A CRITICAL DISABILITY STUDIES CRITIQUE OF RHETORICAL NORMALCY IN WRITING CENTER THEORY, HISTORY, AND PRACTICE

By

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis broadly theorizes how to make writing centers more accessible for disabled writers. Specifically, it applies a *critical disability studies methodology* both to writing center history and research practices. Importantly, this thesis resists impairment-specific approaches to accessibility, and instead seeks to develop the theoretical framework necessary to create lasting reforms in writing center theory and practice so that disabled people are included in both.

Central to this thesis is the idea of "rhetorical normalcy," which is a set of social, behavioral, and rhetorical codes that constitute the deleterious norms that both writing center studies and the larger field of rhetoric and composition have relied on throughout their history. A major claim throughout this thesis is that writing center history, theory, and practice all rely on this conception of rhetorical normalcy, often at the cost of writers with disabilities.

Ultimately, this thesis argues that in order for writing centers to become radically accessible for writers with disabilities, writing center administrators and practitioners must first become aware of the role of rhetorical normalcy has *always* played in writing center practice, and they must look for ways to incorporate disabled writers into their theorizing and research about writing.

For Emma, who gave me a love of hot chocolate, early morning classical music, and reading.

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INTRODUCTION

In tongue slumber, each swollen tangos T's stomp Broca, until blackberry mush. The larynx drools redness as spawn. A boy jabs his molars, thinks a dew worm folds onto the barb, thinks its curl stings cello against his own enunciation._

—Jordan Scott, *Blert* (30)

I am wondering how to write this essay. Will I be intelligible or not? And if I am intelligible, does that mean I have succeeded? And if I am not quite intelligible, or if I am unintelligible, then will that be a failure of communication? Or will it be making a different point?

—Judith Butler, "Values or Difficulty" (200)

To write by fragments: the fragments are then so many stones on the perimeter of a circle: I spread myself around: my whole little universe in crumbs; at the center, what?

—Roland Barthes (93)

A little over a year ago, I began to think critically about the topics that would form the core of this thesis: disability, accessibility, and writing centers. I began to read the literature on disability in writing center studies, a field that prides itself on creating equal access to higher education. Before long, though, I realized that despite there being over forty years of research on disability in the field, we still know very little about the actual needs of disabled writers. Naturally, I thought it would be reasonable to do a mixed-methods, IRB-approved research project on accessibility in the writing center for my thesis, a project that I hoped would contribute to knowledge on writing centers and disability. For reasons that will become clear in the second chapter, however, this is not that project.

Instead, this thesis *theorizes* a more accessible writing center. Access is a tricky word, one that "holds the curious distinction of being seemingly easy to define and comprehend but difficult to create" (Williamson, "Access" 15). The design historian Bess Williamson has written extensively on the history of accessible design and defines access both literally and figuratively. Williamson's literal definition of access is a narrow one: it is "the ability to enter into, move about within, and operate the facilities of a site" (Williamson 14). Unfortunately, this is where most conversations about accessibility tend to stop: with/in bodies and space. Williamson's figurative definition, however, pushes beyond the boundaries of physically accessible space by including the nonphysical space of politics. In this figurative sense, access is about altering the public sphere so that it creates "greater opportunities for social and political participation" for people with disabilities (ibid.).

I define accessibility in a way that makes Williamson's figurative definition literal by positing that true access is, *by its very nature*, the kind of "transformative access" that *transforms* spaces by changing their structure, not just their entry points. Here, I draw from work in "critical access" studies by scholars such as Elizabeth Brewer, Aimi Hamraie, and Elizabeth Ellcellsor done on "transformative" access (see Brewer et. al.; Hamraie, *Building Access;* and Ellcellsor). Brewer et al., for instance, have contrasted transformative with "consumptive" access: "the former involves allowing people to enter a space or access a text. The latter questions and re-thinks the very construct of allowing" (154). When accessibility is about making better disabled consumers, not disabled creators, it can be considered consumptive, not transformative. Consumptive access, then, focuses on making goods and services more accessible to consumers rather than making tools accessible for creators (or composers) who can transform the world.

In my definition of access, I also draw on the work of disability justice activists, such as Mia Mingus and the members of the disability justice collective Sins Invalid, whose conceptions of disability justice frameworks have pushed conversations about access beyond this consumptive model. Disability justice aims at incorporating access within the larger sociopolitical goal of liberating disabled people from an ableist world (thereby enacting *justice* for disabled people). As elucidated by groups like Sins Invalid, a disability justice framework centers identities that are intersectional, communities that are interdependent, and access that is transformative and collective. Collective access, according to Mingus, "demands that the responsibility for access shifts from being an individual responsibility to a collective responsibility" ("Access Intimacy, Interdependency" n.p.). A collective model of access resists the ableist tendency to view access as a fungible good that is conferred on (or sold to) disabled people in a market economy by benevolent abled people. Instead, in a disability justice framework, access is treated as a mutable, emergent property that is negotiated collectively. Access is therefore interdependent and interpersonal, and involves various negotiations, either between disabled people and their attendants or members of mixed-ability communities who understand each other's access needs "intimately" (Mingus, "Access Intimacy: The Missing Link" n.p.).

"Intimate" access, like collective access, is a conceptualization of access that is diametrically opposed to the kind of consumptive access promulgated in a neoliberal market economy. Mingus explains that access intimacy is an almost inexplicable feeling that results "when someone else 'gets' your access needs" ("Access Intimacy: The Missing Link," n.p.). For Mingus, then, access is an affective, embodied response that is centered in the disabled person's body, not in building codes or accommodation plans. This kind of access might seem like too lofty a goal for a space as bureaucratized as the academy, and indeed, it might just be an impossible ideal. But just as academics strive for fair and balanced inquiry and to prepare students to be engaged members of a democratic society—ideals that are arguably just as lofty—they must strive to create access intimacy in their work with disabled students, as well. Doing so is a matter of disability justice.

So, while Williamson's distinction is useful for understanding the limited history of accessible design, it risks further limiting the conversation about access so that it only concerns improving access for people with physical disabilities to physical spaces. My definition collapses that distinction and incorporates notions of collective and transformative access: *to make the world more accessible is to change the structure of physical and nonphysical space so that disabled people can enter those spaces and change them.*

Accessibility matters, even if it doesn't always directly concern matter. Even if we think immaterial practices don't concern the ordering of space, they do. Accessibility is about bodies and minds and whose bodyminds get accounted for; accessible writing center practices are about which bodyminds show up in the space of writing center research and practice. As a field, we've virtually ignored the systematic study of writing center practices that exclude writers with disabilities (other than learning disabilities), which I argue also limits the transformative potential of the writing center. A critical disability studies approach to the history of the field forces us to grapple with the reasons for that exclusion.

Normal Writers

Conversations about accessibility in writing center studies have tended to be either just that—conversations—or they have deflected the responsibility of creating access to on-campus disability services. Writing center scholars Rebecca Day Babcock and Sharifa Daniels note that even though writing centers tend to have progressive agendas, "there is often a disconnectedness between theoretical and policy announcements about disability and the practical implementation of such policies" (2). The lack of attention paid to disability studies within the field is all the more shocking because ideas of ability, of "normal" writers, are key to the writing center's existence.

Over the past decade, scholars in the field of rhetoric and composition have elucidated the numerous ways in which language norms (such as Standard Written English, or SWE) have been used to deny rhetorical agency and competency to people of color (access Royster; Kynard). Historians of rhetoric, such as James Berlin have pointed out that early composition programs (e.g. Harvard's) relied on language norms—such as the ones once promulgated by current-traditional rhetoric—in order to simultaneously justify requiring freshman composition courses and to exclude students from entrance to institutions of higher education (Matsuda 638; Berlin, *Writing Instruction*...73). Indeed, we might say that despite the progressive and liberatory goals of recent scholarship in the field, the enforcement of language norms and the punishment of linguistic deviance—what Matsuda calls "linguistic containment"—is one of rhetoric and composition's most durable legacies (648). Despite the important historical work on linguistic norms, rhetoric and composition has only been recently theorized through the perspective of critical disability studies (CDS).

Broadly speaking, CDS has long been interested in identifying and critiquing the deleterious norms linked to the oppression of disabled people. But even though this powerful theoretical framework has been applied to other fields, such as education and even rhetoric and composition, there has been little to no sustained application of critical disability studies to the history, theory, or practice of writing centers.

As a field, writing center studies claims to value making writing centers "thoughtfully, accommodatingly, and graciously accessible," and yet, in reality there has been very little research done on how to realize that goal ("Position Statement"). Much of what has passed for writing center research on disability should actually be considered the study of what Jay T. Dolmage has called the "retrofit" (70). Retrofits are used to improve existing practices and structures so that they are accessible to people with disabilities, but not in the transformative sense (ibid.). As retrofits, accommodations can improve access to spaces and services, but they do not transform those spaces and services by challenging the norms that act as their presuppositions. In order to accomplish a level of access that is thoughtful and gracious, we need to move beyond dated research that fixates on the little tips and tricks of accommodation that so often passes for research in accessibility.

To that end, you should not expect to find subheadings like "How to Tutor Students with ADHD" or "Working with Autistic Writers" in this thesis. As Kiedaisch and Dinitz point out, when this kind of language is used in writing center manuals, it is often used with "the assumption…that the student writer, not the tutor, is the ESL student or has the learning disability, suggesting that such differences disqualify a student from being a tutor," and, as a result, "these groups of writers are often overtly marked as being 'different'" (43). Well-meaning writing center theorists and practitioners who conceive of difference in this way cannot actually engage with the difficult work of building collective access in their centers. In only seeking to make the space of the writing center minimally accessible, these writing center professionals reify the very material and discursive conditions that create disability in the first place. To be sure, there is something to be said for developing robust accommodations in writing centers, but on their own, accommodations cannot constitute accessibility knowledge. As a field, we must begin to root both our research and practice in a critical disability studies methodology. This does not mean moving beyond access, but toward it. After all, access should be a "way to move" (Dolmage 116).

The under-utilization of disability studies theory in writing center studies is even more conspicuous given that numerous writing center scholars, such as Beth Bouquet, Neal Lerner, and Peter Carino, have explicitly problematized the history of writing centers through the topoi of norms and normativity. These scholars point out that at various times throughout their history, writing centers have both perpetuated exclusive languaging practices by serving as "fix-it shops," *and* they have promoted diversity, equity, and inclusion through positioning themselves as safe spaces for non-normative writers and sites of resistance against what sociolinguists have called "standard language ideology," or SLI (Lippi-Green 166).

SLI, as defined by performance studies and rhetoric scholar Vershawn Ashanti Young, is "the belief that there is one set of dominant language rules that stem from a single dominant discourse (like standard English) that all writers and speakers of English must conform to in order to communicate effectively" (111). Standard language ideologues frequently claim that learning Standard Written English is like learning a second language. "Who could object to learning a second language?" asks Stanley Fish in his defense of teaching standard English "What he really mean by this rhetorical question," responded Vershawn Young, "is that the 'multiculturals' should be thrilled to leave they own dialect and learn another one, the one he promote" (Young 111). Simply put: SLI polices the language of lower-class non-able-bodied Whites, while middle- to upper-class able-bodied Whites can slide in and out of different registers and even dialects. Even though antiracist and radical writing center scholars have sought to distance the field from its roots in SLI, it's crucial that we never forget the fact that SLI is actually part of the conditions necessary for something like a writing center to enter the scene in the first place.

Because the history of writing centers is closely connected to the history of the field of rhetoric and composition, the writing center is an ideal space to research how a phenomenon like SLI intersects with race, class, gender, and ability. However, as writing center scholars Rebecca Day Babcock and Sharifa Daniels note, writing center scholars have only recently begun to pay serious attention to the presence of disability in the writing center, and we need to better understand the role of the writing center in the creation and enforcement of normalcy—not only of "normal writers," but of "normal" or normative college students. Much of the previous scholarship on disability in the field has simply suggested a number of disability-specific accommodations that follow the script "'I tutored a student and here's what happened'" (Babcock et al. 25). More recently, however, scholars such as Allison Hitt and Annika Konrad have made important interventions into writing center pedagogy by calling for accessibility to be a foundational part of writing center theory and practice. Hitt and Konrad both call for Universal Design for Learning and multiliteracies as ways to make writing center consultations more accessible. While these are important new directions for writing center theory, there has been very little research done using critical disability studies as a framework to evaluate these practices. One of the purposes of this thesis, then, is to frame accessibility in the writing center through the theoretical lens of critical disability studies by analyzing how norms circulate in the field, which I group under the header of "rhetorical normalcy."

Critical Disability Studies Methodology in Writing Center Research and Practice

I use the term "critical disability studies" (CDS) throughout this thesis in order to call to mind two interdependent operationalizations of disability theory, at times stressing the *critical* part, and at other times, the *methodological*. As critical theory, CDS is an extension of the critical projects of feminism, critical race theory, post-colonialism, critical pedagogy, and the kind of critical theory originally envisioned by Horkheimer and Adorno's Frankfurt School. As disability studies scholar Aimi Hamraie writes, "the critical disability turn addresses ideology, political economy, and cultural systems responsible for characterizing disability as disqualification" (Hamraie, *Building Access* loc. 367). This critical turn, then, goes beyond the study of specific impairments, and thus moves the field beyond the "medical industrial complex's" obsession with curing disability in order to study the logic of "human disqualification" (Clare 25).

Similarly, as a theoretical framework and methodology, CDS is an attempt to move beyond the binaries of disability and impairment and Universal Design and accommodation-as-retrofit. Released from these unproductive binaries, we are newly free to engage in a meaningful critique of systemic "ableism," which in turn lets us make the world—and the writing centers contained within it—accessible. Ableism, according to Fiona Kumari Campbell, is:

> a network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human. Disability then is cast as a diminished state of being human. (Campbell 44)

Just as disability studies scholars like Campbell have identified a "corporeal standard" against which disabled people are judged in terms of physical appearance and ability, I argue that students are judged against rhetorical norms; when they don't adhere to those norms, they are "cast as a diminished state" of being writers, students, and ultimately, thinkers. Given the need to dismantle ableism, it is the norms on which we should focus, not specific forms of impairment.

Once again, in practical terms, this means that writing center scholars must move beyond brief addendums to writing center manuals that contain "tips and tricks" sections for the atypical, the non-average, the "Other[ed] Writers," because these are always impairment-specific. Instead, CDS asks us first to take up the difficult task of challenging the ableist norms that create disability in the first place, and then to "crip" our practices, thereby radically transforming them so that they make disabled futures possible.[1]

It's important to point out that critiquing ableist norms does not mean we get rid of standards in writing and education altogether. It doesn't mean that writers can no longer learn to write through feedback that draws attention to their language choices and sets goals for further progress. What it does mean is that we must engage in a critical genealogy of those norms, a genealogical analysis that is informed by scholarship in critical disability studies scholarship, critical theory, Black feminist thought, and in other anti-oppression work and critical theories.

That CDS taps into these traditions does not mean it is wholly derivative of them. While previous writing center scholarship has explored the role of writing centers in perpetuating racial-, gender-, and class-based oppression, these critical approaches should now be expanded so that disability serves as a key intersectional and analytical lens. With a CDS approach to writing center studies, we revisit these problematic histories of composition and writing centers in order to examine how norms are used to represent subjects who deviate from cis-heteronormative middle-class Whiteness and "compulsory able-bodiedness" (McRuer 2). Just as

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[1] I will explain the term "crip," as well as the related term "cripistemology" more fully in the second chapter. In short, my use of the terms "crip" and "cripping" is meant to call forth "queering." In this sense, crip is used "to identify a sensibility, identity, or activity in opposition to mainstream assumptions about disability" (Lewis 46). This will become clearer as I discuss how disability studies scholars have cripped research methodologies.

with those other traditions, we need to examine which standards are necessary to keep in order to help students become better writers, and which ableist norms can be done away with.

Julie Avril Minich has argued that the move to methodology is also important for the continued viability of the field of disability studies. Because disability studies (DS) is thriving as a field, it is at risk of being co-opted by the neoliberal university. Minich claims that in order to protect the radical potential of DS, scholars engaged in this work should pivot to using disability as a methodology, rather than merely as an object of study. In this sense, her explanation of CDS is similar to Hamraie's, which identifies CDS's primary aim as the critique of the ideology of human disqualification. For Minich, CDS "involves scrutinizing not bodily or mental impairments but the social norms that define particular attributes as impairments, as well as the social conditions that concentrate stigmatized attributes in particular populations" (n.p.). In order to move beyond its remedial brand, writing center studies should fully commit itself as a field to the interrogation of "the social conditions that concentrate stigmatized attributes in particular populations." Here, I attempt to do just that with respect to the idea of the able writer.

An able writer is, in essence, someone who conforms to rhetorical normalcy. Rhetorical normalcy is an ideology that privileges able-bodied and able-minded rhetorical performances, and by extension marks rhetorical difference and rhetorical deviation. Even though my analysis is focused on how disability is produced within spaces of writing instruction, my use of the term rhetorical normalcy (instead of, say, a "rhetorics of ability") is meant to also call forth antiracist scholarship in composition studies and writing center studies by scholars such as Smitherman, Young, Asao, etc., whose work has implications far beyond the academy. Rhetorical normalcy calls forth those traditions by positing a relationship between language norms, such as SLI and bodyminds, that are coded according to race and ability. This does not make it an attempt to theorize a grand unified theory of oppression. To say that all oppression stems from X (rhetoric, language practices, class, etc.) is to flatten difference and deny historicity to specific forms of oppression.

One way I attempt to avoid such flattening is to use CDS to critique writing center narratives that make claims about our ability to serve "all writers." According to Jackie Grustch McKinney, that grand narrative goes something like this: "writing centers are comfortable, iconoclastic places where all students go to get one-to-one tutoring on their writing" (3). While Grutsch McKinney's work has gone a long way in critiquing that narrative, a CDS approach allows us to go even further by focusing on whether that dubious universal "all students" includes students with disabilities or just the able-bodied.

As I outline in chapter 1, one way to view early writing centers, or "writing clinics," as they were initially called, is as places of containment for writers who are rhetorically abnormal. When we conceptualize writing centers this way, it is only logical that we re-conceptualize the students they were originally intended for as well. Given this history, it is important as a field to think about how current practices within or adjacent to writing centers, such as composition studies, continue to produce a set of rhetorical norms that mark students as deviant. As Minich says elsewhere, this doesn't require that we go looking for disabled users of the writing center (although, done correctly, that research could yield important results) (n.p.). Instead, we need to examine how these practices promote a kind of "rhetorical normalcy" that disqualifies students as writers and thinkers.

In chapter 2, I argue that if we want our writing centers to truly be "iconoclastic" places, then we must closely consider how the agendas of writing centers do or do not align with the ableism of the university. Even if we do in fact serve all students, we can't serve them all the same way; a critical disability studies approach helps us work through how to universally design the writing center and its services so that we can serve each student accordingly. My central argument in this chapter is that writing center research should be used to study rhetorical normalcy, which means that writers with disabilities should be incorporated into our research to a much larger degree than they are at present. Not only is this a matter of making our services accessible, but if done correctly, it could also transform writing centers into places that create access-knowledge and push back against ableist norms of the university. Now, that would really make us iconoclastic.

"But," I can already hear writing center people say, "all writers means *all* writers, even those with disabilities." So why make the seemingly obvious argument that we must consider disability in writing center historiography, research, and practice in the first place? Because the rampant and ongoing ableism of academia has excluded people with disabilities from the academic enterprise—that's why. In his 2017 book *Academic Ableism,* Dolmage argues that academia is a place that:

> powerfully mandates able-bodiedness and able-mindedness, as well as other forms of social and communicative hyperability, and this demand can best be defined as ableism. In fact, few cultural institutions do a better or more comprehensive job of promoting ableism...That is, to value ability through something like the demand to overcome disability, or a research study to cure disability, there is also an implicit belief that being disabled is negative and to be avoided at all costs. (7)

Simply put, disability is a dirty word in the academy, and as such, disabled people are still largely excluded from the university, not only because of its "steep steps," which literally prevent access to it, but also because they are excluded from action-oriented research, including research within writing centers (Dolmage 2). This creates an obvious problem. As disabled scholar Elizabeth Grace once put it, we must first "understand some more about some of the potential barriers if we are to make progress solving these access barriers" (n.p.). "But..." But nothing—if we are to create a writing center that is "thoughtfully, accommodatingly, and graciously accessible," then we must begin to include disabled writers in that project.

THE IDEA OF THE NORMATE WRITING CENTER

I'm not sure if I want all poems to limp, but I know this: all the interesting ones do, all the lovely ones do, in one way or another.

—Jim Ferris

The writing center was born sometime in the early twentieth century, but the roots of laboratory-based teaching go back to the late nineteenth century (access Lerner, *The Idea of the Writing Laboratory*[2]). Initially, writing centers—called writing labs during their adolescence—were places that "fixed" difference in a very literal sense: they sought to "cure" students' "composition disease."[3] In the past several decades, writing center studies scholars have explored the remedial role of writing centers (access Lerner, *The Idea of a Writing Laboratory)* and the role of writing centers in perpetuating inequality, including many passing treatments of race over the years (access Grimm "New;" Bawarshi & Pelkowski; Condon; Geller et al.). More recently, they have begun to do so through full-length edited collections, such as *Writing Centers and the New Racism* and Harry Denny et al.'s *Out in the Center*, which covers many identities in the space of the writing center. This scholarship has explored the various ways in which writing centers, whether knowingly or not, have enforced "white, middle-class male culture" (Lerner, "Punishment" 59). Disability, however—both as an identity and as a source of theoretical, embodied knowledge—has been excluded from this body of identity-based critique, and this

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[2] Like Jay Dolmage, I use the term "access" rather than "see" when I want to direct the reader to a source (Dolmage, *Academic Ableism* 193)

[3] In her 2014 book *Toward a New Rhetoric of Difference,* Stephanie Kerschbaum highlights the ways in which rhetoric and composition scholars have "fixed" difference in writing studies research. By "fixing," Kerschbaum explains, she means "both…the process of treating difference as a stable thing or property that can be identified and fix in place as well as attempts to fix—that is, improve—the way difference is understood" (6). Here, I have Kerschbaum's use of the term in mind, but I extend it to its literal sense: "fix" also connotes "cure" and "treat," words that are important to the history of writing centers.

exclusion is a detriment to the field of writing center studies as a whole. We've begun to come to terms with White, middle-class male culture, but what about our *ableist* culture?

My aim in this chapter is to use a critical disability studies (CDS) methodology to uncover the role writing centers have played in enforcing an *ableist* culture on college campuses and in their larger communities. Critiquing this ableist culture requires an analysis of writing center texts and practices in order to interrogate the ableist rhetorical norms that create the conditions necessary for rhetorical normalcy—and therefore the larger ableist culture—in the first place. Playing on the title of Stephen North's famous essay "The Idea of the Writing Center," I argue that writing center theory and practice has problematically conceptualized the *writer* as a "normate" one. Normate, a term coined by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson:

> usefully designates the social figure through which people can represent themselves as definitive human beings. Normate, then, is the constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them. (8)

The normate is the unmarked, able-bodied "cultural self" in Garland-Thomson's formulation. Decentering the prototypical writing center normate student is the first step toward understanding how to make the writing center a more inclusive space, not just for students with disabilities, but for all students (but especially for disabled writers; access Hamraie, "Designing Collective Access" for a critique of the "value-added" rhetoric of Universal Design). In fact, as I argue in the next chapter, the most effective way to counter the field's overreliance on the normate writer is by conducting empirical writing center research with non-normate writers (while this may sound obvious, the lack of such research indicates that it is not). Before I can make that case, however, it is important to first search for disability in the history of writing centers with methods more generally concerned with exposing the disabling forces within the field, not with disability, per se.

Because CDS is meant by design to surface norms rather than the oppression of specific impairments, the examples that I use in this chapter may not at first seem to be relevant to uncovering disability. Yet this project should not be considered merely adjacent to the work done by historians in the field of rhetoric and composition, even though its domain (the writing center) is indeed adjacent to writing studies. That scholarship, much of which could be considered a "recovery-and-recognition enterprise," as Wendy S. Hesford has called it, has turned to the archives in order to discover rhetorical ancestors forgotten by a field too racist or ignorant (or both) to acknowledge them as such (793). While that's valuable work, the recovery of disabled rhetors per se would be outside the scope of this thesis. Instead, I join disability studies scholars such as Julie Avril Minich in arguing that a critical disability studies methodology should be applied to "contexts that extend well beyond what is immediately recognized as disability" (n.p.).

That means looking for evidence of ableism in early writing center literature, even where disability is not explicitly named. To that end, in the first section of this chapter, I focus on representations of students as linguistically and compositionally deviant, and I turn to Eli Clare's work on cure in order to better understand the role of cure in eugenicist discourses. Using work by disability studies scholars such as Clare, I explore the intersections between the containment of these linguistically deviant students and the containment of people with disabilities, arguing that these two phenomena are linked in important ways. With this in place, I turn to foundational writing center studies scholarship in order to examine claims about the field's movement away from writing centers as places of containment. While scholars such as Kenneth Bruffee and Stephen North have tried to distance the writing center from its image as the "fix-it" shop (a place meant to contain writers who deviate from the norm), I argue that their theorizations of writing center work, far from liberating writers with disabilities, have left a lasting legacy of ableism in the writing center.

The Birth of the Writing Clinic

Much ink in writing center studies has been spilled over the names we give to ourselves, our spaces, and our practices. In terms of naming personnel, for instance, Laura Greenfield has pointed out that "the field already boasts a range of synonyms for tutor—words such as *mentors,* *coaches, assistants, and fellows abound"* (321). For Greenfield, these debates are about far more than mere rhetoric; a truly radical writing center praxis forces us "to interrogate the relationship between language and function" and to reimagine "possibilities for different kinds of being that give way to different kinds of activities that more readily promote peace" (ibid.). While I won't rehash every debate about naming here, revisiting some of them in light of disability studies is a useful endeavor, as they help us understand how writing centers' decisions around "clientele, staffing, and institutional identity" have impacted the field's relationships with disabled writers (Carino 109). Perhaps no other controversy over names has had more serious ontological and axiological consequences for the field than the clinic-lab-center debate, in which writing center studies scholars have argued about the implications of the names given to early writing centers.

While there is no debate that early writing centers were called both "writing clinics" and "writing labs" (as well as the more formal *laboratories*), there's a fair amount of disagreement among scholars about how writing centers got those names. One possible source for the writing lab name could be the description in the nineteenth century of postsecondary writing instruction as compositional "laboratory work," which antedates the first references to writing laboratories (writing centers) by almost 50 years (Lerner, "Punishment" 55). Lerner notes that theorizations of the teaching of composition as laboratory work, which entailed intensive one-on-one work with students, actually stood in stark contrast to the "assembly-line" classroom cum panopticon that was dreamt up by educational reformers during the Industrial Age (Lerner, *The Idea* 20). But not all implementations of the laboratory model were motivated by such student-centered concerns.

In fact, Berlin has pointed out that one of the first references to the laboratory method comes from John Franklin Genung at Amherst, who in 1895 designed a version of freshman composition that used it in part to jockey for institutional prestige, which at the time was being showered on newly formed science departments (hence the "laboratory" method) (74). While scholars have explored these roots in depth, few have been willing to explore what Greenfield identifies as "relationship between language and function" through the lens of disability studies.

For instance, while another debate concerns the kinds of conclusions that can be drawn about the nature of early writing centers based on the metaphors of the clinic and the laboratory, so far, few scholars have explored how these terms figure into the history of the oppression of disabled people. Because this is in many ways a debate about the heart and soul of writing center work, important questions remain about how these naming practices have affected the very concept of a writing center, if they have at all. In their histories of early writing centers, scholars including Elizabeth Boquet, Peter Carino, and Neal Lerner have all considered the problematic associations of the terms "lab" and "clinic," only to later dismiss them. Carino, for instance, claims that early writing centers "were much more variegated and complex" than these names suggest (104). Similarly, after reviewing evidence of what these early writing centers actually did, Boquet comes to the conclusion that "the naming of those labs was probably largely accidental," and that despite her own structuralist desire to see these metaphors as constitutive of reality, she "failed to find a reliable correspondence between the name and the thing" (*Noise* 11). Finally, even though Lerner also finds several problematic references in writing center literature related to their appellations, he ultimately comes to view the writing center as a place of both "punishment and possibility" (Lerner, "Punishment" 54), and like Carino, this desire for complexity short circuits any attempt at building metaphorical connections between the names and functions of early writing centers. These debates over the name and function of writing centers should come as no surprise given the writing center's close relationship with the field of rhetoric and composition and the freshman writing course, both of which have been punctuated—and even reinvigorated and renewed—by the continual literacy crises that have maintained U.S. writing instruction as a "site of contest" (Gold and Hammond 273).

In some ways, the very idea of the writing center has rested on these literacy crises, which have resulted in a de facto exclusion and containment of students who fail to pass as rhetorically normal. One of the oldest literacy crises in this country came as a result of the Harvard Reports, which were produced by a committee formed in 1891 and chaired by Harvard president Charles W. Eliot, eventually culminating in a series of related studies published in 1895 (Gold and Hammond 274). These studies caused a pandemonium among members of the U.S. elite, and in turn, this resulted in colleges such as Harvard instituting writing components in their entrance exams, as well as the positioning of freshman composition as a remedial service intended to correct the writing deficiencies introduced in the lower schools (Berlin, *Writing* 61). In "The Myth of Linguistic Homogeneity in U.S. College Composition," Paul Kei Matsuda identifies the Harvard entrance exams as an inaugural moment in U.S. composition, one that contributed to the "myth of linguistic homogeneity"—a foundational myth in the enterprise of standard language ideology, and, I argue, rhetorical normalcy writ large (643). Underneath this idea of linguistic homogeneity lies linguistic *normalcy,* and by implication, linguistic *abnormality*. Davis notes that along with binaries like deaf/hearing, straight/gay, and so on, binaries such as ability/disability contribute to an "ideology of containment," and to a "politics of power and fear" (*Enforcing* 4).

Disability studies scholars like Davis are closely attuned to the semantic alignment between the literal and figurative meanings of terms like clinic and lab, and as such, have come to view these places as all punishment, no possibility. Building on Foucault's formative analysis of the "great age of confinement," in *The History of Madness,* a period in European history dating from roughly the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries in which the "forced fraternisation [sic] between the poor, the unemployed, the criminal and the insane" began to take place in poorhouses and asylums across Europe, disability studies scholars have explored the "underlying economic, political, and ideological forces that define [the processes of institutionalization] and the effects that they have had cumulatively on people with disabilities" (Foucault 43; Carlson 109). In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, confinement continued to grow both in severity and scope as the new science of statistics legitimized the criminalization of an almost unimaginable number of deviations from the newly established statistical “norm.” The study of these bodily and mental norms eventually led to the creation of the eugenics movement in the late nineteenth century and its wide-scale adaptation throughout the first half of the twentieth (Davis, *Enforcing* 29). Before long, the eugenicist list of undesirable traits grew to include disparate variations such as:

> congenital feeblemindedness, manic depressive insanity, schizophrenia, hereditary epilepsy, hereditary St. Vitus’s dance, hereditary blindness and deafness, hereditary bodily malformation and habitual alcoholism (MacKenzie, qtd. in Davis, *Enforcing* 38).

During this eugenicist period, the United States also became home to what Jay Dolmage has called sites of “lower education,” a term that describes how

> people with disabilities were institutionalized in asylums, ‘schools’ for the ‘feeble-minded’ and other exclusionary institutions, locations that became the dark shadows of the college or university, connected with residential schools, prisons, quarantines, and immigration stations in these shadows. (3)

The rise of the clinic ran parallel—and was in some ways even identical—to the ascendance of eugenics and lower education: like the asylum, the clinic became a place in which the power/knowledge discourses of medicine are applied to bodies that were little more than expressions of a population; therefore, if we are inclined to read this history in the manner Foucault has (admittedly, that can be a big *if* for some), then even the word “clinic” evokes confinement. And although it is difficult to make generalizations about a phenomenon that spanned several centuries and continents, there’s no question that the current that ran beneath this period was the punishment of deviance and abnormality.

Like Foucault, contemporary disability studies scholars have argued that one of the key ideological forces behind the confinement of people with disabilities has been the ableist policing of the line between reason and unreason, which has been historically tied to language use (hence *logos)* and sociality. Gerald Shea, a partially deaf lawyer and scholar of d/Deafness, has demonstrated how the inability to hear has been linked to the inability to think going all the way back to Aristotle (2). Similarly, Margaret Price and Melanie Yergeau have both made arguments that ableist representations of mentally disabled people as lacking "rhetoricity" have led to the exclusion, *en masse*, of the mentally disabled from the category of human, and thus from society (Price 26; Yergeau 6). Price claims that because the mentally disabled are represented as a-rhetorical, they are also:

> presumed not to be competent, nor understandable, nor valuable, nor whole. We are placed in institutions, medicated, lobotomized, shocked, or simply left to survive without homes. The failure to make sense, as measured against and by those with 'normal' minds, means a loss of personhood (ibid.).

This link between sense-making or rhetoricity and personhood suggests just how consequential rhetorical normalcy really is. Scholars working in madness studies, such as Therí Alyce Pickens, have further complicated these connections by making important interventions that analyze how madness has long been associated with Blackness—from the *drapetomania* that allegedly caused Black slaves to run away, to the "protest psychosis" that caused the dissent of the civil rights era, Blackness itself has been considered a kind of cognitive pathology (Pickens 8; Clare 24). All of this is to say that we should pay attention to representations of students' inability to make sense—*especially* minoritized students—and that a CDS framework should be used in that analysis. Attention to disability theory, however, should not come at the expense of other identity-based critiques, such as critical race theory, which has been used to such great effect in the scholarship I named in the introduction to this chapter; instead, analysis of disability should be performed along with analyses of race, class, and gender *intersectionally.* Disability is not analogous to race, class, or sex, but it affects, and is affected by, those categories. We should pay attention to these disabling discourses, even if the students they disable are not explicitly identified as having mental impairments.

In an article in an issue of the *Writing Lab Newsletter* from 1992, Michael Pemberton did just that. In "The Prison, the Hospital, and the Madhouse: Redefining Metaphors for the Writing Center," Pemberton wrote about what he claimed were three pernicious—if "unrealistic"—metaphors for writing center work: the prison, the hospital, and the madhouse. Unlike subsequent analyses by Boquet, Carino, and Lerner, Pemberton does not shy away from drawing conclusions about the deleterious effects of these metaphors (just because they are "unrealistic" does not mean they do not have force in the world). He begins his article with three examples of these metaphors at work, examples that he refers to as anecdotes, but which I believe are more productive to think about as case studies. That these case studies reify and materialize these metaphors is unquestionable to Pemberton, who claims that "nearly everyone who directs a writing center or tutors in one will recognize them immediately and recall similar incidents in their own experience" (11). In his own experience, students are either sent to the writing center or feel compelled to go there because their language must be confined and dealt with in a space that is like a prison, hospital, or madhouse. All three metaphors suggest that the writing center has played a key role in the marking of students as linguistically deviant, and by extension, functionally disabled.

Pemberton's metaphors force us to grapple with troubling questions about the nature of writing center work. While it is not unreasonable for writing center scholars like Boquet to dismiss, or at the very least complicate, the names given to early writing centers and the remedial past those names imply, these scholars were not working within a disability studies framework. Were such a framework accessible to them, they might have come to different conclusions. They might have come to view the early writing center as a space of confinement. In turn, this would have provided them with a different—and newly generative—vocabulary with which to view the remedial mission of the writing center: the rhetoric of cure.

The Composition Condition

When viewed through a CDS methodology, the terms used to describe the work of the writing center take on more than just a metaphorical importance—they suggest an ideology of containment that undergirded and surrounded early writing centers. And if we return to Greenfield's idea that the name of a thing is related to its function, then, naturally, how we name a writing center affects not only what it can do, but *whom* it can serve. In his study of early references to writing centers in *College English*, Lerner has found copious references to the writing center as both a laboratory and a clinic. For instance, Lerner writes about how at the "CC Laboratory," the name for the writing center at the University of North Carolina in 1946,

> faculty could attach to students' final grade a 'cc' (for 'composition condition'), and students were then consigned to work in the writing laboratory until they were 'able to write as well as the 'average' college student in America'. At that point the 'cc' was removed, and students were seemingly 'cured' of their condition" (Bailey, qtd. in Lerner, "Punishment" 56).

It's unclear if Pemberton had the CC Laboratory in mind when he wrote about the writing center as a hospital nearly 50 years later, but like Bailey (the director of the CC Laboratory during the period Lerner's describing), he sees representations of students with the "linguistic disease" as central to the concept of a writing center (although, unlike Bailey, he's uncomfortable with this metaphor) (ibid. 13). Like the asylum and the leprosarium that proceeded it, the writing center becomes a space for confinement and containment, where the CC expert can "diagnose the specific nature of the problem evidenced in a piece of text," and which has "the resources and knowledge available to effect a cure" not available in a classroom full of those who adhere to rhetorical normalcy (Foucault 71; Pemberton 13). The early writing center, then, sought to cure the linguistically—or mentally—disordered.

Condition, average, cure—these words have important connotative histories in disability studies. They are integral to the rhetoric of cure. As Eli Clare notes in *Brilliant Imperfection*, cure is based on "eradication and the many kinds of violence that accompany it" (26). As is often the case with the race for a cure, initiatives like the CC Laboratory were borne out of a deep-seated fear and intolerance of human difference, and when this fear was stoked by the flames of the literacy crises that had begun in the late nineteenth century, measures were taken to contain rhetorical abnormality. While writing centers and freshman composition could hardly be considered examples of "eradication," it's important to keep in mind that in addition to these efforts at remediation, administrators wanted to keep the ill-literate out of higher education altogether. And like other forms of cure, underneath the rhetoric of the composition cure lies eugenicist logics—linguistic and cognitive difference are systematically snuffed out by such programs.

While I do not want to imply an equivalence between the attempt to cure the composition disease and physical or mental disabilities that have been objects of negative eugenics, such as cerebral palsy (for instance), I do see these two instantiations of cure as part of the same rhetoric, and Clare and other disability scholars seem to, as well:

> [Cure] is a tool in the drive to normalize humans, to shrink the diversity of shape, form, size, and function among us. Through cure, we believe we can control our fragile, changeable, adaptable selves. It takes the shape of medical research, medical abuse, medical healing. It plays a role in making billions of dollars of profits and in providing the most basic of health care. Amidst this cacophony, cure always revolves around the perception of a disease, infection, virus, chronic illness, dysfunction, disorder, defect, abnormality, or body-mind difference. (69-70)

Clare does not explicitly name rhetorical abnormality as a thing to be cured here, but he doesn't have to. Clare's analysis of the ideology and rhetoric of cure is trenchant, and it tells us something important about what early writing center administrators and tutors might have been up to. First, what is common to all forms of cure is normalcy and the "perception of…abnormality, or body-mind difference." It is this eugenicist desire to eradicate difference that Lennard Davis has so thoroughly located in the science of statistics in his book *Enforcing Normalcy*. As the French statistician (and avowed eugenicist) Francis Galton began to refine and apply the statistical bell curve to the development of the norm in the late nineteenth century, it wasn't long before deviations from this norm became justification for eugenicist discourses (Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy* 32). Considering Davis's claim that statistics, race pseudoscience, and eugenics are all mutually constitutive, it is not insignificant that the rise of composition studies in the late nineteenth century, with its remedial freshman composition course and quantification of rhetorical competence via college entrance exams, also coincided with the birth and rise of statistics and eugenics.

Though there's very little extant primary literature on writing centers from the early twentieth century, early writing clinics—with their tacit commitment to the ideology of containment—would have fit in perfectly on the campuses of colleges and universities at the turn of the century, a time when higher education in the U.S. was becoming increasingly obsessed with social efficiency, behaviorism, and the quantification of intelligence. When Stanford was in the midst of its own Harvard Reports moment in the early 20th century, for instance, the Stanford psychologist Lewis Terman, who coined the phrase "intelligence quotient," began work on a revision of the Binet-Simon Scale test, which was originally used in France to evaluate the intelligence of children (Stross 120). Terman would not only go on to develop what are now known quite loosely as IQ tests, but he would also influence a test that was used to filter out "mental incompetents" for service in the U.S. military during World War I (135). This test in turn would influence the Thorndike Intelligence Examination, which had begun to be used by schools such as Columbia and the University of California system in the 1920s as a way to filter out Jewish applicants who had earned "superior grades in high school beyond their 'natural intelligence'" (139). These tests, which were firmly rooted in the ideology of exclusion and containment, ultimately ended up being adopted by institutions of higher education as the Scholastic Aptitude Test, or SAT (146). Early writing centers likely benefited from the "poor students" who were newly (and perhaps provisionally) admitted to their colleges, a category that had no doubt existed since the Harvard Reports, but which now had glossy imprimatur of *science*—a "poor student" now came to mean a student with a low SAT (IQ) score.[4] Lerner likens the early writing center to a kind of "holding tank" for those deemed linguistically deviant:

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[4] In fact, an empirical study by Lori Salem found precisely this correlation between SAT scores and writing center users ("Decisions…Decisions" 154).

> [The early twentieth century] was key in the evolution of a stand-alone writing center, for the movement from laboratory teaching as a method to laboratory teaching as a site…would mean that some students could get the full experience of laboratory methods in the classroom while others would get shunted off to entities called 'writing laboratories' that were often little more than holding tanks filled with drill pads. (*The Idea,* 27).

As Lerner notes, the writing center as a place of containment or the writing center as a site of remediation and punishment are not the only stories we can tell about the writing center's history, but I would argue they are important, especially when considering the writing center's role in creating (or at least maintaining) rhetorical normalcy. Whether willingly or not, faculty and staff of writing centers across the country have upheld the language practices of "white, middle-class male" and *ableist* "culture," thereby perpetuating standard language ideology (Lerner "Punishment," 59). Simultaneously, writing centers were seen as places where students who were rhetorically and cognitively deviant could be contained. In second language instruction, Matsuda has called curricular decisions, such as the creation of separate ESL tracks, attempts by writing teachers and administrators at "linguistic containment" (641), which separate the non-normative users from the normative ones, thus preserving the kind of linguistic purity that rhetoricians from Aristotle to Blair have long advocated.

For some students, the process of being sent to the writing center in the first place can be a mark of a difficult, excessive bodymind. From Lori Salem's analysis of the kinds of students who choose to go to the writing center, we know that writing center users are likely to be "historically excluded from full access to higher education: women, students of color, English language learners, and students with less 'inherited merit'" (Salem160). Furthermore, we know that these students likely begin to feel this exclusion long before college (155). For students with disabilities—students who were already subject to forms of de facto segregation as a result of being in special education programs—we can only imagine what kind of message the writing center, qua clinic, might be sending them. Like Rosemarie Garland Thomson's notion of the extraordinary body, the abnormal bodymind always exceeds its ability to signify. In a quite literal sense, students who are sent to the writing center exceed their professor's abilities to teach them for various reasons, or are perceived by their professors to exceed them, and are therefore in some ways rendered illegible as students. Excessive punctuation, excessive disorganization, excessive error—all meet the conditions necessary for one to be labeled as compositionally and rhetorically abnormal, and hence, to be sent for a cure at the fix-it shop.

That this view of the writing center's purpose extended well into the middle of the century and beyond is clear from articles in *College English,* such as Robert Moore's infamous "The Writing Clinic and the Writing Laboratory" (1950), which characterized remedial work in composition as a "necessary, if deplorable, part of the task of American colleges and universities," and which North so valiantly rallied against in his "Idea" essay (Moore, qtd. in Lerner, "Punishment" 58). Finally, this desire to eradicate difference fuels the medical industrial complex, and at a more general level, intolerance of difference has led to research regimes designed to find ways to eliminate it, which in part explains the growth of freshman composition throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Unlike teachers and administrators, writing center professionals rarely mark students' abnormality directly because we don't create exclusionary tests or compel students to come to our centers, but both individual tutors and directors must decide whether or not to reify those boundaries created by other educators. Both Laura Greenfield and Harry Denny have suggested that much of writing center history revolves around the dialectal dance between liberalism and conservatism (access Greenfield, *Radical Writing Praxis*) and assimilation and separatism (access Denny, *Facing the Center*). As Denny notes, not a day goes by in the writing center when "somebody doesn't contend with the dilemma of assimilating, going with the flow, or challenging the well-worn path" (16). Writing center professionals must continuously approach the problem of encouraging their clients to assimilate to the dominant academic discourse, "to accommodate, to accept often arbitrary 'standard' or dominant positions" *or* "to resist, fight back, or challenge" those dominant positions (17).

The idea of resisting dominant discourses, however, is a relatively recent one in writing center studies. In the final section of this chapter, I argue that the two foundational essays in writing center scholarship—Stephen North's "The Idea of the Writing Center" and Kenneth Bruffee's "The Peer Conversation and the Idea of Mankind"—have further entrenched ideas of rhetorical normalcy, even as they were meant to contest the idea of the writing center as a clinic, lab, or fix-it shop. While many writing center scholars identify these two texts as the beginning of a more humane, student-centered approach to writing center work (and even a disciplinary approach in general), I argue that the commonplaces they established, such as the North's enshrinement of the individual writer and Bruffee's celebration of normative "talk," have created and sustained an ableist culture within writing centers.

The Commonplaces of Writing Center Work

Let me begin with a few hypothetical situations concerning mental disability, the writing center, and the composition classroom:

1) A student with severe depression cannot get out of bed most mornings, so they miss several of their early morning first-year writing classes, causing them to miss lessons on a particular writing skill that the professor will later assess in the student's writing, as well as a peer review session that factors heavily into their participation grade. The professor, not knowing what to do, sends them to the writing center.

2) A student with learning disabilities has continued to make the same kinds of sentence-level errors on essay after essay. The professor has met with the student during office hours and tried to help them see their pattern of error, but as far as the professor is concerned, the errors continue unabated. Eventually, in the GRAMMAR/CLARITY section of the rubric for the student's most recent essay, the professor writes: "5 point penalty. Go to writing center."

3) A student delivers a Verified Individualized Services and Accommodations (VISA) letter to their first-year writing instructor. The VISA asks for two accommodations: extra time on tests, and the use of a note taker. The conversation goes well, but near the end of it the professor

tells the student that these accommodations won't help the student in her class in particular, because in her class there are no tests, and there are no lectures. Instead, she recommends the student attend the writing center regularly.

While these three examples are hypothetical, they nonetheless demonstrate the complicated relationship between mental disability and college writing, a relationship that I would argue is still largely under-theorized, especially in the context of the writing center, where theoretical knowledge about such a relationship is of vital practical importance. Though the specifics of each of these situations differ, together they exemplify Dolmage's pithy description of what happens in real life when students with disabilities are merely accommodated, but course content and policies are not built with the principles of Universal Design in mind. These students are told they can enter the university, so long as they don't "come in the front entrance" (42). Dolmage isn't just talking about the ways in which students with mobility disabilities are forced to metaphorically sneak themselves into the university through side doors retrofitted with ramps (often the only entrances with ramps, by the way)—although he is talking about that. On another, equally important level, Dolmage is talking about how spatial significations, such as the hidden retrofit, indicate a deeper, darker desire "for higher education without disability," which "is academic ableism in a nutshell" (ibid.). Although it might not be immediately obvious, it is worth asking if writing centers, which are themselves so often literally pushed to the margins of college campuses, are somehow complicit in the marginalization of writers with mental disabilities.

Because his work looms so large in writing center studies, any analysis of the field's commonplaces must begin with an analysis of North's "Idea." As Boquet and Lerner show, "Idea" "has, in many ways, controlled the discourse that surrounds writing center theory and practice more generally" (175). Since it was first published in 1984, almost a third of articles that appear in *Writing Center Journal* (a journal that North co-founded) make reference to the article, and over 90% of those references are by unique authors. However, their work also shows that a majority of these references (70%) only cite North once, "an indication that its most typical use is to align the author with North's position" rather than mark a deep engagement (176). Relying so heavily on a single article (not even a single-authored monograph) would be a troubling sign for any discipline, but this is especially so for writing center studies, given the field's precarity. This is where Boquet and Lerner step in, who engage deeply with "Idea" not only as intellectual historians, but as critics. They begin with a close reading that, while it doesn't go far enough, provides an important and authoritative reading of the document.

Boquet and Lerner begin by noting that North's article, the first line of which is "this is an essay that began out of frustration," has been rightly described as "'both a call for understanding and a call for separation'" from the larger field of English studies, which since the early days of the Conference on College Composition and Communication has been obsessed with the writing clinic as a remedial fix-it shop (Murphy and Law, qtd. in Boquet and Lerner, 173). Boquet and Lerner also note that North, who is intentionally writing in the pages of *College English* rather than his own *Writing Center Journal*, is quick to delimit his audience to those outside of the walls of the writing center. He's not writing to writing center professionals, he claims, but to "the members of my profession, my colleagues, people I might see at MLA or CCCC or read in the pages of College English" (433). In other words, it is (mostly) literature professors he is frustrated with (and, to somewhat of a lesser degree, those in rhetoric and composition). Long considered both a call out and a call-to-action by writing center professionals, North's "Idea" was meant to open up the writing center space, transforming it into a space of opportunity instead of punishment. I argue that while certainly better than what preceded it, North's reconceptualization of the writing center has not opened up either the field of writing center studies or actual writing centers to disabled writers.

Contrary to North's original intentions as a way to jumpstart conversations in writing center scholarship, "Idea" has "exerted undue influence and either did not leave enough space—or others did not enter spaces that were left by it—in any substantive way" (Boquet and Lerner, 185). Therefore, it seems perfectly reasonable, and even necessary, to read this document closely through a critical disability studies lens, to enter into its rhetorical space. If we are to read North's "Idea" as a controlling idea in writing center studies, then we must interrogate the commonplaces that have resulted from its widespread and uncritical embrace by writing center professionals.

In "Retheorizing Writing Center Work to Transform a System of Advantage Based on Race," Nancy M. Grimm asks what writing center professionals might be waiting for if they feel that the writing center is not responsible for advocating for and enacting institutional change that makes higher education more equitable. "We could continue business as usual, waiting for the day when the institution changes," she goads. But what are we waiting for? Recruitment changes? Admissions policies? Curriculum? Hiring initiatives? What sort of changes would address the foundational assumptions that structure what we do? And how would that trickle down to writing centers? On the other hand, writing center scholars can rethink the "why" of writing center work—in other words, the ways writing center work is theorized. In particular, we can examine the extent to which our theoretical discourse focuses on individuals rather than on the rapidly changing social contexts that create communication challenges, and then we find alternative ways to theorize (78).

By criticizing writing center studies' fixation on individuals, Grimm is evoking a tradition that began with North's now famous dictum to "produce better writers, not better writing" (438) and Jeff Brook's "Minimalist Tutoring." Along with North's prescription, Grimm identifies two other commonplaces: "A good tutor makes the student all of the work," and "the ultimate aim of a tutorial is an independent writer" (81). Together, these commonplaces "tell us what's 'normal' or what's 'right'; thus, they have real consequences for people who are subject or our decisions, assumptions, and judgements" (78). I, too, find the writing center's focus on individuals troubling, but for different reasons than Grimm.

First, however, it's important to remember that North's now-canonical "Idea" is just that—an idea—or, as North himself would have likely called it, lore. Lore, according to North, is "concerned with what worked, is working, or might work in teaching, doing, or learning writing" (North, qtd. in Boquet and Lerner 184). Writing center administrators and consultants have been known to mindlessly tell clients, new consultants, and faculty (really, anyone who will listen) that "our job is to produce better writers, not better writing," because if the writing center ain't broke (because it's no longer a fix-it shop), then, well, don't fix it. As Boquet and Lerner snappily put it: North's dictum has become "lore-ified" largely thanks to its reception in writing center studies (ibid.). One must assume it's been received this way because writing center "practitioners" think it works.

In contrast to this lore, a critical disability studies approach allows us to critically examine writing center commonplaces and produce new knowledge. This begins, of course, with asking whether it is always best to try to improve the writer and not the writing, as well as to interrogate the ways we go about trying to improve that writer, which naturally differs from how a writing teacher would work with that writer in a classroom setting. Like Grimm (and Villanueva, whose work she draws heavily from), I am concerned that our passive acceptance of commonplaces such as North's dictum prevent us from being able to "challenge the links between ideologies of individualism and racism" (82). A critical disability studies approach to this problem asks how these ideologies are in turn connected to ableism and how their circulation might help writing centers accrue certain kinds of capital within the neoliberal university.

Since its inception in Britain in the '70s, disability studies scholars working with the social model of disability have sought to deconstruct the nature of the individual and its corresponding ideology of individualism. Broadly speaking, by locating disability within disabling social structures, the social model itself serves as a potent critique of the medical model, which posits that disability inheres in individuals, and therefore must either be overcome by the individual or cured and/or eradicated by the medical industrial complex (Clare 8).

Dolmage, building on Joe Stramondo's work on "reasonable accommodations," has argued that in order for most students to receive accommodations on U.S. campuses, they must first seek out onerous medical examinations in order to prove their disability status through medical diagnoses (80). Stramondo notes the irony here: much of the legal impetus for such accommodations came from the Americans with Disabilities Act, which was once viewed as the triumph of the social model of disability, and yet the process for acquiring such accommodations is firmly based on a medical model that locates the epistemological and moral burden of disability in the individual, not in disabling systems (Stramondo n.p).

While a strong argument could be made that writing centers have participated in the medical model of disability simply by virtue of their erstwhile role as containment and treatment centers for the "CC disease," I would instead like to focus on the more reasonable claim that Grimm makes in "Retheorizing…" about certain writing center practices serving to tacitly accept—indeed perpetuate—liberal individualism. I choose to focus on these "tacit theories," as Grimm calls them, because even though most writing centers long ago disavowed the fix-it shop lineage, few have been as quick to discard commonplaces such as North's dictum (80). In sum, from a critical disability studies lens, the three mottos Grimm has identified in her article (that students should do all the work, that the ultimate goal of a consultation is to make independent writers, and that we should always aim to make better writers, not writing) all serve to perpetuate independent, able-minded and able-bodied individuals as the unmarked norm for which all writers should unquestionably strive, thus marking interdependence, a core value in disability justice movements, as abnormal and undesirable.

While Grimm does a good job delineating these three mottos, she also notes that they work synergistically "because that is how ideology works," so I will consider them here (briefly) as a single force whose main outcome is to mark interdependence as problematic (81). Dating back to Garland-Thomson's work, disability studies scholars have long critiqued the role that liberal and neoliberal political philosophies have played in constructing disability. In

Extraordinary Bodies, Garland-Thomson criticizes the work of Emerson for its association of self-reliance with masculinity on the one hand and dependence with femininity on the other, but she also notes that there are many similar references in Emerson's work that position ability and disability within these same binaries (42). For Garland-Thomson, the "four interrelated ideological principles that inform this normate self [are] self-government, self-determination, autonomy, and progress" (ibid.). I would argue that various writing center practices, ranging from our obsession with avoiding plagiarism to the idea of making better writers, also reflect these ideological principles. Additionally, in the conclusion, I argue that we need to embrace interdependence as a value in the writing center if we want it to be both radical and accessible, and I suggest notions of disability justice and access intimacy can provide writing centers with the necessary conceptual frameworks to do this work.

First, we must examine how one other foundational writing center text has created ableist lore in the writing center. Kenneth A. Bruffee's "Peer Tutoring and the 'Conversation of Mankind'" is, like North's "Idea," a foundational text in writing center studies. Bruffee begins his article by noting that certain students, "for cultural reasons we may not yet fully understand," have "had difficulty adapting to the traditional or 'normal' conventions of the writing classroom;" in other words, they have been sent to the writing center or another remedial program because of perceived rhetorical incompetence or abnormality (87). Once they're there, the best route of administering their cure, so to speak, is through peer tutoring, because peer tutoring provides "not an extension but an alternative to the traditional classroom." Having thus set up his argument, Bruffee turns to Michael Oakeshott, Lev Vygotsky, and Thomas Kuhn to outline his program for peer tutoring, which revolves around the key commonplace of talk. Talk is also central for North, who, according to Boquet and Lerner, "celebrates the nature of talk most dramatically" in "Idea" (174). For both writers, in-person, verbalized speech in the form of talk is championed unquestioningly.

More recently, however, scholars such as Allison Hitt and Annika Konrad have made important interventions into writing center pedagogy by calling for accessibility to be a foundational part of writing center theory and practice. Hitt and Konrad both call for Universal Design for Learning and multiliteracies as ways to make writing center consultations more accessible. Not only does talk privilege one mode (oral), but in so doing it limits the writer and consultant's means of representation, engagement, and acting—key elements of UDL (CAST). Knowledge of and practice with multiliteracies is key to building access in the writing center, according to Hitt:

> if students with disabilities are limited to particular modalities—e.g., a blind student who relies on auditory or sensory modes to write or a deaf student who relies more heavily on visual modes—a multimodal pedagogy more easily adapts to these needs, incorporating rather than accommodating them. (n.p)

Greenfield, echoing Bawarshi and Pelkowski's critique of North in "Postcolonialism and the Idea of a Writing Center," notes that Bruffee's celebrated dialogic approach is "not necessarily intrinsically radical;" indeed, it could even be considered a colonizing move (71). I would add that it's ableist, too. Bruffee and North's reliance on talk, itself an audist commonplace, is problematic for a number of reasons. Not only might it affect students with physical disabilities, but with mental disabilities, as well. Talk, as it is conceived of here, is predicated on mono-modal learning and perception, as well as on a normative conception of sociality and pro-social behavior. Bruffee, after all, is also concerned with what he calls "normal discourse," which Richard Rorty defines as "the sort of statement that can be agreed to be true by all participants whom the other participants count as 'rational'" (Rorty, qtd. in Bruffee 92). Now, writing center consultants are not just responsible for enforcing normal disciplinary discourse, but also what counts as a reasonable statement by a reasonable member of a discourse community. If this is all beginning to sound like the writing center of an earlier time, well, that's because it does.

While North and Bruffee were supposed to move writing centers beyond the fix-it shop, they further entrenched the idea that rhetorical abnormality resides in *individuals* rather than in the ableist norms themselves, as well as the idea that one of the most important roles of a writing center consultant is to police the line between reason and unreason. “When these students are told they can’t write, the madhouse metaphor therefore assumes that they can’t think either,” Pemberton wrote. Furthermore, Pemberton noted that the link between disordered writing and thinking fell disproportionally on students of color, and that it was linked to other forms of oppression (14). In his description of the deleterious effect of the writing madhouse metaphor on students, he settled on a term that has long resonated with disability studies scholars:

> When we need to help students who have been told in no uncertain terms that they are rhetorical—and therefore intellectual and social—*misfits*, we are being asked to deal with situations that are at odds with our very mission and teaching philosophy. (emphasis added, 15)

The misfit, according to Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, is “an incongruent relationship between two things: a square peg in a round hole. The problem with a misfit, then, inheres not in either of the two things but rather in their juxtaposition, the awkward attempt to fit them together” (Garland-Thomson, qtd. in Miller 39). The concept of the misfit, according to Elizabeth Miller, helps resolve the impairment-disability debate in disability studies by conceiving of “the body as a simultaneously social and material source of meaning-making” (ibid.). Pemberton, then, understands something that other writing center studies scholars do not: deviations from rhetorical normalcy are not indicative so much of deviance, but a misfitting between norms and bodyminds. Quickly, we find ourselves again at the door of normalcy—it seems nearly impossible not to continuously enter through it when visiting the neighborhood writing center.

In this chapter, I have tried to make a few key connections between rhetorical normalcy and the history, theory, and practice of writing centers. Specifically, I have tried to call attention to the various ways in which the ideology of containment found in early writing centers bears a problematic resemblance to the institutionalization of disabled people throughout the cultural West’s modern period, a practice which continues even today. While the containment of rhetorically abnormal writers differs from the containment of disabled people in important ways, the former, like the latter, is the result of harmful ableist logics. It is a policy that can only exist in an ableist world that devalues bodily, cognitive, and linguistic difference. Despite this critique, I sincerely want to believe in the rhetorical space of today's writing center; I want to believe it's a space that centers all writers, not one that (further) marginalizes them. When I first encountered the field of writing center studies, I was led to believe that the humanizing credos found in North's and Bruffee's work constituted a break with the field's dehumanizing past. But what else is a desire to improve the writer, not the writing, other than a desire to cure that writer, to rid them of their difference?

In order to preserve the writing center as a space that values rhetorical difference, we must continually come to terms with the problematic histories of writing center studies, as well as rhetoric and composition as a whole. As we look toward the future, we must first take a critical disabilities approach towards our past. A CDS approach to writing center history reveals that the standard for rhetorical competence has been set by White, able-bodied, cisgender and heteronormative men. But this can change. In the next chapter, I argue that this change must begin with empirical research that is concerned not with the normate writer, or the rhetorically abnormal one (in a sense of abnormality being a deficiency), but with the *non-normate* writer. Such research, I argue, is critical to the *normalization of abnormality*, which is the opposite of its containment. In order to conduct such research, however, we must also "crip" our research practices. In fact, we must entirely re-imagine how large research institutions such as Michigan State University oversee research involving human subjects, as the system that is currently in place is a poor steward of our research "space." While engaging the histories and methodologies of the field, we must never forget that, as Berlin once reminded us, "each history endorses an ideology, a conception of economic, social, political, and cultural arrangements that is privileged in its interpretation" (Octalog 6). We must be careful not to privilege cultural arrangements that center normativity and ability.

CRIPPING WRITING CENTER RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

The motion of varying, particular bodies, set in motion by varying minds, converges in an environment. The motion in this convergence is shaped by what disability studies calls "access."

—Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (McRuer and Johnson 154)

All things counter, original, spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
Praise him.
—Gerard Manley Hopkins

As a commuter in graduate school, I spend a lot of time on the road, lost in thought. During one of my commutes back home early in the academic year, I was jolted out of my reveries by a billboard that had a picture of a person in a wheelchair and a caption that read, "We look beyond disability and see the right person for the job."

That billboard bothered me. In fact, each time I pass it, it bothers me.

In what follows, I explain how that billboard is linked to the erasure and exclusion of disabled people, both from the space of the academy, and from society more generally. Claiming to "see beyond" disability, I argue, is just one of the many tactics that able-bodied people use to exclude disabled people from the public sphere and from knowledge creation. If able-bodied writing center professionals choose to "see beyond" disability, then they will continue to exclusively serve those with normate bodies and minds, constituting an erasure of disabled people.

In this chapter, I examine how these erasures occur in writing center research, which I argue needs to be reconceptualized—even "cripped"—in order to better account for the needs and literacies of disabled writing center users and practitioners. That reconceptualization is a call to move away from disability-specific accommodations, from quick fixes in our tutoring manuals and trainings. Instead, we must engage deeply and meaningfully with disabled participants and co-researchers, not in order to understand disability as deficit or deviance, but in order to challenge and reconstruct writing center norms. Finally, I weave my own research story throughout this chapter in order to call attention to the ableist nature of current research practices.

What Do Disabled Writers Need?

In March 2019, I presented a paper at the East Central Writing Center Association (ECWCA) conference in Dayton, Ohio on accessibility and the writing center, a presentation that eventually became a draft proposal for this thesis. As I've explained in the introduction to this thesis, this research came out of my own experience as a person who has been labeled with disabilities in the past, including learning disabilities (officially, a "communication disorder"), and as someone who's been diagnosed with Bipolar II disorder, anxiety, depression, *and* as someone who has experienced alcoholism and drug addiction and the disabling effects that come along with those disorders. I have struggled for most of my life to write normally, to be considered a "normal" student. I wanted to undertake this research because I suspected that some of my clients in the writing center might be struggling in ways that go beyond how compositionists have tended to think about what it means for writers and learners to struggle.

Shortly before the presentation started, I began pacing outside of the room in a sunlit corridor, reviewing the script I had meticulously crafted for the talk. Even though I often speak extemporaneously with little or no effort, I cannot do so in front of a room full of strangers (many cannot), one of the many ways in which my communication disorder continues to haunt me. Without notes, my digressions and loose strands overtake me, tongue tying me in my own discursive nets. Then, aphasia kicks in: nouns blur and recede just underneath my tongue, lost to an echo without an antecedent.

Having realized that continuing to pace and peck at my notes would not prepare me any further for the presentation, I entered the room, found a seat, and waited for the panel to start. Within a few minutes I began to notice a middle-aged man across the room—a fellow presenter, as it turned out—complaining, rather cantankerously, about my use of the term "mental disability" in the description of my presentation, which he thought was offensive. "Who would say that?" he asked as he scoffed. "It's *people with mental disabilities*." First, those without disabilities called me "learning disabled." Now I was being called out for using "mental disabilities," a phrase that many disabled people prefer. *This might not go so well,* I thought.

I hardly remember what I said that day or how I said it (I'm consulting those meticulous notes in order to write this). I was the last presenter, so when I was done and it was time for questions, I finally came to, out of my nervous stupor, entirely unsure what my fellow writing center professionals would ask me. As it turns out, they had a lot to ask, not just of accessibility, my topic, but of me as a scholar-in-training. It seemed like all the questions were directed specifically at me, even though my co-panelists had given interesting presentations, as well.

While most of my interlocutors began their questions by noting that my work was important, they all had a reason why it would not be possible to conduct such research. One audience member asked me if I had plans to address possible HIPPA and FERPA violations (my survey was anonymous, so I was not sure why this kind of privacy concern would become a major issue). While these comments were well intentioned, they were nonetheless my first indication that disability is meant to be hidden in the academy, that it's supposed to come in through what Jay Dolmage referred to as the academy's "back door" (123). Despite years of advocacy by activists and disability studies scholars, disability remains a dirty word around the halls of academia. As would become apparent to me when I submitted my IRB application, the inverse of this need to hide disability is a "desire for able-bodiedness and able-mindedness," which Dolmage argues "comes from the belief that disability should not and cannot be something that is positively claimed and lived-within" (ibid. 70).

*

10/10/2019: In the first draft of my IRB application, I write the following explanation in the "Hypothesis/ Objective/ Goals/ Aims" section:

> The purpose of this research is to understand how writers (students enrolled at Michigan State University) who self-identify with mental disabilities navigate the demands of college writing, as well as their experiences with seeking and using accommodations in the Michigan State University Writing Center and in other academic settings reltaed [sic] to college writing. The results from this research will be used for three specific ends: 1) in order to fulfill the requirements for the completion of a Master's Thesis; 2) as data to be used in any publications related to the Master's Thesis; 3) to better inform writing center practice at the MSU writing Center.
>
> For the purposes of this study, mental disability is defined as the self-identification with any psychiatric or mood disorder, any developmental disability such as Autism Spectrum Disorder, or any learning disability (including Attention Deficit Disorder or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) that affects a participant's ability in one or more major areas of his or her life, such as his or her ability to succeed in school in general or his or her ability to complete writing tasks in particular.
>
> With this definition in mind, the researcher seeks to answer the three following guiding research questions (all of which are applicable both to participants' experience in the MSU Writing Center and to their experience with writing for their general course work):
>
> 1. What are students' attitudes toward disclosure of mental disabilities?
>
> 2. Do students actively seek out accommodations? If so, is the process of receiving accommodations positive or negative?
>
> 3. Do students with mental disabilities feel empowered to act as agents when working with peer consultants at the Writing Center (or with professors), or do they feel disempowered?

What I could not understand when conceiving this research study was that, in a very real sense, *I could have been a participant in my own study*, that I too was trying to "navigate the demands of college writing," only at the graduate level, and that the history of my diagnosis and my own complex identification with mental disability were major factors in the way I approached the genre of the research proposal and IRB application. My three main research questions, which concerned disclosure, accommodations, and agency, could just as well have been asked of me.

Disclosure: Almost every time I disclosed my disability in academia, I heard something to the effect of: "But you seem so smart."

Accommodations: What would I risk as a graduate student by asking for accommodations for an undocumented disability?

Agency: What or who does the empowering? In which direction does power flow?

*

10/16/2019: IRB submitted—months late. Now, time to wait.

I began my presentation in Dayton by noting that the Writing Center at MSU had an explicit focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion, as represented by its mission statement:

> We believe [an] expansive view of writing, literacy, and pedagogy enables us to meet the ever-changing needs of a diverse constituency and challenges us to continually grow as The Writing Center at MSU.

I continued:

> This statement, which I assume looks similar to many other centers' statements, highlights the work we do at MSU to make the center an inviting, inclusive space. We value multiple literacies and writing pedagogies because this, we think, is the only way to truly honor the kind of diverse constituency that we serve as a land grant institution. What this statement means in practice is that in our peer consultation sessions, outreach efforts, and work with MSU faculty and staff, we avoid construing literacy in a way that centers White, middle-class, male ways of knowing. We actively resist the single norm that antiracist pedagogues such as bell hooks and, more recently, Asao B. Inoue have critiqued in rhetoric and composition's languaging practices.
>
> But how are we accounting for ability—and the intersection of ability with positionalities such as race, class, and gender—in our tutoring practices? As Rebecca Day Babcock and Sharifa Daniels note in their introduction to *Writing Centers and Disability*, "even though writing centers have always had transformative and inclusive agendas—and good intentions—there is often a disconnectedness between theoretical and policy announcements about disability and the practical implementation of such policies." ()
>
> So, the question for me as a consultant and a member of my writing center community becomes: how do we, in Marilyn Cooper's words, create "really useful knowledge" when working with clients with disability; that is, how do we not just account for them, accommodate them, or learn to work for them, but truly work *with* them?

As I began to ask these questions, I realized that there were prior questions that needed to be answered before I could ask these larger questions. Namely, I found that as a consultant, I needed to know what clients with disabilities at my center need, and what their experience is like in the Writing Center.

The Writing Center at MSU's mission statement expresses a desire to fulfill the grand narrative of writing center work, which is the idea that "writing centers are comfortable, iconoclastic places where *all* students go to get one-to-one tutoring on their writing" (emphasis added, McKinney 3). Clearly, scholars have been problematizing this grand narrative of the inclusive writing center for many years. The time to include disabled voices in that troubling is long overdue. We often say that our centers serve *all* students, but we must ask, as Hamraie has in her critique of post-ADA claims about "inclusivity for all," "who counts as everyone and how can we know" (*Building Access* loc. 189)? When we seek to meet the needs of a diverse constituency, when we aim to be an "iconoclastic place" where "all students go," do we have disabled writers in mind? How do we know? In what follows, I frame the problem of accessibility in the writing center in terms of research design, ethics, and most importantly, epistemology—a "cripistemology," as critical disability studies scholars have called it. I argue that writing center researchers must do more to include disabled people in their research, not only in accessibility research, but in general writing center research, as well. This will require a robust application of a critical disability studies methodology to writing center work, both to research methodologies in writing center studies *and* to tutor practices.

Crip Ways of Knowing

What do we really know about the relationship between disabilities and college writing, and how do we know it? A cursory glance at the literature reveals that this question is not difficult to answer—even after 40 or so years of published research on disability in writing center studies, we do not know much. But why? For years, academics framed disability primarily through medical and deficit models, still tacitly present in higher education's system of accommodations. These studies reveal a certain epistemology, or a structured way of knowing, one that devalues the knowledge of disabled research participants and overstates the value of able-bodied researchers.

Cripistemology on the other hand, which can be understood as crip ways of knowing—a kind of crip literacy—posits that the lived experience of being disabled constitutes meaningful, non-commodifiable forms of embodied knowledge. In a special issue of *The Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies,* editors Robert McRuer and Merri Lisa Johnson formally introduce the term, though they credit social and cultural critic Lisa Duggan with its coinage. Influenced by feminist standpoint theory, the contributors to the issue theorize a disability "*sitpoint*" theory, one that explores:

> the implications of structurally placing crip(s) at the beginning or center of the production of knowledge. A long political and intellectual history trails out behind this notion of thinking through what Margaret [Price] calls the crip bodymind to produce first-hand, and in some cases, first-person knowledge about topics that concern disabled people and communities, broadly conceived. (McRuer and Johnson 158)

Cripistemology asks us to place disability at the center of our knowledge-making practices. Importantly, however, this does not mean that able-bodied scholars can make disability an object of their knowledge, an object of scholarly *certainty*—as Jasbir K. Puar puts it, "cripistemology does not have to reproduce the violence of the mandate of Western knowledge as able to know its object" (ibid. 163). For Jack Halberstam, one of the valances of cripistemology is its ability to "identify modes of not knowing, unknowing, and failing to know" (ibid. 152). A cripistemological approach to access values it as an emergent property in environments—something that is always unfolding in reality's fold.

Similarly, crip of color critiques of accessibility by activists such as Mia Mingus and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha have argued that access should be conceived of as a kind of negotiation—access is about collectives, not individuals (access Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice)*. Hamraie has recently argued that rather than access as an outcome, we think instead about "access-knowledge," which involves understanding "what users need, how their bodies function, how they interact with space, and what kinds of people are likely to be in the world" (*Building Access* loc. 218). Disabled writers' needs have been undertheorized in the context of writing center pedagogy, which has been premised on normative tutoring techniques dating all the way back to North and Bruffee, and which I discussed in the first chapter. Again, the canonical work by these authors posits that in a session, two individuals work together collaboratively to solve writing problems, but collaboration does not imply an ethos of interdependence, as "abnormal" writers seem to need "normal" tutors much more than the tutors need them. Furthermore, while credos such as "making better writers, not better writing" and the designation of tutors as clients' peers may *seem* to suggest that some kind of negotiation can take place, this conveniently ignores the social capital and habitus of the normate tutor. Instead of continuing the promotion of these dynamics, tutors and writers should work together to increase "access-knowledge" through research.

The access-knowledge of a disabled writing center user might include how they move through the physical space of the writing center (and whether it can be accessed), but it also includes how they move through the pedagogical and social space of a tutoring session. Those spaces, like the physical space of the built, architectural environment, "devalues 'not normal' bodies," and this is "a devaluation reflected in disabled people's difficulties in seeking to overcome the frictions of distance or the spaces between different places" (Imrie 171). The frictions that disabled people feel when in an accessible tutoring session, I argue, must be productively explored in writing center research.

However, while these advances in disability theory point clearly toward where we need to go as a field, they stop short of resolving a seemingly intractable ethical dilemma at the heart of doing research with disabled subjects. At the heart of this work, which Hamraie calls "critical access studies," lies an ethical dilemma: throughout the history of academia, disabled people have been exploited by the academy (*Building Access* loc. 398). Until the middle of twentieth century, disabled bodies were used to create knowledge for able-bodied researchers through experimentation in “settings that offered ‘total control’ or close to it, including prisons, psychiatric wards, classrooms, institutions for the mentally challenged, schools for the autistic, and factories” (Zuboff 322). While we think of these institutions as existing outside of higher education, Jay Dolmage has shown that many “institutional basements were labs for the social and biological experimentation of scholars from the Ivory Towers” (17). Further, as I outlined in the first chapter, even writing centers haven’t entirely avoided the ideology of containment that such institutions were based on. Now, the knowledge of disabled people are appropriated by researchers in the neoliberal university “wherein disability, like other forms of embodied difference, gets commodified” (ibid. 27). To be sure, we must be aware of these historical (and ongoing) forms of violence against disabled people, but this awareness (and even reparations or amends) cannot justify the exclusion of disabled students’ access-knowledge from writing center research.

As Dolmage has so convincingly argued in *Academic Ableism*, the physical structures of higher education—its many “steep steps”—have been built to exclude students with disabilities. But Dolmage wants to draw our attention to the ways in which the exclusion of students with disabilities from higher education is never merely physical. “Instead,” according to Dolmage, “physical inaccessibility is always linked—not just metaphorically—to mental, intellectual, social, and other forms of inaccessibility” (9). When repurposed for non-physical spaces, inaccessibility *is not just a metaphor*. Inaccessible writing center practices, including (but obviously not limited to), the audist bias in our consultations, writing center websites that are not friendly to screen readers, and the choice to hold consultations in physically inaccessible places, are all linked to the exclusion of certain writers from writing center scholarship, and this link *is not merely metaphorical*. It’s real. It matters, even if it doesn’t always directly concern matter. Even if we think immaterial, often discursive practices don’t concern the ordering of space, they do. This is about bodies and minds and whose bodyminds get accounted for—it’s about which bodyminds show up in the space of writing center research. As a field, we’ve virtually ignored the systematic study of writing center practices that exclude writers with disabilities other than learning disabilities—CDS forces us to ask why. As Driscoll and Perdue's work has shown, research agendas are never neutral; they are choices informed by material factors such as access to grants and cheap graduate student labor, but this also means that they are shaped by political, historical, and disciplinary factors. There are many reasons for the exclusion of disabled writers from writing center studies. In what follows, I will propose that this exclusion mainly results from the field's inability to value the embodied knowledges of disabled writers.

"I Don't See Disability"

The billboard read: "We look beyond disability and see the right person for the job."

The first time I saw that it, I thought it disturbed me because "looking beyond disability" sounds analogous to saying one "does not see race," or that one is "colorblind." Not only is this a bad analogy, but the very idea of being "ability blind" is also a particularly unfortunate metaphor (think about it). While claiming to not see disability is somewhat like claiming not to see race, Tanya Titchkosky has argued that the very use of a term like "color blindness" is an example of how dead metaphors become key devices in what she calls "impairment rhetoric" (270). Titchkosky argues that impairment rhetoric is a rhetorical technique that's still prevalent in social justice praxis today. When discussing issues related to race, class, or gender, well-meaning activists uncritically use terms such as "amnesia," "aphasia" to describe these forms of oppression, thus unwittingly perpetuating ableist stereotypes of and negative associations with disabled people.

Given its metaphorical nature, impairment rhetoric is always an act of world-building through language. Drawing on the work of Paul Ricoeur, Titchkosky reminds us that metaphors are acts of *poiesis as well as mimesis*, but Titchkosky argues that such metaphors do the wrong kind of world building because they shut down disabled futures; they don't "open the world on the abnormal," in order to cause a "disruption to the movement of normalizing," as a critical disability studies approach asks us to do (280). In other words, these metaphors are not merely "problematic" or ableist (although they are those things); they are also ways to shut down critical thinking about how language mediates the intersections between race, class, gender, and ability.

There are other things wrong with the billboard, though, such as the "problem" of being unable to "see beyond" "invisible disabilities" (I wonder if this employer would also see beyond something that has no discernible sign on the body, such as my learning disabilities, major depression, or history of addiction), not to mention that person-first ideology is also often wrapped up with ableist ideology (if you don't see a disability, why would you design for it?). This billboard is ableist on multiple levels.

While I could probably go on for several more pages about the billboard, I must keep the spotlight on research methodologies and institutional practices for a little bit longer. Around the time that I first noticed this billboard, I was beginning to run into serious difficulties with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at my university, and I began to wonder, does the IRB "see" disability, or do they claim to "see beyond" it? As I moved through the IRB approval process, I began to suspect things might be even worse—IRB might not only keep the proverbial gates to the university's research wing. It might just also keep those gates atop a set of steep steps, forcing researchers and potential participants with disabilities to go in through the side door of the university, if they even let them in in the first place.

Institutional Review Boards, Bodies, and Space

In order to understand the specific emplacement of bodyminds in the space of the writing center, we must first understand how disabled bodyminds exist and interact in the space of the research university. With its focus on how normative bodies and spaces are constructed, critical disability studies allows us to begin by asking how the specific "space" of research has been constructed by researchers and those who oversee the research. "Space is one of the major axioms of being and of life itself," according to Rob Imrie. "It is where we are located, the places where we live and move around, and the multiple relationships that take shape among them."

That means we must turn our attention to IRBs and note how they construct and manage different spaces.

IRB manages spaces that are both literal (multi-site research) and figurative (by, in part, determining one's entry into the space of a discipline). Think of Burke's parlor. Unlike disciplinary critique, which might ask about the content of a field's parlor conversation, institutional critique asks about where the parlor is located in the space of an institution and how accessible it is to entrants in a field.

In the above paragraph, I use "space" both literally and figuratively, but for the purposes of institutional critique, these two senses are not easy to disentangle and are therefore interdependent. In *Academic Ableism,* Dolmage follows the feminist rhetorician Roxanne Mountford by focusing not on physical spaces but on "rhetorical spaces," which allows him to see how space is always already both spatial and discursive. According to Mountford, "rhetorical spaces carry the residue of history upon them, but also, perhaps, something else: a physical representation of relationships and ideas" (Mountford, qtd. in Dolmage 8). Going forward, then, every time I use the word "space" I'm thinking of rhetorical space. The refusal to bifurcate space and discourse, nature and culture, is crucial to a critical disability studies critique of an institution.

IRBs have been flawed managers of space. In fact, for many critics, the IRB has been a flawed institution from the start, although most histories represent the adaption of the Common Rule (and the concomitant creation of IRBs) as the culmination of a progressive march toward increased protections for human subjects.[5] Many histories of the IRB note that the oversight of human subject research has unfolded gradually in response to a series of high profile cases of in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, typically beginning with the Tuskegee Syphilis

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[5] See, for instance, the descriptions of 45 CFR 46 provided by the Office for Human Research Protections: https://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/regulations-and-policy/guidance/faq/45-cfr-46/index.html

Experiment study and the Nazi experiments in the first half of the twentieth century, which resulted in the Nuremberg Code of 1947, the *Belmont Report* in 1979, and the Common Rule in 1981, and which culminated in the death of Ellen Roche in a 2001 asthma study (Seidman 57; Kim 7). Typically, this is where the story stops. But why? As I was drafting this chapter, the World Health Organization (W.H.O) was being accused of running large-scale clinical trials for a malaria vaccine in three African countries without providing informed consent to participants. Though the W.H.O has disputed the accusation that its activities constituted a set of "clinical trials" (they called the rollout of the vaccine a "pilot introduction" rather than a "research activity"), the story is the same (Doshi n.p.). Though these are examples of widely disparate human rights violations from a multitude of regions, governing bodies, and groups of researchers, one pattern is clear, and it's not one of progressive improvement; rather, there is a pattern of an exploitative and extractive attitude held by researchers against the researched. As Dolmage succinctly puts it: "one studies; the other is studied" (4).

In "Institutional Review Boards: What's Old, What's New, What Needs to Change" by Kotsis and Chung., the failure of the larger IRB system is attributed to increased workloads, overburdened staff, low morale, and the bloated bureaucracy of the corporatized, neoliberal university (n.p.). It doesn't require a thorough literature review to recognize that many researchers are fed up with the current system, but the authors point out that even IRB investigators are sick of the dysfunction, as well. One investigator is quoted as saying that "the IRB, with all its work, dreams up corrections" (n.p.). However, the problems with IRB go much deeper—in fact, they are systemic.

A broad range of scholars, including la paperson, Tuhiwai Smith, Walter Mignolo, Mary Louise Pratt, Dolmage, and others, have focused their etiologies of this ailing research system on knowledge-making practices that predate even the most egregious errors of the twentieth century, thus short-circuiting the typical IRB creation story, which relies on the trope of institutional progress and benevolent university administrators. Decolonial scholars in particular have argued that today's problematic research practices stem from colonialism and Enlightenment epistemology more generally, and that these traditions are at the very least tacit parts of our research practices today. For the purposes at hand, however, I focus on a few key decolonial criticisms that directly implicate a land-grant institution like MSU in the project of colonialism. Though separated by hundreds of years, I review this research here because it provides crucial context for the ableism and neo-colonialism present in research institutions today.

This is about land, and it's about bodies. Decolonial scholars such as la paperson have drawn attention to the ways in which the land-grand institution, along with "land tenancy laws, debt, and the privatization of land" is one of many interlinked deployments of "settler-colonial technology" (2). Although he is writing about the University of California system specifically, la paperson has in mind all land-grant institutions (including MSU, one of the most venerable members of this class) when he says that "universities are land-grabbing, land-transmogrifying, land-capitalizing machines. Universities are giant machines attached to other machines: war machines, media machines, governmental and nongovernmental policy machines" (31). For la paperson, then, the mission of the land-grant institution, which was originally stated in the 1862 Morrill Act as the advancement of the "agricultural and mechanical arts," is predicated on settler colonialism and the dispossession of indigenous peoples' land and language, which has made it complicit in the "empire-self-making project of the United States" (26). This is a damning critique on its own, of course, but it also calls attention to the otherwise obscured historicity of the IRB.

Although not an indigenous scholar, Dolmage has argued that the history of forced re-education and assimilation, the theft of native land, and experimentation on indigenous populations should all be grouped together as forms of "colonial science" (14). Colonial science is not merely the intellectual arm of the colonialist project writ large in North America—it is also closely connected to the concurrent creation of the system of "lower education," which relies on the assumption that disability is the “inverse or opposite of higher-education” (3). Dolmage traces the history of how lower education has historically relied on and justified both positive and negative eugenics, and in turn how eugenics “was in many ways the perfect ideological vehicle for the settler colonialism of higher education” (14).

La paperson and Dolmage both suggest that the primary function of the land-grant institution is in its use as a settler-colonial technology that orders bodyminds in space and time. Dolmage further argues that the history of the land-grant institution cannot be separated from the creation of disableism and lower education:

> One way to map the spaces of academia and disability would be to look at the ways land was parceled out in North America in the late 1800s (parceling that always took place as though this was settlers’ land to divide up as they pleased). While universities were popping up in urban settings and on land grant tracts, asylums and “idiot schools” were popping up in other, nearby rural settings—on old farms and “abandoned” land. (19)

This is precisely the history of asylums in Michigan, many of which were founded on territory ceded in the Greenville (1795), Detroit (1807), Saginaw (1817), Chicago (1821), and St. Joseph (1827) treaties. In her analysis of The Treaty of Detroit, Tiya Miles argues that members of the Ottawa, Ojibwe, Wyandot, and Potawatomi were pressured to cede territory in a move that “set in place the pattern for the eventual relinquishment of most of what we now know as the state of Michigan by the early 1840s,” and that this particular cession of territory was achieved by Michigan governor William Hull largely through a threat of violence used to secure American military supremacy in the region, as well as to further “white settlement in the march toward statehood” (loc. 3727 of 6809). In 1859, the first mental hospital in the nascent state of Michigan was opened in Kalamazoo, Michigan. The hospital, which was known as the “Kalamazoo Asylum,” was built on an “irregular eminence” in western Kalamazoo on a lot comprising 200 acres of land (Smith 13). This land originally belonged to the Potowatomi, and although the 1827 Treaty St. Joseph created reservations for the tribe, “the U.S. government did away with four of the five reserved areas, including the one in Kalamazoo, in an attempt to consolidate the Potawatomi as a precursor to removal west” (“Kalamazoo College Land Acknowledgement”).

While colleges and universities were springing up in and around Detroit, asylums were popping up on stolen “irregular eminence[s]” like the one in Kalamazoo. Meanwhile, in Lansing, the Agricultural College of the State of Michigan (as Michigan State University was known at that time) developed a curriculum devoted to settler-colonialist strategies, extracting surplus value from the land and its indigenous peoples. These histories are another reminder of how the discourses of containment are closely intertwined both inside and outside of college campuses.

This double movement, which is at once an exclusion through eradication and exclusion through appropriation, can still be seen today in a newly altered form, fit for the neoliberal research university. When Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act was passed in 1973, the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges were quick to voice their opposition to blanket reforms that would allow disabled students access to their campuses. Instead, they preferred what Dolmage and other disability studies scholars call “retrofits,” which provide access on a case-by-case basis and are dispensed by benevolent university faculty and staff, but only if the disabled student can prove their disability (Williamson 131; Dolmage 70). Universities would provide access to students with disabilities, but only through providing the bare minimum of retrofits to individual students, thus ensuring that collective access would never be achieved and that the vast majority of disabled students would never cross their hallowed greenswards, degrees in hand. Today, the exclusion of students with disabilities from the participation in the production of knowledge continues, not through outright eradication, but through the neoliberal university’s claims of “seeing beyond” disability. This, too, is a way of managing space, of preventing certain bodies from entering certain spaces.

Disability Respectful Language

10/28/2019: A message in the IRB portal states that I must resubmit my study for exempt review because “it appears that [it] may qualify for an exception under limited IRB review under category 2(iii).”

11/22/2019: Never mind. Because "there is reason to think the subjects may find the interaction or intervention offensive," it must go through a full IRB review.

I wait. As I wait, I revise and resubmit, revise and resubmit again. Mostly I tweak this form or that form, but not at any point do I feel like I'm being asked to engage with the difficult questions about how to engage with disabled participants in a way that is both ethical and accessible (which this thesis argues is the same thing). On a deeply personal level, I refuse to believe or accept that the tweaks I'm being asked to make amount to anything substantial.

1/8/2020: I speak with the IRB coordinator on the phone, and I am told that I should combine my consent forms for both the survey and the focus groups into one consent form that is given to participants *before* they begin the online survey. I am told to do so because this makes the "process easier for auditing purposes." But does it make the survey more or less accessible to students with mental disabilities, the very population I have in mind for this research? Both my advisor and I agree that combining the consent forms makes no sense, as this would greatly increase the complexity (thus decreasing the readability and clarity) of the informed consent process, and it is entirely unnecessary because participants are allowed to decide whether they would like to join the focus group *after* they complete the survey—the two instruments are related, but not fully dependent on one another, as the survey consent form clearly indicates that a survey participant may choose to only participate in the survey and nothing more. The IRB claims to have participants' best interests at heart, but in this instance, does it? Are they making decisions that center disabled participants, or themselves?

1/21/2020: The study actually goes before the full IRB board. It is rejected. The first, and perhaps *primary* concern, it seems, is that the study does not use "disability respectful language:"

> Throughout the survey you use 'mental disability' - google search returns are listings of mental illness. Would you consider use of 'mental disorder' instead - a google search returns a listing that include the examples you use in your questions. Or is there another term that might reduce the possibility of eligible participants finding the survey to be offensive?

In my past, my teachers, those with authority, called me learning disabled, and now a new authority comes along and tells me that I should not use the term “mental disability,” that it is not respectful. The battle over labels is, to a large extent, a battle over space—over who has the authority to identify and claim how bodies relate to identities and space. Prior to my diagnosis, I occupied the space of my elementary school in one way, and after that diagnosis, my relationship to that building, to its hallways, to the other bodies within it all changed as the result of my lack of authority to claim my own name in that space. For disability activists, the right to claim a name is the right to claim a space.

On Not Seeing Disability

As a graduate student in rhetoric and writing, the problem of labels, and of naming generally, is real to me. Going back to at least the development of the strong Sapir-Whorf hypothesis in the 1950s, social constructionists in multiple disciplines have made the argument that words and labels affect the way we view and interact with the world. Influenced by Sapir’s theory, Kenneth Burke theorized what he called terministic screens: terminology doesn’t neutrally describe the world; instead, it always reflects, selects, and deflects reality (45). In the context of the neoliberal university, which disability studies scholar Stephanie Kerschbaum has claimed uses diversity discourses in order to commodify and neutralize difference, terministic screens such as *mental disability* or *learning disability* are used in “institutional category systems” that create surplus value in a diversity market (33). According to Kerschbaum, “when students find themselves defined within [these] institutional category systems, their own self-perceptions and orientations to difference and otherness are affected” (32). Labels matter, especially when they are tied to material networks such as accommodations and other institutional resources for students with disabilities.

But this view of language’s power to shape reality is no longer universally held, and linguists have challenged the strong Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (suggesting that Burke’s work should be revisited, as well). Nonetheless, we don’t have to accept the strong version of the

Sapir-Whorf hypothesis in order to be concerned with the ways in which the very terms associated with mental disability are highly stigmatized. In fact, de-stigmatization was one of the original intentions behind the introduction of person-first language (PFL) in the 1980s by disability scholars and activists (Davis, "Disability Language…"). Originally, these activists and scholars felt that referring to a "person with a disability" instead of a "disabled person" was a good way to de-stigmatize disability because it centers a person's humanity instead of their disability. Although not explicitly stated in the reviewer's response, it's likely that my IRB reviewer had PFL in mind when they called for more "disability respectful language" in my survey questions. In doing so, they were simply following a standard that has become ubiquitous not only in higher education, but in society as well (Andrews et al. 2). These should be recognized as good intentions. But good intentions only go so far, especially when they are codified and appropriated by corporations and the corporate university. As Kerschbaum notes in her analysis of one institution's diversity agenda, "when social institutions create and perpetuate particular forms of language, that language is never disinterested" (30). Given that the university's use of PFL belies a certain political or economic agenda, it remains for us to ask whether that agenda aligns with the rhetorical and political projects of disabled people in the real world.

While concerns about "disability respectful language" should not be dismissed outright, they are out of touch with current debates in disability studies and in activist circles, both of which have moved away from person-first language to identity-first language (IFL). Disability studies scholars, such as Margaret Price and Lennard Davis, and disability activists, such as Emily Ladau, have all questioned PFL, which has become the de facto, naturalized approach to talking about disability in health and educational contexts, if not in most professional and institutional contexts (Price, *Mad at School;* Davis, "Disability Language"). In his response to an article by Iles and Lou in *AJOB Neuroscience*, Davis even goes so far as to claim that when considering PFL and IFL, "there isn't a correct term—only one preferred at the moment" (ibid.).

On the other hand, Price's criticism of the debate is a bit more nuanced because of its attention to the rhetorical affordances of respective terms. For Price, a multitude of descriptive terms are used by mentally disabled people, including *mental illness, psychiatric disability, neuroatypical,* and so on, but each "does particular kinds of cultural work in particular contexts" (9). Price explains that her own choice to use "mental disability" (rather than "a person with…") is informed by a desire to use language "in a way that operates as inclusively as possible, inviting coalition, while also attending to the specific texture of individual experiences" (ibid.). While scholars agree that there is no consensus in the disability community on which label is preferred by disabled people (at least scholars can agree that there is a disagreement), the IRB seems to have defaulted to PFL without further consultation with people with disabilities. It is unclear whether they have chosen to do so because such a rhetorical move is an easy way to signal virtue and inclusivity, and is therefore politically expedient, or because they truly believe such a move is in accordance with the best practices of research. What is clear is that statements such as Price's call attention to the principles of inclusivity, coalition building, and respect for self-naming when making decisions around disability respectful language, not a strict adherence to person-first language.

While all three principles should be considered simultaneously when doing research with disabled participants, a respect for a group's or research participant's right to self-name should take on tantamount importance in institutional processes, such as IRB. Because IRB relies heavily on human rights discourses, such as the Belmont Report, for its ethos, which specifically cites a respect for persons as one of its three pillars of ethical human subject research, respect in this context should also include the right to name and claim an identity. Davis makes a related (and obvious) point:

> A general rule of thumb in such situations should be that when people within an oppressed group object to classifying names and suggest, from within that group, that these terms be changed, then it makes sense to change them. (n.p.)

Numerous conversations online by disabled activists are evidence enough that Davis's threshold has already been met, so why does IRB insist that my use of "mental disability" isn't "disability respectful language?" As disability-rights activist Emily Ladau notes in her blog post "Person-First Language Doesn't Always Put the Person First," PFL has become the de facto "law of the land" in institutions and in professional contexts, and yet she, like many disabled people, has chosen to refer to herself as a *disabled person* rather than a person with a disability for several reasons: first, PFL has the tendency to de-emphasize a person's disabled identity (making it just one of many); secondly, because we treat disability differently from other identity markers, such as race and ethnicity (Ladau points out that one would never say "a person who is Jewish"); and lastly, because disability is a source of pride, not shame, and for many disabled people, PFL ironically further stigmatizes the very identity it's meant to de-stigmatize (n.p.). Ladau's reasoning makes sense and is in step with many other disabled activists and scholars, but even if it were not, shouldn't a respect for a person's right to name his or herself be enough for IRBs to move beyond outdated language ideologies?

Ladau describes being met with confusion, and even ire, by able-bodied people over her choice to refer to herself as a disabled person, and she links their response to IFL to a kind of ideology:

> I can't even begin to tell you how many people I encounter who question my language choice. I realize I can't blame them entirely, because PFL is all that many people know. It's drilled into people's minds, often in the form of generally well-intentioned sensitivity trainings and educational literature, as the only possible means to be respectful. (n.p.)

Ladau notes the role that institutional bureaucracy has played in individuals' reactions to IFL, and the fact alone that such directives come from these bureaucratic initiatives instead of from disabled people themselves, should lead us to question the extent to which an institution's diversity initiatives are meant to further disabled justice and systemic change for disabled people. It also leads us to question the role of something like IRB, which, according to the Belmont report, is supposed to protect the dignity of human subjects; however, if IRB (and the research institution of which it is merely a part) does not entitle individuals to their individuality because it denies them their right to name themselves and therefore occupy space in their preferred way, then it cannot really be said to be protecting them at all. Perhaps in this litigious age, it is merely protecting the institution itself.

Unusually for an English studies scholar, Davis concedes that "names are the tip of the iceberg of oppression," and that it is "fully possible that oppressors can be linguistically correct while unjust in their application of power and policy" (n.p.). In other words, lurking behind person-first language could be ableist institutional policies and procedures that put disabled people last, and which even do harm to disabled people. In effect, the rejection of disabled peoples' right to name themselves is a de facto form of exclusion, one that constitutes a form of violence—albeit a discursive one—that is part and parcel to the historical violence perpetuated against disabled people for hundreds of years by higher and lower education. When the IRB encourages researchers to try to "see" beyond disability by seeing the person, they are actually encouraging those researchers to ignore the lived experience and knowledges that disabled people can contribute to a range of disciplines and areas of inquiry.

I argue that in order to build an accessible writing center, we must include the voices and experiences of people with disabilities, no matter the difficulties in engaging in such research—difficulties that are, to a large extent, created by the neoliberal university itself. Seeing disability means that we must not only allow disabled people to name themselves, but we must allow them to name their own conditions of existence. They must become subjects of access-knowledge, which, while not objective, can and should be reached, at least in part, by empirical research. We must deal with the complex way in which different bodies inhabit space, as well as the ways in which they make that space different, heterogenous, and in the words of the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, gloriously "dappled."

Toward Evidence-Based Disability Research in the Writing Center

In a literature review of writing center scholarship on disability, Babcock produced two notable findings: 1) that few of the research studies on disability in the past 40 years can be classified as evidence-based; 2) that almost none of the most prominent literature on disability in writing centers features "actual research done with students with disabilities" (337). These limitations constitute major gaps in our knowledge of the access needs of disabled writers. In addition to Babcock, Sherry Lynn Perdue and Dana Driscoll have also raised concerns about the lack of RAD research (research that is replicable, aggregable, and data-driven) in writing center studies more generally, and Babcock's critiques bring disability into this wider discussion of RAD research and writing center research methodologies. In her literature review, Babcock found that most writing center research on disability over the past 40 years has relied extensively on anecdote, which she defined as the "reporting of past tutoring sessions but does not include systematic data gathering or research questions" ("Disabilities…" n.p.). The problem for Babcock is that anecdote contributes to lore. Like North before her, the defining characteristic of lore for Babcock is not the methodological approach (which is typically narrative-based), but its lack of systematization and generalizability.

Of the 43 studies that Babcock examined, only 6 (13%) used an empirical research design, and only one suggested the use of Universal Design as a way to improve accessibility for disabled writers. The rest, it seems, rely heavily on anecdote and case-by-case accommodations for specific disabilities. In her preface to *Writing Centers and Disabilities,* Allison Hitt calls this the "diagnose-and-accommodate" model of writing center accessibility:

> In response to inaccessible best practices, writing center scholarship has often adopted an impairment-specific approach to disability. This approach focuses on identifying the characteristics of a particular disability diagnosis and then developing practices that are specific to those characteristics...the development of impairment-specific practices—although well intentioned—does not honor the complexities, nuances, or strengths of disabled student writers. (viii)

When looked at as a whole, the list that Babcock presents indicates a fractured, "impairment-specific" approach to disability in the past 40 years of writing center scholarship, an approach marked by a patchwork of trends and gaps in impairment-specific research, suggesting that new disabilities get researched only when they enter the academic zeitgeist. For instance, while research on learning disabled (LD) writers is obviously important, it's clear from Babcock's research that this group is over-represented in the field. LD writers, who only accounted for 9% of postsecondary students with disabilities, according to a 2008 government report, are so over-represented in the literature, in fact, that Babcock comes to the conclusion that "learning disability has almost become synonymous with disability in many writing center conversations" (Babcock, *Writing Centers* 331).[6] Of the 43 studies that Babcock evaluates, 16 concern writers with learning disabilities—37% of the total. Furthermore, given the near total absence of Universal Design, the accommodations that are invariably offered for LD writers, like writers with other disabilities, sound more like retrofits than substantive changes to tutoring techniques. Accommodations become retrofits when they are tacked onto existing structures for individual students (Dolmage 70). "Like ramps," retrofits "'fix' space," Dolmage claims. Another key feature of the retrofit is that they "have a chronicity—a timing and a time logic—that renders them highly temporary yet also relatively unimportant. Thus, the experience of seeking a retrofit usually reveals that they are slow to come and fast to expire" (ibid.). Importantly, the accommodation qua retrofit is temporary and *reactive*, rendering "disability as something to be addressed only when it arises, never to let it extend beyond the classroom and into scholarship and service" (79). In Hamraie's words, the retrofit does not transform "knowledge, values,

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[6] These numbers are very tricky, however. Not only are they often outdated, but there are a lot of different ways to slice the proverbial pie. While students with learning disabilities only accounted for 9% of students with disabilities according to this 2008 report, 43% of students who registered for accommodations with RCPD in 2011 reported having learning disabilities, suggesting that while students with learning disabilities constitute a small percentage of students who have disabilities, they constitute a near majority of recipients of accommodations from disability support services such as RCPD, making their overall importance to research a complicated matter.

ideologies, and systems" (*Building Access* loc. 370/8867). We must question, then, any tutoring or programmatic prescriptions that follow the diagnose-and-accommodate model of tutoring, no matter how well intentioned. Babcock's criticism of the lack of RAD research on disability in the writing center represents more than just a desire to inject objectivity into writing center studies; in fact, it reflects a concern that the exclusion of disabled writers from this invaluable research ensures the services provided to them never rise above the status of the retrofit.

Again, although this critique seems to be little more than a misguided and thinly-veiled call for positivism—a tradition that has been strongly critiqued by disability studies—Simi Linton raised similar concerns several decades ago. Linton took issue with the fact that, historically, disability research has "not [been] considered generalizable or relevant to nondisabled people," and disabled people are merely "studied as deviation from the norm in order to increase knowledge about and stature of the norm" (Sinton 73). Today, not much has changed. Neuroscientist Eric R. Kandel, who shared a Nobel prize in 2000 for his work in neuroscience, claimed as recently as 2018 that "brain disorders provide a window into the typical healthy brain" (9). While Kandel does not apply a deficit model to the field of abnormal psychology, he still problematically asserts that the primary utility in studying disorders such as autism and gender dysmorphia lies in helping neuroscientists "increase knowledge…and stature" of the normate mind.

It doesn't have to be this way. There is a history of designers and scholars who have used empirical research design to actually increase knowledge about the *arbitrariness* of the norm, rather than its givenness, and therefore to increase access-knowledge, as well. A central assumption of this chapter, then, is that in order for researchers and writing center professionals to understand the needs of disabled writing center users, we should consider designing empirical studies that incorporate both disabled writers *and* researchers, and we must concern ourselves with generalizability while doing so. In her work on the history of accessible and universal design, disability studies scholar Aimi Hamraie has shown how even quantitative methods, such as anthropometric research, which was once used to define exclusive bodily norms in architecture and product design, was appropriated by disability researchers to design products and environments more inclusively ("Universal Design Research," n.p.). While empirical study designs may at first seem inherently problematic when used in the context of disability, mixed-methods research studies by disabled researchers, such as Margaret Price and Stephanie Kerschbaum, have shown that the use of such quantitative methods is acceptable as long as ethical concerns, such as "reciprocity, representation, and accessibility," are centered (Price and Kerschbaum 21).

Babcock's second criticism—that much of the literature on disability in the writing center doesn't feature "actual research done with students with disabilities" is even more problematic in light of the criticisms made by disability studies scholars that much of what passes for research on disability in the academy doesn't materially improve disabled peoples' lives. As pioneering disabilities studies scholar Mike Oliver has claimed, any disability research that doesn't transform the "social relations of research production" is inherently problematic. Although the use of qualitative methods in fields such as education was initially championed as a means of correcting the sins of positivism, Oliver points out that even interpretivist qualitative paradigms can (and have) failed disabled subjects when they don't result in changes to social relations between abled and disabled people, researcher and researched (Seidman 7; Oliver 106). Additionally, both Oliver and Linton have criticized the unequal power dynamics between abled researchers and disabled research participants (Oliver 105; Linton 73). To echo Dolmage once again: systemic oppression against people with disabilities by the academy has led to a situation in which "one studies; the other is studied" (4).

But why are disabled subjects excluded from writing center research in the first place—is this another instance of the double exclusion of disabled people from higher education that began in the middle of the twentieth century, or is it something else? In the next section of this chapter, I will turn to some final considerations on the kinds of systemic changes that need to be made to the research process in order to produce writing center research that is inclusive for disabled people.

One of the primary barriers preventing the inclusion of disabled participants and researchers in academic research is the general devaluation of disabled people by IRB and the precepts of empirical research design. In “Addressing Accessibility Issues in Institutional Review Board Policies,” Milligan et al. reviewed the IRB policies of 55 land-grant institutions by searching each school’s IRB websites for keywords such as “disability” and “accommodation” and found “little or no evidence of accessibility concerns in postsecondary educational institutions' IRB policies” (n.p.). However, as Davis reminds us, the lack of inclusive language might just be the tip of the iceberg. The authors point out that both disabled research participants *and* researchers are systematically excluded from the research process through various inaccessible materials and practices. Graduate students and faculty researchers face inaccessible submission systems and “incompatible technology,” and given the primacy of research potential in both hiring and tenure and promotion decisions, the inaccessibility of human-subject research contributes, at least in part, to the high number of adjuncts with disabilities (Milligan et al.; Adjunct n.p.) For disabled participants, research projects are inaccessible if the researchers (with the tacit approval of IRB) rely on exclusive recruitment techniques (such as flyers), or if informed consent forms are inaccessible for people with mental or physical disabilities. Milligan et al. claim that the inattention to accessibility issues by IRBs constitutes a violation of the principle of beneficence, but I would say it violates the principle of justice in human subject research, as well.

If writing centers are to enact their social justice missions, then they must include disabled students in their research through accessible research practices, even if the IRBs that approve those studies do not value disabled students. The suggestions that Milligan et al. make for IRBs apply to writing centers, as well. At the bare minimum, writing center research on disabled writers *must* include researchers with disabilities, or researchers who have a deep knowledge of disabilities, in the design of research projects, and every part of a study, from its instruments to its informed consent documents, must be designed to be in compliance with the ADA and 508 requirements (Milligan et al. n.p.). Reviewing my own failure to get a research study through IRB approval, I can now see how not only the IRB fell short in its obligations to disabled people, but so did I. Had I known back then what I know now about inclusive research design, I would likely have designed a very different study, one that drew on access-knowledge and crip ways of knowing in order to challenge the very conventions that I am now critiquing. It's not enough to make a study accessible; writing centers researchers must go even further: they must disregard normate research commonplaces, such as the need to do proportionate sampling and the audist nature of qualitative interviewing (Hamraie, "Universal Design" n.p.; Price and Kerschbaum 22).[7] This ensures that writers with disabilities are not merely accommodated, but that their inclusion challenges dominant writing and research paradigms, as well.

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Today, I live at home full time, so I no longer have to drive past the "see beyond disability" billboard. Nonetheless, I'm still reminded on a daily basis—this is no exaggeration—of the ableist world's preference for seeing beyond disability. Because of my own identity as someone with a learning disability and alcoholism, someone who, according to my teachers, is so "articulate" now but whose speech was once so "disorganized," I'm reminded of another valance

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[7] Hamraie, Price, and Kerschbaum point toward the ways in which disability can "crip" methodology" (Price and Kerschbaum 22). In "Universal Design Research as a New Materialist Practice," for instance, Hamraie describes how accepted statistical methods, such as proportionate sampling, actually *under*-represent people with disabilities because "generalizing from a small sample to the whole population in this way is a mechanism by which privileged figures, like the normate, become a legitimate representation of the supposedly average body" (n.p.). Similarly, Price and Kerschbaum have used a variety of modalities when interviewing participants, which is not merely a matter of accessibility, but also transforms the research paradigm so that it relies on interdependence (Price and Kerschbaum 22).

of that word *beyond*: the preference to cure disability, to move beyond it. A part of me wonders if this preference isn't as nefarious as it seems at first; perhaps it's reflective of our desire as humans for *story*, because what else is a *beyond* if not an also *after*, as well, placing the (now) nondisabled character at the end of the narrative arc, as in: I was once OK, then I became disabled, and now, *after* I got over my disability, I'm OK again. While some disabled people undoubtedly want to return to the state of their bodyminds before their disabilities, others do not. We cannot make assumptions either way. We must instead value disabled voices and experiences. We must put them at the center of this work.

NOTES TOWARD AN ACCESSIBLE WRITING CENTER

"When I think about access, I think about love." Piepzna-Samarasinha, 75

"Without an ethic of love shaping the direction of our political vision and our radical aspirations, we are often seduced, in one way or the other, into continued allegiance to systems of domination—imperialism, sexism, racism, classism."—bell hooks, n.p.

As I began my draft of this chapter, riots were sweeping across the country as thousands of people protested the state-sanctioned murder of innocent Black people, including Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, and most visibly, George Floyd. It is hard to write about such unconscionable violence—where to begin? How does a short academic treatise on rhetoric and writing centers make any difference in a world that continues to allow, sanction, and even promote such unbelievable cruelty against Black people? And what does this violence have to do with ableism?

Everything. Anti-Blackness and systemic racism have *everything* to do with ableism. In 2016, a police officer shot and wounded a Black, unarmed caregiver named Charles Kinsey. Kinsey, a personal attendant to an autistic Latinx person named Arnaldo Rios-Soto, was not North Miami police officer Jonathan Aledda's intended target—Rios-Soto was, whom he thought was holding a gun. Viral cellphone footage captured that day shows Kinsey and Rios-Soto in the middle of a neighborhood intersection shortly before being confronted by police, with Kinsey laying on his back, hands up, and Rios-Soto sitting up, clearly not holding a weapon, but a silver toy truck ("Man who recorded…"). Rios-Soto's perceived incommunicability, their asociality, along with their inability or refusal to perform the dominant socio-rhetorical codes of Whiteness and ability, marked them as a menace. This violence, and our complicity in it as educators, must continue to be addressed by the field of rhetoric and composition, not just by scholars of race or disability. Rhetorical normalcy, I have argued, sits squarely in the middle of the intersection of race, class, gender, and ability, making it an important theoretical frame for scholarship in the field.

If this story is unsettling, that's because it's meant to be. Sadly, I could punctuate this thesis with innumerable stories like the one about Rios-Soto and Kinsey. By punctuate, I have in mind Barthes' *punctum*, which is the "sting, speck, cut, little hole…" that Barthes felt when looking at certain photographs (*Camera* 27). Greenfield et al. have likened stories that unsettle in this way to the *punctum,* "the sharp little wounds that catch us unaware and force us to acknowledge racism" (Greenfield et al. 120). Whether they take place within or without writing centers, stories about racism punctuate (and puncture) the grand narrative of the writing center as a place that helps *all writers* because they help us see how the world is not designed for *all people* to dwell in it. That realization is meant to disturb. It is dangerous for writing centers to slip into complacent grand narratives as the world continues to burn, and I do not intend to settle either myself or the reader in this final section by tying things up in a neat little bow.

To that end, this chapter is not meant to be a conclusion—not in the usual sense of that word—because it's not merely a culmination of all that came before it. "[C]ulmination (or even example), by bringing the discussion to a particular, fixed point," says McRuer, "generates a manageable order, reduces difference, calms, settles, or frees from agitation" ("Composing" 61). I won't try to calm the reader, because we don't yet deserve it. Instead, I offer some specific ways that centers can work toward an accessible future, one in which the difference that disabled writers bring to higher education is not commodified or fixed, but rather is used to change the very structure of the university. I want us to consider what higher education would look like if it didn't exclude disability or punish rhetorical abnormality. Could we imagine such a place? Would it still be recognizable?

In order to make the writing center accessible, I argue that writing centers need to begin by taking the following five actions, while fully admitting that this is just a beginning. Combatting ableism, like other forms of oppression, is an on-going process that requires accountability within communities and coalitions, and it cannot be accomplished via checklists. Nonetheless, it is crucial that the theory presented in prior chapters can be used to inform writing center praxis, and to that end, I want to present a series of *actions* that can be taken by writing center professionals who are interested in enacting transformative access in their centers. Similar to the principles of Universal Design, the following list should not be treated as a series of abstract, inert nouns. UD should be treated as "a way to move," as Dolmage says (116). Likewise, each of the following suggestions is more verb than noun.

In what follows, I suggest that in order to begin this process, writing centers must practice *centering* disabled students in their research, *coming* to terms with their ableist past (and present), *including* disabled people in leadership and research positions, *forming* partnerships with disability services on campus, and, finally, *embracing* interdependence as an ethic of love that works to liberate disabled writers.

Centering Disabled Writers in Research

Research in writing center studies has yielded important findings about the nature of writing and about writing pedagogy, but it has done so largely based on models of writers and tutors that follow the "normate template" (Hamraie *Building Access,* loc. 525). But the inclusion of disabled writers in writing center research is critical for at least three reasons. First, what disability theorists call "crip ways of knowing" are valuable sources of knowledge in their own right, but they are also critical to the production of access-knowledge. Research on disability can lead to a more accessible world and one with fewer deleterious norms. Second, the ableist bias toward the normate has precluded a real understanding of how writers of varying levels of ability compose, thus limiting the scope of the field's knowledge. Lastly, the exclusion of disabled writers from research has even prevented their inclusion in writing center communities more generally.

Centering should be recursive, not criterial. Contrary to the kind of consumptive access inherent in ADA regulations and retrofits, transformative access posits that something does not become *accessible,* as if accessibility is a state that can be merely achieved and then moved on from. Accessibility is a context-dependent and contingent *process*: things are more or less accessible to different populations at different times, just as the treatment of a specific impairment as a disability is dependent on context. For example, while prosthetic limbs were originally developed to restore function to disabled veterans' limbs, many of those veterans never used prostheses at all, or only used them for cosmetic purposes (Williamson *Accessible*, 9). All this is to say that *accessible design, whether of a prosthetic limb or a writing center, requires research on how disabled users actually use the thing or service so designed.*

Here, the pioneering work of designers and architects, as well as work done by a few writing center researchers, is informative. In the late 1970s, the architect Ray Lifchez and his graduate students at Berkley *began* their design process by soliciting access-knowledge from disabled users on campus and from within the surrounding community, a move that is now clearly prescient in light of the Universal Design movement that began in the 1980s. In Williamson's telling, Lifchez developed a method of accessible design that was "about process, not product," one which constantly sought out and incorporated the access-knowledge of actual disabled users (*Accessible* 131). It is this model that I suggest writing center researchers adapt for their own purposes in all areas of research.

Until now, the centering of disabled users in writing studies research has been almost non-existent, but there have been a few studies that have incorporated the access-knowledge of disabled writers in meaningful ways. The best example of such research is a set of usability tests done by the researchers Brizee et al. with disabled users, which examined the accessibility of Purdue's Online Writing Lab (OWL). Through collaborations with disabled users and campus organizations at Purdue, Brizee et al. conducted user-centered, participatory design-based usability tests that specifically tried to improve the usability and accessibility of the OWL for users with vision impairments. While Brizee et al.'s research focused on usability testing for an online writing lab, their methods could be extended to other modalities, as well, such as to in-person consultations, writing center media, assessment practices, and so on. The applications are virtually endless; there are innumerable possibilities to increase both access-knowledge and the field's knowledge of writing *in toto*.

If writing centers want to become spaces of transformative access—spaces that are therefore "anti-ableist," that push back against academia's ableism—then they must include disabled people in that project. Period. Not only that, but disability theory must inform—must *change*—writing center praxis at every level. To that end, the remaining processes that I outline below are all deeply imbricated with disability theory; this theory must inform praxis and praxis theory.

Coming to Terms with Writing Centers' Ableist Past (and Present)

Writing center historians like Neal Lerner are right to claim that writing centers have been spaces of *both* punishment *and* possibility. What I have tried to argue, though, is that in our attempts to recover the progressive nature of early centers, we mustn't forget that oppressive rhetorical norms formed their very reason for being. This point can be made many times, in many ways, and it will never become redundant. Critical disability studies, with its focus on how norms disable people, puts that history in a new light and generates new knowledge about it. CDS does not merely repackage old critiques of writing centers in terms of disability—it calls to our attention eugenicist and ableist logics, which are often hidden by self-congratulatory talk about how we serve *all* writers. In fact, many writing centers were quite clearly created to *cure* certain writers of their composition disease, which is a pretty harmful way of *serving* them, actually. Cure, let us not forget, is central to the project of eugenics. A preference for writing that is error free, clear, easily digestible—this is a preference for rhetorical normalcy, which is ableist by nature because it wants to cure writers of certain ways of writing, thinking, and being.

So how can we come to terms with this ableist past? One obvious suggestion is to have undergraduate and graduate tutors read histories by Lerner et al. early on in their training so that they can form their own impressions of the original ends of writing centers. But many writing center tutors are already reading this important work. I suggest going one step further by also having tutors read foundational disability studies texts alongside those histories. For reasons that are now clear, Clare's work on cure is particularly generative in this respect. But there are a lot of other DS texts out there, as well. Even exposing tutors to the basic ideas behind the medical and social models of disability could be useful because it would allow them to see the degree to which society's norms disable people with impairments. Again, additions to tutor preparation curriculums should not be viewed as optional add-ons, but as a means to help writing center staff fundamentally re-think tutor preparation by framing the field's past and purpose differently. Taking a critical disability studies approach to writing center work allows us to view the theory and praxis of writing center work differently, and concepts like the social model of disability can be broadly applied to all that we do, not just our work with disabled writers who identify as such.

Including Disabled Writers in Leadership and Research

There is no question that disability status is still a major barrier to inclusion in both professional and educational spheres. According to a 2011 World Health Organization report on disability, labor participation rates for disabled people are on the whole significantly lower than for the nondisabled (11). The situation in higher education is no better. According to the most recent numbers, only 34% of disabled students completed a four-year degree at the national level in the eight-year period between 2009 and 2017 (Newman et al., 48). While the reasons behind this gap—call it the ability opportunity gap—are complex, research suggests one major reason for it is the inaccessibility of campus infrastructure, services, and classroom instruction.

Although disabled college students are guaranteed reasonable accommodations under the Americans with Disabilities Act and section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974, many students find accessing those accommodations cumbersome, and many never seek accommodations in the first place. According to an *Inside Higher Ed* article, up to two thirds of disabled students in the U.S. do not seek accommodations (Grasgreen n.p.). While the reasons for this are complex, disabled students have cited various obstacles ranging from the difficulty of navigating the accommodations procedures themselves, to a lack of knowledge about possible accommodations (Scott 11). For those who do seek them, the actual accommodations they receive are often inadequate (Scott 10).

This context helps us come to a number of related conclusions about the efficacy of the medical model of disability in relation to diversity and inclusion efforts. First, we desperately need to change these ableist systems from the inside out—including the writing center—but in order to do so, we need to include disabled people in that work and at every level of it. We need more disabled writing center directors. We need more disabled writing center researchers. We need to understand the needs of the disabled writers whom we tutor. The list goes on. But the numbers show that in fact, disabled people are excluded from all these areas, and this leads to the second conclusion: the current mechanisms we have in place—accommodations-as-retrofits—are inadequate for the job. This dilemma leads to a number of paradoxical responses from well-meaning university administrators, teachers, and employers, including the claim that bare-minimum accommodations are adequate because people in positions of power don't actually "see" anyone with a disability in our universities, classrooms, or workplaces. It doesn't take a disability studies specialist to undo the knot of this faulty logic: bracketing for a second all the problematic claims about not seeing disability (including the obvious inability to see "invisible disabilities"), if we don't see any disabled people on our campuses, maybe that's because our systems are ableist at their very core.

Perhaps one of the most radical things a writing center can do for disabled writers is move beyond providing only letter-of-the-law accommodations. In the second chapter, I touched on some ways that disabled people can be included in our research, and if we want to move beyond accommodations-as-retrofits, this is where we must begin. But there are other things we can do to include disabled people more broadly in writing center work. We should begin by recruiting and hiring more staff with disabilities. Yet in doing so, we must also turn our research agendas inward in order to better understand through programmatic assessments the unique experiences of disabled writing center professionals. For instance, writing center research has paid very little attention to the effects of ableism on disabled writing center professionals, to the use of non-normative tutoring models by disabled tutors, or to how other identities, such as race and class, affect the experience of disabled writing center tutors and other writing center professionals.

If writing centers take steps such as making public-facing commitments to accessibility, forming accessibility committees, and taking an aggressive stance toward disability advocacy, then there's a good chance that disabled people will notice and feel welcome in our centers. This work is not merely a matter of diversity and inclusion (although it most certainly is that)—it's also a matter of disability justice because it helps to narrow the "ability gap."

Forming Campus Partnerships with Disability Services

Because of its pursuit of disciplinarity, the field of writing center studies has long had a vexed relationship with the idea that the writing center's main mission should be one of service, rather than research. Attempts by institutions to position writing centers as part of a suite of student support services on campus, for instance, have been frequently met with field-wide resistance. Part of this privileging of research over service undoubtedly dates back to calls by North and other early writing center studies scholars to re-brand writing centers as humane writing and composition workshops whose focus is on the development of *all* writers, rather than as the "fix-it shops" of yore. Due to the institutional politics at many universities, the increased levels of funding needed for this re-imagined mission often required further professionalization of the field, and, ultimately, the production of high-quality research by graduate students and tenure-track faculty. There is nothing inherently ableist about the desire for writing centers to professionalize and produce high-quality research. If the field wants its centers to become anti-ableist, however, it cannot entirely reject its "remedial brand," to borrow the titular phrase of one of Lerner's articles (access "Rejecting"). As a field, we must begin centering disabled students in our research and service missions. And while we should reject ableist methods of remediation, such as the quarantining of rhetorical abnormality, we should not reject the spirit of inclusivity behind open admissions and the important role that writing centers have long played in such efforts.

Increasing support for students with disabilities on college campuses across the country will undoubtedly require the expertise of other support services on campus, such as units that work closely with disabled students themselves. That means that writing centers must more readily accept their role as one unit among many in an ecosystem of support services whose main aim should be to increase the retention and persistence rates of students. At Michigan State University, for example, the office of the Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education announced the launch of the Student Learning and Success Initiative back in 2017, the main goal of which was to increase retention and persistence rates (Chivukula n.p.). The Initiative has had a modest impact so far: 81% of undergraduate students who entered MSU in 2013 earned their degrees by 2019, up from 80% of the cohort entering in 2012 ("Graduation Rates"). These numbers, which we should celebrate, might make us forget why the Initiative was created in the first place: to close the opportunity gap that exists for the 20% or so of students who did not graduate in 2019, most of whom were from underrepresented groups. According to one recent press release, the Initiative is particularly concerned with closing the opportunity gap for "first-generation, lower income, Black, Latinx, Native American and/or international students" (Largent, n.p.) Noticeably absent from this list, however, are students with disabilities. According to the most recent numbers, only 34% of disabled students completed a four-year degree at the national level in the eight-year period between 2009 and 2017 (Newman et al., 48). While the reasons behind this gap—call it the ability opportunity gap—are complex, research suggests one major reason for it is the inaccessibility of campus infrastructure, services, and classroom instruction. Writing centers need to do their part to address these issues, not only by becoming more accessible to the students who seek their services, but also by becoming leaders in closing the ability gap.

Writing centers have a role to play in closing that gap for students with disabilities, but in order to fulfill this role, they must partner with other support services on campus, and, in particular, form partnerships with disability services. Such partnerships could lead to at least two important outcomes. First, they can ensure that writing center media and services undergo routine accessibility audits, a process that most centers are not capable of doing on their own. Broadly speaking, an accessibility audit would closely examine whether the space(s) of a writing center is accessible to a wide range of disabled people, as well as its media and services. The assumption that such a task could be done without the frequent input of disabled people or accessibility experts is little more than hubris and ableism, pure and simple. Unfortunately, writing centers are just as subject as other units on campus to the delusion that mere adherence to the ADA means that a space is accessible. In fact, in a report produced by the National Center for College Students with Disabilities, a qualitative research study that hosted focus groups across the country with disabled students, one theme that emerged was the inaccessibility of support services on campus, which "are typically assumed to be available to all students" (Scott 13).[8] In the study, one participant singled out the inaccessibility of career services on their campus. "So what's the relationship between the campus, the DS [disability services] office, and the employment [services]," the student asked. "The employment material is [designed for] non-disabled students" (ibid.). We should not assume that writing centers are designed any differently from other inaccessible spaces on campus; in order to figure out how to make them more accessible, we must conduct research with disabled students and tap into others' expertise.

Another potential goal of these partnerships could be the development and implementation of more consistent and up-to-date training for writing center staff that focuses on how to better support staff and writers with disabilities. While impairment-specific training must clearly be avoided, robust discussions about accessibility should not be—disability is not a dirty

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[8] Notice that *all* again?

word. Discussions of disability and accessibility should be a normal and ongoing part of tutor preparation; in fact, discussions about *all* the work of a writing center, both internal and external (i.e., not just tutoring), should incorporate disability and accessibility in meaningful ways. For instance, while disability support services are sometimes asked to provide new tutors with impairment-specific training on how to work with students with x, y, or z disabilities, their expertise might be better used to help a center's media team create an accessible digital presence. A deep integration between writing centers and disability services—rather than cursory and perfunctory trainings—would help transform writing centers into spaces where accessibility considerations are built into everything they do, rather than the secondary considerations they all too often are.

While there are clear benefits from partnerships with disability support services, there are also major obstacles to forming those partnerships and ensuring their ongoing, mutual success. Unfortunately, the fact that disability support services are, by their very nature, predicated on the medical model of disability is unavoidable. In contrast, given their relative isolation from the bureaucratic and legal machinations of the university, writing center professionals are freer to operate based on the social model than their colleagues in disability support offices (at least in theory). These two approaches are simply incompatible, and if this incompatibility is not addressed early on in a partnership, it could seriously hinder its success. To help prevent miscommunications and misunderstandings, leaders from writing centers and disability support services should not only have frank discussions about the goals and aims of their partnerships, but they should generally approach them with a spirit of reciprocity and interdependence. To that end, centers that have liaison or embedded-tutor programs should consider offering to extend those programs to their disability support services office. Similarly, disability support services could permanently embed an "accessibility" fellow in their university's writing center, and these two liaisons could work together on accessibility related initiatives in both units. Such bidirectional partnerships could help foster both reciprocity and a spirit of independence, both of which are crucial to furthering disability justice.

Embracing Interdependence

In order for writing centers to become radically accessible, they must do things like privilege disabled subjects in their research, come to terms with their ableist past, include disabled people in the work of the center, and form partnerships with campus disability services. But they must also practice what Black feminist bell hooks calls an “ethic of love” (hooks 243). For hooks, love is not just amorous or familial—it is a kind of ethical engagement with the other that, crucially, resists dominating them. In hooks’ ethic of love, I hear echoes of the related concepts of interdependence and access intimacy, values that are crucial to what disability activist circles call disability justice, and which I suggest writing centers adopt in all of their practices. Disability justice is a response by activists such as Sins Invalid to the shortcomings of the disability rights movement. In contrast to how that movement has approached accessibility, a disability justice framework centers identities that are intersectional, communities that are interdependent, and access that is collective and transformative. In turn, these commitments are used to liberate disabled people and to fight against ableism. Disability justice does not merely accommodate people with disabilities or mainstream them—it (re)makes the world so that it centers the needs and lived experience of disabled people.

If writing centers are to take this approach, then they must also adopt a radically different approach to understanding how disability affects writing. Impairment-specific approaches to accessibility that ignore writers who are multiply disabled, or ignore how disability intersects with race, class, gender, and other identities, do little to change ableist structures. Similarly, a disability justice-informed approach to writing center work calls for us to find new ways to value and practice interdependence. This means seriously reimagining, or even doing away with, many of the nondirective tutoring practices that center the individual writer and have been used to form the pillars of our field’s praxis.

Writing center scholars such as Nancy M. Grimm have already made the case that when tutors use nondirective tutoring strategies—which since Stephen North have been used to make "better writers, not better writing"—they may inadvertently perpetuate racism and white supremacy because they make the assumption "that all writers…already have in their heads what they need" ("Retheorizing" 84). Now, writing center scholars like Babcock have also begun to critique nondirective tutoring as a way of upholding ableism within higher education, as well (Babcock, "Interpreted" 215). On a practical level, this means that tutors should embrace directive tutoring strategies, such as sometimes framing feedback in the imperative, rather than interrogative mood (Johnson 39).

Finally, in a disability justice framework, access is must be "intimate," which is closely related to an ethic of love but not necessarily identical to it. Access intimacy, according to disability activist Mia Mingus:

> is that elusive, hard to describe feeling when someone else "gets" your access needs. The kind of eerie comfort that your disabled self feels with someone on a purely access level. Sometimes it can happen with complete strangers, disabled or not, or sometimes it can be built over years. It could also be the way your body relaxes and opens up with someone when all your access needs are being met. ("Access Intimacy: The Missing Link," n.p.)

Access intimacy can only be achieved if writing center professionals approach their work with *all* students (but especially disabled students) with an ethic of love. This means not waiting to think about disability until the last minute, when some thing or service has been pointed out as inaccessible by a disabled person. It also means not relying solely on the accommodations for an individual disabled student provided by disability services. That's because access intimacy is also related to what Mingus has called "collective access," which is a model of access that is mixed-ability, proactive, and communal: it requires *all* members of the writing center community to continuously work together in order to build (and rebuild) an accessible writing center. One can only imagine what a research methodology based on an ethic of love might look like, but at the very least, it would likely be less exploitative, rapacious, and superficially ethical than the standards currently in place.

A commitment to collective and intimate access requires accountability from able-bodied allies and institutional partners, and it's not something that writing centers are likely to get right all the time. This brings us back to the other sense of the word ethic: it is a set of principles that help guide an action. An ethic is an orientation toward the world. An ethic of love that enables transformative access in the writing center is, therefore, an orientation toward disabled people themselves—an orientation that creates access that is both intimate and interdependent.

Coda: Difficult Bodies

For most of my early life, I was told that my language was difficult to understand. I was led to believe that this difficulty was due not only to a difficult body (I wasn't born with enough oxygen to my brain), but also to a difficult mind. My diagnosis, a communication disorder, was part of a more general learning disability, one rooted as much in my speech as in my mind. Much later, as an adult, I was still told that my language was difficult (and specifically that my writing was difficult) because it wasn't clear, wasn't organized. That difficulty has never really gone away, only changed. Yet when I tell people about my diagnosis, I'm often met with disbelief, even from graduate students. *But you're so smart, so articulate*, they say—clear evidence that in an ableist world, intelligence is directly linked to language. Now that I pass as rhetorically normal, people think I must have "overcome" my disability through good old American hard work, a critical trope disability studies refer to as the "supercrip," which Joseph Shapiro described the "inspirational disabled person" (Shapiro, qtd. in Schalk 73). As I have worked through the ideas in this thesis, however, I have begun to believe more firmly in something that was only inchoate when I was younger: that we must value difficult bodies and minds, ones that don’t adhere to norms, that don’t overcome.

In her essay “Values of Difficulty,” Judith Butler notes that “to pass through what is difficult and unfamiliar is an essential part of critical thinking within the academy today” (200). “One of the most important ways to call into question the status quo,” Butler claims, “is by engaging language in nonconventional ways” (ibid.). Although Butler has in mind the difficult language of critical theorists like Adorno and Benjamin, not the prattle of a communicatively disordered child, her theorization of their difficult language gives me a vocabulary to understand my own. For Butler, difficult language makes us question the very conception of a rhetorical norm. “Whose language assumes the status of ‘common’ language,” she asks, “who places the ‘common,’ and what uses of language are thereby ruled out as uncommon or, indeed, unintelligible?” (201). For Butler, clear and distinct language, hidden behind the “common,” is actually what obscures meaning, not difficult language.

The Russian American linguist Roman Jakobson sought the limits of human language in what he called the “apex of babble,” which he thought could be found in infants (Heller-Roazen 9). Infants, Jakobson thought, are “capable of everything” linguistically (10). Long before they learn their mother tongue, they are capable of the most astounding “‘consonants with the most varied points of articulation, palatalized and rounded consonants, sibilants, affricates, clicks, complex vowels, diphthongs, and so forth’” (Jakobson, qtd. in Heller-Roazen 9). Jakobson thought that by learning their mother tongue, they gave up this ecstatic cornucopia of linguistic diversity. “Perhaps the loss of a limitless phonetic arsenal,” Heller-Roazen concludes, “is the price a child must pay for the papers that grant him citizenship in the community of a single tongue” (11).

Rhetorical normalcy, and all that it entails, is the cost of naturalization in this "community of a single tongue." While rhetorically abnormal people are certainly not infants, Jakobson's theory points out that normality comes at a great cost to individual expression. This has important ramifications for us as writing teachers, both in the classroom and the writing center. What if writing teachers and consultants engaged with the "uncommon" and "unintelligible" aspects of their students' language more critically, with an ethic of love? Language standards become ideological when they cause reality to become "rendered immutable, imprisoned through repeated kinds of language use," according to Butler (201). "Language not only communicates to us about a ready-made world" she says, but it "gives us a world" (202). By critically engaging with rhetorical normalcy, we ask who can dwell in that world, who is granted citizenship, and why.

While Butler has the difficult language of critical theory in mind (and her own notoriously difficult prose, of course), there is no reason why the "difficult" language of disabled writers cannot also do critical, subversive work. Rhetoricians would do well to turn to the fields of literary and aesthetic theory, and in particular, poetics, for models of how less rarified uncommon language can become part of a critical praxis. In the essay "The Stutter of Form" by the poet and scholar Craig Dworkin, for instance, Dworkin explores what he calls a "poetics of stutter," described by him as the "moment at which the stutter moves from being merely descriptive to becoming an integral part of the formal structure of a text" (167). For Dworkin, stuttering isn't aberrant, abnormal speech, but rather a form of embodied communication that challenges "the ideology of referentially communicative language" (166). It's also a ghost in the language machine. The stutter is a kind of *la perruque*: the body uses the resources of speech to do the body's work, which is so often erased in symbolic communication. The stutter is an eruption, or an implosion, of the symbolic order. Stuttering impedes “the facile consumption of language,” which is encouraged by uncritical and unspecific calls for clear language use (182).

What are we calling for as writing teachers and tutors when we call for “clarity?” Little more than the disappearance of words altogether. Oftentimes, by calling for clarity, we are calling for a prose that is White, unmarked, easily consumed, and co-opted. We are committing the very fallacy that Butler warns us against: we imagine a language that has infinite travel, that ignores what she calls the “context of a multicultural linguistic condition” (204). In so doing, we are not only asking for an invisible language, but invisible bodies, invisible minds, invisible bodyminds.

In contrast, a language that stutters, that is difficult, draws attention to itself because of its refusal to cloak itself in the ex-nomination of unmarked, normative discourse. It revels in its own disorder—a disorder that, because it demands readers notice it (because of its very opacity), becomes a kind of ordering.

I have come to value the difficulty of my own language, body, and mind. I value difficult bodies, difficult minds, difficult people, difficult writing, difficult limbs that flail, difficult disabled students, difficult Black and brown students, difficult criticisms, difficult subject positions, difficult privilege, difficult. A critical disability studies approach to writing pedagogy asks us to value difficulty and use it to subvert this ableist world.

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