

Editorial

Crippling Concepts: Accessibility

Kelly Fritsch, Ph.D.

RDS Associate Editor for Research

Accessibility is a keyword for disability studies, one that is often taken for granted in its everyday deployment. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, use of “accessible” as an adjective dates to the fourteenth century when it denoted being “capable of being entered or approached” and “readily reached.” It was not until 1961 that “accessible” began to signify the ability to be “readily understood.” As a noun, “access” derives from the fourteenth-century Old French “aces” (signaling both the “coming on” or “attack” of an illness or emotion) and from the Latin “accessus” (“a coming to, an approach”). Within these etymological origins there resides a tension between “access” as a kind of attack and “access” as an opportunity enabling contact. This tension is important for disability scholars and activists as the dual inflection of both attack and contact highlights the centrality of the boundary work of inclusion and exclusion to all forms of struggle within disability politics, studies, and activism.

Such boundary work is apparent not only in the historical emergence and circulation of “accessibility” as a concept but also in our everyday accessible practices within disability studies and disability activism. For example, within the history of social movements, use of “access” as a noun emerged throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as it became associated with the US liberal politics and calls for “equal access” to public accommodations regardless of race or color. The use of “access” and “accessible” dramatically increased from the 1950s onward as a result of developments in civil rights, the rise of disability rights struggles, and new forms of technology like the personal computer and the sidewalk curb cut designed to improve urban-landscape navigability. With this usage, “access” denotes a kind of opportunity. According to Bess Williamson, it conveys “the importance of recognizing external barriers that prevent disenfranchised persons from gaining access to resources” (2015, 15). This meaning is perhaps expressed most obviously through the International Symbol of Access (1969), the ubiquitous white graphic depicting a wheelchair user, faced to the right, presented on a blue background (Fritsch 2013). This symbol is deployed to depict access to ramps, elevators, and entrances easily entered by wheelchair users.

In contemporary usage, gaining access to resources is the primary meaning “access” takes, where people clamor for “access to jobs,” “access to healthcare,” and “access to housing”

(Williamson 2015, 15). Through “accessibility,” people can participate in or access something that would otherwise exclude them on the basis of mental or physical impairment,

educational or class status, gender identity, or other factors. With this particular usage, “accessibility” is primarily achieved through a “checklist approach”—something can be deemed accessible when a space is barrier-free for people using wheelchairs, has non-fluorescent lighting, has gender-neutral washrooms, where American Sign Language interpretation is available, is free or has sliding-scale fees, has integrated a range of ways for people to participate, offers childcare, is scent-free, et cetera. As a checklist approach to inclusion, “accessibility” conforms to an understanding in which difference is an individual problem to be accommodated. By accommodating and including individuals in this way, the fight for accessibility draws upon and reiterates the liberal rights-based approach to social change. Consequently, it is valorized and celebrated as a self-evident good that solves (or might eventually solve) the problem of exclusion.

When used in this way, “access” is generally conceived as an individual state of affairs in which the problem of exclusion to be resolved arises within a particular body incapable of gaining access. By taking accessibility into account and by providing “equal access,” this problem is ostensibly solved. However, behind this conception resides the assumption that some bodies naturally fit whereas others need “access.” As such, the socially just thing to do is to extend access to those who do not easily fit. In this way, demanding access to a space or event can inadvertently reinforce the naturalization of “able” bodies while reinforcing the individualization of impairment, class or educational status, and gender identity. As disability scholar Tanya Titchkosky has pointed out in *The Question of Access: Disability, Space, Meaning*, this is because “access” is not solely about a lack of inclusion; instead, it is a way of “perceiving, talking, and acting” (2011, 13) that is concerned with some aspects of everyday-life access while others remain unnoted. Although every instance of life could conceivably be regarded from the standpoint of access (since establishing access is the precondition to doing anything), current conceptions tend only to implicate those considered abnormal or who do not easily fit into activist spaces as normally constituted. “The fight for the rights to access may get people in,” Titchkosky notes, “but that is only half the issue.” In her view, “developing critical relations to access that are committed to recognizing how it already interprets embodied difference is the other half” (2011, 28). In this way, “access” can rectify exclusion; however, such efforts remain incomplete without a critical assessment of how those exclusions first came to be and how they continue to function.

Despite attempts by disabled activists to emphasize that it is not the problem of any individual body but rather social relations that set up barriers to access, contemporary mobilizations of “access” tend to reinscribe the idea that access is about some bodies and not others. In this way, and despite the “social model” advanced by many disability activists, the problem is once again individualized. In its dominant figuration of disability access (a wheelchair user who requires a ramp, elevator, or automatic door opener), the International

Symbol of Access makes this tension emblematic.

For radical disability activists, the tension in “accessibility” also arises from use of the term to denote inclusion in an unjust system—or, as activist organizer AJ Withers (2015) terms it, “accessing privilege.” In this view, a truly radical approach to accessibility requires considering the tensions between “accessibility” as a solution or checklist versus “accessibility” as an ongoing negotiation. For radical disability activists, the potential of “accessibility” is precisely to mark “access” as an ongoing and shifting process rather than as a mode of solving individualized problems. As disability justice activist Mia Mingus (2014) remarks, “we need to go beyond just inclusion and beyond just trying to make spaces accessible” in order to ask what liberatory access would look like, not only for disabled people but for “all of our communities.” One strategy for achieving this reformulation can be observed in what Mingus (2011) has termed “access intimacy.” Here people are encouraged to “get,” “understand,” or anticipate someone’s access needs and, in so doing, produce or practice “crip-made access” and “crip solidarity.”

But even as we begin reimagining “accessibility” as a shifting process rather than as a mode of solving individualized problems, and even as we present “accessibility” as a self-evident good, it remains common practice to deliberately limit access in all sorts of ways. And so, while “accessibility” is regularly presented as a way of extending social inclusion to those who have historically been marginalized by ableism or other forms of oppression, this conception of “access” regularly (though rarely explicitly) comes into conflict with “security culture,” “safe space,” or forms of intellectual engagement such as dense theoretical writing or complicated word usage not deemed to be “readily accessible.” Like “accessibility,” these forms of exclusion are also commonly presented as a self-evident good, in which access is deliberately restricted for some in order to create a different kind of access, or community, for others. Importantly, the access barriers created by “security culture,” “safe spaces,” or through particular kinds of intellectual engagement like “inaccessible” writing, are usually taken to be necessary. Indeed, these practices are often necessary in order to create boundaries to achieve certain goals (scholarly, activist, otherwise). The result is that the assumed good of creating access is pitted against the assumed good of creating community, or deepening our understanding of our ourselves and our world. Here, far from being a self-evident good, “access” functions as a kind of attack upon boundaries that have been constructed for a particular purpose. Thus, while frequently proclaiming the good of access, scholars and activists contradict this proclamation through everyday exclusionary practices that are deemed necessary and important. Balancing exclusion and inclusion requires that we are able not only to recognize the difference but also to enact that difference through the opening and closing of those boundaries we control.

And yet the question remains: how might we address the divide in practices between

celebrating access and acknowledging the need for particular exclusionary spaces? If, despite its violence, exclusion is a category we want to embrace in certain moments (for example, in calls for sovereignty or in contests over occupation), then it may be through “access” as a boundary practice denoting both “contact” and “attack” that we might find the means of navigating this fraught terrain (Fritsch 2016).

References

- Fritsch, K. (2013). Neoliberal circulation of good affects: Happiness, accessibility, and the capacitation of disability. *Health Culture and Society* 5(1), 135-149.
- Fritsch, K. (2016). Accessible. In K. Fritsch, C. O’Connor & AK Thompson (Eds.), *Keywords for Radicals: The Contested Vocabulary of Late-Capitalist Struggle*, pp. 23-28. Chico, CA: AK Press.
- Mingus, M. (2011). Access intimacy: The missing link. In *Leaving Evidence*.
<https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/05/05/access-intimacy-the-missing-link>
- Mingus, M. (2014). Talking transformative and disability justice with Mia Mingus. In *Project As[I]Am*.
<http://project-as-i-am.com/talking-transformative-and-disability-justice-with-mia-mingus>.
- Titchkosky, T. (2011). *The question of access: Disability, space, meaning*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Williamson, B. (2015). Access. In *Keywords in Disability Studies*. R. Adams, B. Reiss, & D. Serlin (Eds), pp. 14–16. New York: NYU Press.
- Withers, AJ. (2015). Self-determination, disability and anti-colonialism or self-determination as disablism and colonialism. In *If I Can’t Dance, Is It Still My Revolution?*
<http://stillmyrevolution.org/2015/01/25/self-determination-disability-and-anti-racism-or-self-determination-as-disablism-and-racism>.