodological tools. Historians and sociologists of knowledge offer the tools of exploring academic disciplines as "epistemic communities" and "epistemic cultures," which are constellations of habits of thought and action, material arrangements of space and technology, relational transactions, and other onto-epistemologies (Imrie 2012, 867; Hamraie 2012; Knorr-Cetina 1999). Similarly, the field of "design methodology" offers theories and research about what thinking and acting like a designer (that is, by embracing uncertainty and iteration as strategies for accountability) can do for contexts beyond architecture, particularly when the goal is social change (Cross 2011). Design methodology reveals that design processes are iterative and recursive, doubling back on themselves to integrate new ways of knowing and making.

Together, critical disability theories, design methodology, and sociologies of knowledge support the notion that access is a relational and epistemic practice. By approaching feminist philosophy as an epistemic community and access as a relational phenomenon, we can understand the field's representative practices toward disability and also draw upon existing work in disability theory to produce more accessible iterations of feminist epistemic community.

Thinking with Disability

Feminist architectural theorists argue that design processes are also "desiring practices," which provide clues regarding what types of bodies and people we expect to be in the world (Ruedi and Wrigglesworth 1996). But in desiring the expansion of disability concepts into feminist philosophy, scholars must also be careful to avoid treating disability as a mere conceptual repository. When we draw upon theories and lived experiences of disability to propagate feminist theory without also committing to meaningful structural inclusion for disabled scholars, we are refusing to "think with" and understand disability as anything other than an object (Erevelles 2014). We are, in other words, committing a form of appropriation.

One way that nondisabled feminist philosophers can think *with* disabled people and disability theorists is by attending to the nuances of ongoing debates surrounding meaningful access, rather than presuming how access should take shape. Conventionally, accessibility standards are found in laws, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which grant disabled people the right to access public life. The ADA enforces this right by mandating particular types of access in public buildings, but requiring that disabled people request accommodations on an individual basis when access is denied or inadequate. Several disability theorists, drawing upon the architectural practice of Universal Design, have argued that this "accommodationist" strategy is problematic for several reasons (Bain 2016; Dolmage 2006; Hamraie 2013; Price 2014a; Tremain 2013; Yargeau 2013). First, it fails to understand accessibility as a collective or societal imperative for which nondisabled people are responsible. Instead, it forces disabled people to carry out the labor of requesting and creating access—often constantly. Second, accommodationist strategies single out disabled people as exceptional "misfits" in need of accommodation while keeping the structures that produce disability exclusion intact (Garland-Thomson 2011). Third, accommodationist strategies are often premised upon "retrofitting" a material arrangement after the fact, rather than building a commitment to access into the process of designing a conference, event, or classroom. Too often, accessibility standards and expectations presume disabled peoples' needs. Compliance-based checklists often fail to consider access as a qualitative experience or framework. Achieving meaningful, rather than merely accommodationist, access requires (as Anita Silvers describes it) "profoundly transforming some dimensions of the core conventions that regulate our interpersonal transactions" (Silvers 1998, 23). Likewise, disability justice activists such as Mia Mingus argue that *meaningful* access is an open-ended and long-term commitment to "challeng[ing] the ableist culture of our work," rather than only focusing on logistics (Mingus 2010).

But the critique of accommodationism should not imply that flexibility toward individual access needs is unnecessary. The broad anticipation of accessibility needs that is frequently portrayed as the converse of accommodationism is not immune to the disadvantages associated with this approach. When accessibility becomes a matter of thinking *for* disabled people by presuming access needs and building them into rigid structures, it becomes another standardized, one-size-fits-all practice that excludes those who are unanticipated or illegible. Instead, meaningful access requires building in mechanisms for accountability that hold space for critical questions about material arrangements—the kind of spaces offered by iterative design processes.

Tanya Titchkosky, a disabled feminist sociologist, describes access as a process of enactments that occur within an "interpretive relation between bodies (Titchkosky 2011, 3). She explains,

> Access is a way to orient to, and even come to wonder about, who, what, where, and when we find ourselves to be in social space. Through the perceptual consciousness of "access," people take social life into account as a space of questions regarding *who belongs where*, under what auspices or qualifications, and during what times or through what particular thresholds. Access, then, is tied to the social organization of participation, even to belonging. Access not only needs to be sought out and fought for, legally secured, physically measured, and politically protected, it also needs to be understood—as a complex form of perception that organizes socio-political relations between people in social space. (Titchkosky 2011, 3–4, emphasis added)

Meaningful access, then, is relational accountability. It materializes from a commitment to enact, iterate, and re-iterate our answer to the questions of who belongs, where, and how. Design methodology offers that both accommodation and anticipatory forms of access are necessary aspects of the iterative design process. Indeed, for access to be an ongoing commitment to social and material transformation requires holding space for redesigning our strategies for access, in addition to committing to the ideal of more accessible academic spaces.

A classic example of meaningful access is the structure of the curb cut, which offers wheelchair users, as well as cyclists, pedestrians, and people pushing strollers, a mechanism of transit from sidewalks to streets. The curb cut has become a metaphor for what I call "broad accessibility," or the notion that disability access also benefits other marginalized users of built environments (Hamraie 2013). But far more instructive than the curb cut *metaphor* are the lessons offered by the design methodologies adopted to create the curb cuts that appear in cities today.

Before laws such as the ADA, many disabled people and their allies designed features of the built environment that could create accessibility, and

used these design processes to generate new disability theories. In Berkeley, California, disability communities and mutual aid networks initially formed around specific ways of navigating built environments, such as using a wheelchair or powerchair (in the case of people with mobility impairments) or white canes (in the case of blind and visually impaired people). A key step toward physical access for chair users came when activists demanded that the city install curb cuts, which are ramps that transition from the street to the sidewalk, along the commercial corridor of Telegraph Avenue (Williamson 2012). Once installed, nondisabled pedestrians, cyclists, and people pushing strollers also found curb cuts useful, which led some activists to claim that accessible design benefits everyone (an idea that is now called "Universal Design"). Yet blind and visually impaired people contested this idea. Because many blind people memorize paths of travel, the new curb cuts were challenging and even dangerous: without the lip of the sidewalk, it was impossible to know when to check for traffic before crossing the street. Access for some did not by default ensure access for others.

If disability activists had thought purely in conceptual or accommodationist terms, they may have understood the curb cut as an inevitable point of tension—a failure to anticipate all users—and may have abandoned their goals altogether. Instead, they thought like *designers*. They created new iterations of the curb cut, placed them in different locations, experimented with various slopes and grades, and created bumpy tactile surfaces to provide blind people with information about the elevation change while also giving chair users access to the street. The curb cuts that we find most often today on street corners with raised yellow bumps reflect these early experiments.

Feminist scholarship is to the discipline of philosophy what those initial, partially accessible curb cuts were to the Berkeley urban environment. As feminist political theorist Brooke Ackerly has argued, feminist frameworks can embody the curb cut by benefitting multiple constituencies beyond women (Ackerly 2008, 141). But if feminist philosophy is to create meaningful disability access, scholars will need to acknowledge the limitations of their own knowledge about disability and be open to re-iterating their epistemic community's material norms.

That access is a relational phenomenon suggests that it can also be learned through interaction and materialized through reciprocal encounters. For example, I attended my first *philoSOPHIA* meeting in 2015 with colleagues in feminist disability studies. Because some of us identify as disabled and participate in conferences such as the Society for Disability Studies meeting, where accessible presentations are a requirement, we planned our access strategy ahead of time. The strategies were simple: because we planned to read text and show slides with images, we built time into our talks for verbal descriptions of the images; we brought handouts and large-print copies

of our papers to share with the audience; we planned to speak at an easy, conversational pace. We also planned to be flexible and change our plans as needed once we knew more about the room, the audience, and our own needs in the space. In the room, we turned off the fluorescent lights, adapted our speaking style to the circular arrangement of chairs by presenting from the corner (where our faces and lips were more visible to the audience), and described our images rather than displaying them on the projector. These practices afforded the presenters and audience members alike multi-modal ways of accessing information.

Though many members of our audience were not accustomed to these practices and may not have considered themselves to need or benefit from them, they reciprocated our efforts with thoughtful and curious engagement. It was clear that the members of the *philoSOPHIA* community wanted to know more about how to be accountable toward disability and that they were open to receiving ideas and resources about where to begin. This reciprocity was illustrative of more collective models of access, which center disability experiences and also hold nondisabled people accountable for facilitating inclusion (Hamraie 2013; Mingus 2010).

Designing Accessible Feminist Futures

From what I understand, efforts to redesign *philoSOPHIA*'s accessibility in future meetings are under way. Like research, design processes begin with questions. If you were designing the next *philoSOPHIA* conference to be as inclusive as possible, where would you begin? Who would you turn to for knowledge and expertise? Who would perform the labor? What resources would you allocate toward inclusion? What elements of a typical conference experience would you redesign? How would you know when meaningful access has been achieved? What protocols will you put in place to maintain accountability?

In the spirit of recent moves to redesign the professional norms and practices of feminist philosophy, I offer the rest of this piece as a series of provocations and tools for creating meaningful access:

1. Access is a beginning, not an end point. Returning to Titchkosky's notion of access as an "interpretive relation between bodies," accountability toward disability access means committing to cycles of success, failure, and (re) iteration. Put another way, access is a long-term commitment to do better.
2. Meaningful access requires us to ask not only, "Who belongs?" but also, "How do we know?" Whose knowledge and leadership is foregrounded? Whose labors are employed in creating access and how are these labors compensated?

3. When we begin to think about accessibility, the task can appear daunting. There may appear to be too many variables to consider in addition to the planning of a conference. The unpredictability of access should not, however, be used to discredit the need for it in conference spaces. Whether one is an organizer, a speaker, or an audience member, the plentiful opportunities for redesigning the material arrangement of space should be considered as part of the feminist project of creating more inclusive spaces for scholarly inquiry.
4. Fortunately, several generations of disability scholars, activists, and makers have asked these exact questions and experimented with new forms of access. Feminist philosophers, particularly nondisabled feminist philosophers who are beginning to draw upon disability theories, would do well to also learn from earlier access experiments, such as the ones described above.
5. While accommodationist approaches try to contain the disruption that disability represents to a normative order, laws such as the ADA also offer feminist philosophers an important reminder about ethics and accountability: *Those who make the world have a responsibility toward those who dwell within it.*
6. Meaningful access requires collective labor. Disabled philosophers and attendees should thus have opportunities to set the agenda for access but all conference attendees and organizers must be willing to perform the labor of creating it. While accessibility guidelines, accommodation requests, and committees are an important beginning, they do not create meaningful access if their labor falls disproportionately upon disabled people.
7. The iterative work of meaningful accessibility does not have to be stifling or daunting if we *begin* our new iterations of feminist philosophy with questions of who belongs, how we can know, and how to include the expertise of those most affected by the lack of access while shifting labor to those with more privilege.
8. The goal of meaningful access should be to create channels for accountability and re-iteration, rather than to decide for others what counts as access. In addition to providing as much access as possible as a default practice, setting procedures in place for addressing denials of access or the need to make alterations to existing material arrangements should be understood as part of the broader feminist project of redesigning philosophy to expand diversity.

Note

1. As a caveat, though I focus on disability, my argument has potential implications for the project of broadening philosophical practices beyond the norms set by white, non-disabled, heterosexual, cisgender (and often male) philosophers

(a project that Parker describes in an earlier *Short Cut*). Racial and economic justice, for instance, are ongoing projects of creating through thoughtful iterations.

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Additional Resources for Self-Education

Conference Planning

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Conference Accessibility: Presenting

The Composing Access Project: http://composingaccess.net/.

Society for Disability Studies. "Accessibility Guidelines for Presentations": https://www.disstudies.org/conferences/accessible-presentations.

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Multi-modal Pedagogy

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