Cripping Academic Theatre: Philosophies of Access in Theatre Education

by Catherine Peckinpaugh Vrtis

Catherine Vrtis is a queer, disabled scholar, educator, and artist, and has been a disabled

student. From this perspective, they will discuss how ideologies of im/possibility keep theatre

education a hostile place for students in populations subject to historical and ongoing

oppression, particularly disabled students, and suggest an approach to inclusion based in Mia

Mingus's philosophy of Access Intimacy rather than legal requirements or funding debates.

The professional theatre demands hypercapacitated workers. This demonstrated perhaps

most clearly by the much vaunted "triple threat" master of musical theatre who is expected to be

a top-level singer, dancer, and actor – with the body of a professional athlete and the face of a

matinee idol. This does not make for an industry philosophically dedicated to inclusivity, a fact

discussed at length across the field, most notably by scholars Ryan Donovan, in his 2023

Broadway Bodies: A Critical History of Conformity, and Sam Yates, in work related to his

currently in-process monograph *Cripping Broadway: Producing Disability in the American*

Musical. Furthermore, the compounding social forces of racism, misogyny, heterocissexism,

ableism, and other forms of bigotry, as well as the centrality of popular culture in the spread of

these toxic beliefs, add exclusionary ideologies to an already exclusive occupation. The field is changing thanks to the labor and activism of innumerable artists, but the pace is slow slowly and erratically at best. This quiet revolution exploded into public view with the June 8, 2020 publication of "We See You, White American Theatre," and the ongoing reckoning provoked by the challenge presented by the signatories. Changing the future of this industry is an ongoing, multifaceted project, yet one element is clear: in order to change the profession, it is necessary to change theatre education.

To that end, developing an inclusive, equitable approach to theatre education means resisting not only the damaging norms of the professional theatre world, but also the similar issues of exclusivity and bias in higher education, as well as the additional factors of collapsing tenure lines, lack of institutional support, demands for free labor, and a weight of tradition that tends towards stagnation in teaching methods. Despite these significant challenges, theatre education in both pre-professional and liberal arts programs can be made accessible to all students. However, expansion of access does not happen by accident; it takes systematic, sustained effort to do so. Additionally, the existing legal guarantees of equity in education are under threat from extremists in governments from the national to local level. The courts and legislatures cannot fix the problem alone, even if the current laws stay in place. Other, fluidly adjustable and community focused approaches to student need and accommodation are necessary for building a better future of theatre in higher education.

Despite their flaws, however, the laws requiring educational access for all students serve as a valuable instrument for forcing exclusionary institutions to provide at least some basic services. Since it passed in 1973, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act has required all schools and other education programs receiving federal funds to provide access to students with

disabilities, protections expanded by the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990. However, these promises of full and equal education have some sharp limitations, as "Accommodations and modifications of policies and practices are not required when it would fundamentally alter the nature of the service, program, or activity or give rise to an undue financial or administrative burden."[1] This exception, subject to significant interpretation by educational institutions, can profoundly alter disabled students' ability to access education. Similar limitations appear in Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which bans discrimination in education by reason of race, color, or national origin, and in Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, which likewise bans discrimination for reason of sex or gender, and the various other federal, state, and local laws banning discrimination in education. Even when the statutes' requirements are not waived for causing "undue burden" to the institution or for not covering the individuals or situations under discussion (which may even only be possible to establish via expensive and time-consuming legal challenges) the resolutions offered are usually partial at best.

As an example of the flaws with the statutory approach to providing access, when I was in graduate school and first using a wheelchair, the path to my program's seminar room for abled students was down a single flight of stairs. The wheelchair accessible path, meanwhile, required me to exit the theatre building and cross over to the music building, go down one elevator, take a hall to a second elevator, ride down again, cross under the space between buildings via a long hallway, then take a wheelchair lift up from the cross-under to the theatre building basement's floor level, and finally take that hallway down to the seminar room. Unsurprisingly, the trip took me considerably more time and effort than required by the rest of my cohort. While the ADA-

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[1] "What are a public or private college-university's responsibilities to students with disabilities?," ADA National Network, Accessed October 15, 2023, https://adata.org/faq/what-are-public-or-private-college-universitys-responsibilities-students-disabilities.

required elevators and wheelchair lift made my class attendance possible, a basic requirement for inclusion that prior generations were routinely denied, the results were far from equitable. However, even this bare minimum of legal requirement version of access is not always available; I have experienced outright physical exclusion only to be dared to sue and threatened with harassment for trying to "shut down" popular spaces that have decided to save money by ignoring the ADA. I have likewise been blamed for "making things difficult for everyone else" by expecting club events to take place in spaces I can access. Ideologies of access fixed on meeting only the minimum legal requirements, with its embedded demand that victims of bias seek judicial remedy for exclusion or other rights violation, cannot create justice.

Furthermore, the unique nature of the performing arts, which locates the site and product of labor on the body of the artist, profoundly complicates the likelihood of success should legal remedy be pursued. As legal scholar Russell Robinson notes in a report on patterns of hiring in the film industry, "casting directors take into account race and sex in a way that would be blatantly illegal in any other industry."[2] While Robinson argues that the exclusion of minoritized performers normalized in the field regularly exceeds what is actually allowed by laws protecting artistic integrity, proving that any particular casting decision is the result of illegal bias is all but impossible. The equivocation between the performer and their performance offers endless excuses for companies, directors, and academic programs to claim their exclusion of unwanted students or employee bodyminds to protect the integrity of the work. Even those whose work is done offstage, including writers, directors, designers, composers, and technicians, experience significant bias in hiring, and likewise this pattern is poorly hidden behind legally protected

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[2] Carl DiOrio, "Study: Bias Suits Possible for Minority Actors," *Backstage* (November 5, 2019), https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/study-bias-suits-possible-minority-actors-35062/.

artistic decisions. The courts are not a viable place to resolve these issues; if theatre as a field is going to improve its equity problem, it must first embrace other, non-legalistic philosophies of inclusion.

Fortunately, there are a broad range of approaches to promoting access and opportunity beyond that of anti-discrimination legislation and lawsuits. However, before considering the various models, it is important to consider the language used to describe these programs. The heavily politicized term Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, or DEI, is used in two very different ways. The first usage is as a general term for all philosophies and programs which attempt to create a more just future for those historically and currently subject to systemic bias in American systems. This is the use preferred by Trump, Project 2025, and other "anti-DEI" forces attempting to reinstate legal oppression of specific populations in the United States. The second definition of DEI is narrow and specific, referring to a particular set of beliefs and practices for decreasing the experience of bias in education and employment, developed in the 1990s and 2000s. This approach, which is also known as Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA) and by several other variant terms and acronyms, begins with proactively recruiting members of excluded populations into education and employment, and then working to provide more positive, less biased experiences for those matriculated or hired. Characteristically, it embraces a combination of short-term trainings, hiring quotas, and corporate grievance systems in executing its goals, though individual organizations may reject some of these techniques or include other approaches within their programming. The elision between the second definition and the first promotes miscommunication and resentment in the broader discussion of achieving justice for all people. Thus, the second, more specific definition of DEI/A will be used in this paper.

Moving beyond the DEI/A model, other common approaches to creating equality include Learning Styles, Cultural Competency, and Universal Design. I have personally encountered all of these techniques being promoted multiple times at academic theatre conferences within the last five years, though not always under those names. In context of this promotion of these particular methods, I think it is important to examine each approach in detail, as each has its advantages and disadvantages. Finally, I will end this paper by proposing Access Intimacy, a philosophy of inclusion based in intersectional disability justice, as a model for a new, more flexible approach to achieving educational equity. While it can be applied in any classroom, it works particularly well in theatre education due to its emphasis on creating a shared sense of emotional safety to allow for vulnerability and risk.

Developed by businesses in response to expensive lawsuits resulting from exclusionary hiring practices and cultures of harassment, DEI/A programming is designed to limit corporate responsibility for employees' actions by establishing that the companies have done their due diligence in ensuring non-discrimination laws are obeyed. These policies are also designed to maintain the same existing power structures while creating the appearance of change. Lily Zheng argues the following in the *Harvard Business Review*:

> Organizations large and small are often eager to fund one-time, "inspirational" events to "raise awareness" of inequity, but far less enthusiastic about medium-to-long term interventions that change incentive structures, shift the balance of power and resources, or reimagine personnel processes like evaluation, promotion, and conflict resolution.[3]

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[3] Lily Zheng, "The Failure of the DEI-Industrial Complex," *Harvard Business Review* (December 1, 2022), https://hbr.org/2022/12/the-failure-of-the-dei-industrial-complex.

Not only does this approach fail to create positive change, it also tends to promote reactionary

anger from members of the dominant group:

> Unconscious bias training rarely changes actual behaviors and has little impact on
>
> explicit biases. A meta-analysis of hundreds of prejudice-reduction interventions found
>
> few that unambiguously achieved their goals. Many popular interventions run the risk of
>
> backlash, strong adverse reactions that sustain or even worsen the inequity that
>
> practitioners attempt to eliminate. Even "the business case for diversity," a decades-old
>
> rhetorical framing and justification for DEI work, has been found to backfire on
>
> marginalized groups' feelings of belonging and weaken support for diversity programs
>
> when organizational performance drops.[4]

This form of "classical" DEI/A is no more effective in educational settings than in corporate

ones. Instead, lessons in the history of exclusion and the practice of inclusion must be integrated

into the entire pedagogical structure if they are to create change. Even then, the goal should

remain focused on creating a safe and supportive space for students to learn and work regardless

of individual characteristics rather than on reducing prejudicial beliefs. Reduction in the personal

biases among employees and students, to the degree that it is achievable at all, is of secondary

importance to ensuring discriminatory actions are not tolerated.

Turning to specific pedagogical techniques such as the tailoring lessons to multiple

specific "learning styles" (visual, auditory, reading/writing, kinesthetic), a standard requirement

in primary and secondary schools, is less dominant but still fairly common in undergraduate

education. Unfortunately, it is likewise useless at best. Extensive research, summarized by Cindi

May in *Scientific American*, has found that despite widespread belief by both students and

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[4] Zheng, n.p.

educators, learning is a complex process involving multiple forms of engagement with information determined primarily by the particular subject in question rather than an overarching ideal form for a given individual. Indeed, over-dedication to one form of information engagement is often counterproductive, inhibiting learning rather than ensuring it.[5] In short, no one can learn a performing art without actually performing the art, though even this most "kinesthetic" form of learning is best achieved for all students via a mixture of methods tailored to the lesson content rather than the individual.

Similarly idealistic in its development and problematic in its reality, the pedagogical philosophy of Cultural Competency, particularly associated with medical education, easily and too often shifts from countering stereotype to reinscribing it. Largely based on the work of Terry L. Cross and his co-writers in the 1989 *Toward a Culturally Competent System of Care: A Monograph on Effective Services for Minority Children Who Are Severely Emotionally Disturbed*, the United States Center for Disease Control offers this summary of the philosophy:

> Cultural and linguistic competence is a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals that enables effective work in cross-cultural situations. "Culture" refers to integrated patterns of human behavior that include the language, thoughts, communications, actions, customs, beliefs, values, and institutions of racial, ethnic, religious, or social groups. "Competence" implies having the capacity to function effectively as an individual and an organization within the context of the cultural beliefs, behaviors, and needs presented by consumers and their communities.[6]

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[5] Cindi May, "The Problem with 'Learning Styles,'" *Scientific American* (May 29, 2018), https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-problem-with-learning-styles/.

[6] Center for Disease Control, "Cultural Competence in Health and Human Services," Accessed October 16, 2023, https://npin.cdc.gov/pages/cultural-competence.

While recognition of cultural diversity and respect for non-normate, non-dominant populations is important for educators at all levels. This is exemplified by the move away from acting programs requiring students to affect a Mid-Atlantic or Transatlantic accent and instead treating all vocal patterns as equally legitimate linguistic forms. Yet, in practice, Cultural Competency tends to reify stereotypes by asserting expected, pre-determined "cultural norms" based on an individual's characteristics, especially those of race or ethnicity.

Helen-Maria Lekas, Kerstin Pahl, and Crystal Fuller Lewis argue this reality in their paper "Rethinking Cultural Competence: Shifting to Cultural Humility":

> Cultural competence trainings assume that most US providers are White non-Hispanic, male, heteronormative, and English speaking, and seek to expose them to the cultures of *othe*r social groups (eg, Black Americans, Spanish-speaking Latinx, or LGBTQ+ persons). Moreover, because of the pervasive health inequities by race and ethnicity, these trainings often focus on familiarizing a prototypical White non-Hispanic provider to communicate with non-White patients who are assumed to embrace common beliefs and experiences solely based on their race and/or ethnicity.[7]

The dangers of such deterministic, Otherizing messages about "cultural norms" are best demonstrated via the October 2017 furor over the pain management section of *Nursing: A Concept-Based Approach to Learning*. This commonly used textbook purported to be teaching nursing students to respect the cultural needs and backgrounds of their patients; yet it actually taught a series of egregious, offensive stereotypes for students to memorize. Examples include "Jews may be vocal and demanding of assistance," "Blacks often report higher pain intensity

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[7] Helen-Maria Lekas, Kerstin Pahl, and Crystal Fuller Lewis, "Rethinking Cultural Competence: Shifting to Cultural Humility," *Health Services Insights* 13, (2020), https://doi.org/10.1177/1178632920970580.

than other cultures," and "Muslim clients must endure pain as a sign of faith."[8] No matter how "well intended," the strong tendency for Cultural Competence to become Cultural Bigotry sharply limits the usefulness of this approach.

Positive intentions resulting in harmful outcomes is also seen in Universal Design for Learning (UDL), a philosophy that expands the architectural and urban planning model of Universal Design (UD) to pedagogical methodology. Universal Design principles seek to make public spaces innately accessible to all people, as is explained by the Centre for Universal Design in Ireland, established in 2007 by the National Disability Authority:

> Universal Design is the design and composition of an environment so that it can be accessed, understood and used to the greatest extent possible by all people regardless of their age, size, ability or disability…If an environment is accessible, usable, convenient and a pleasure to use, everyone benefits. By considering the diverse needs and abilities of all throughout the design process, universal design creates products, services and environments that meet peoples' needs. Simply put, universal design is good design.[9]

Universal Design, at its core, seeks to create spaces - as well as products such as cars, home appliances, clothing, and more – that can be easily and intuitively accessed regardless of physical, psychiatric, neuro-cognitive, or any other kind of debility, variance, or difference, so that all bodyminds have their needs met to the fullest extent. In practice, of course, UD is a series of compromises, as the profound variety of forms and needs represented within the human species mean that few, if any, objects or places are equally usable and useful to all people. Despite this fact, universality as the intended goal of environmental, industrial, and product

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[8] Pearson Prentice Hall, *Nursing: A Concept-Based Approach to Learning*, 2nd ed. (London: Pearson, 2014), 1: 161.
[9] Centre for Excellence in Universal Design, "What is Universal Design?" National Disability Authority, https://universaldesign.ie/what-is-universal-design.

design is a far more just approach than designing for the normate population to the exclusion of everyone else.

In principle, extending this philosophy to education is a worthwhile goal. Certainly its ideal deployment, synopsized by disability scholar Jay Dolmage as "the use of multiple and flexible strategies to address the needs of all students,"[10] is worth pursuing. However, the execution tends to be profoundly lacking in practice. CAST, formerly the Center for Applied Special Technology, began developing what would become Universal Design for Learning following its 1984 founding as a small program experimenting with using computers in special education. By the mid-1990s those experiments had been refined into a standardized product complete with fixed policies and rules for implementation. Sales of commercial UDL products began in 1997.[11]

The major components of UDL are Engagement, Representation, and Action and Expression,[12] each of which are to be addressed in a range of ways to first Access, then Build, and finally Internalize these principles. UDL competitors, Universal Design for Instruction and Universal Instructional Design, are nearly identical in ideology despite using slightly different language to describe their techniques as well as making legally distinct products available for purchase. Promotion of UDL in higher education has increased over the last five to ten years. This can be seen in the widespread embrace of techniques including the extensive use of multimedia materials, flexible or non-existent attendance and due date policies, no timed work, choice of evaluation type, and opportunities to repeat assessments. Some of what is described as UDL is vitally important (and legally mandated), such as access for wheelchairs and other

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[10] Jay Timothy Dolmage, *Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 124.
[11] CAST, "Timeline of Innovation," https://www.cast.org/impact/timeline-innovation.
[12] CAST, "The UDL Guidelines," https://udlguidelines.cast.org/.

assistive devices, sign interpretation, captioning (known as Communication Access Realtime Translation or CART service), tolerance of service animals, and so on. Unfortunately, other elements more distinctive to UDL are less beneficial. One fundamental issue with the practice is its lack of any scientific grounding despite emphatic claims to the contrary. Michael P. A. Murphy explains this about UDL practices:

> UDL is consciously framed as a scientific approach, and advocates often state that the three networks of learning were identified through "advances in neuroscience"...Rather than citation of scientific articles, as might be expected given the strong claims of being grounded in neuroscience, the authors present images altered from an introductory neuroscience textbook...The neurological basis of the theory is itself a hypothesis and *not* a fact.[13]

Furthermore, favorite UDL techniques fail to even rise to the level of hypothesis as Murphy notes here:

> The claim that students know best and can self-select to activities that best suit their learning style has been resoundingly rejected as a neuromyth…While UDL's general advocacy of scaffolding skill development follows the scholarly consensus, the specific argument that digital scaffolding can isolate specific skills to be assessed removes the opportunity for students to develop an understanding of how skills are applied in complex contexts. Finally, the constant advocacy for screen-based classrooms ignores research demonstrating reduced comprehension when students read on screens versus paper materials.[14]

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[13] Michael P. A. Murphy, "Belief without evidence? A policy research note on Universal Design for Learning," *Policy Futures in Education* 19, no. 1 (January, 2021),https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1478210320940206
[14] Murphy, ibid.

Additionally, UDL tends to recreate the problems of the debunked "learning styles" pedagogical approach:

Both learning styles and UDL lack evidence showing their implementation increases student learning…both learning styles and UDL emphasize the importance of diversity, rather than universality in how people learn…because of their emphasis of diversity in learning, both assert that instruction should match students' specific ways of learning…to justify the existence of students' unique learning needs, both rely on overgeneralizations from neuroscience.[15]

Finally, the standard removal of attendance policies and assignment deadlines in UDL programming has been demonstrated to be counterproductive in student learning. Susan D'Agostino explains this in an article in *Inside Higher Education*:

Short-term deadlines serve as motivators for accomplishing accessible tasks. They also imbue each step in the process of completing a longer-term project with more meaning, according to [researcher on student procrastination Frode] Svartdal. When professors steer clear of single, far-off deadlines, they keep the focus on the course content.[16]

Counterintuitively, students with disabilities including hyperactivity, attention deficit disorder, anxiety, and depression, as well as students facing significant additional demands from long work hours to family responsibilities, consistently produce higher quality work and achieve deeper learning through the scaffolding of smaller tasks with individual deadlines building to a complete final work. This successful practice, in contrast to receiving one, far off deadline for a

[15] Guy Boysen, "Lessons (Not) Learned: The Troubling Similarities between Learning Styles and Universal Design for Learning," *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Psychology* 7, no. 1 (May 2021), https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/stl0000280.

[16] Susan D'Agostino, "'Procrastination-Friendly' Academe Needs More Deadlines," *Inside Higher Education* (February 9, 2023), https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2023/02/10/should-professors-eliminate-deadlines.

completed project, is due to the still-developing executive function of typically aged college and university undergraduates.[17]

It must be noted that while the most orthodox versions of DEI/A, learning styles, Cultural Competency, and Universal Design for Learning create at least as many problems as they resolve, there are valuable ideas embedded within all of them. The answer to the harm of offering no deadlines or attendance policies is not the rigid requirements of historical educational practices, which long experience has already demonstrated can be devastating for students with any needs or responsibilities beyond those of the wealthy, abled, young White men the American university system, was initially created to benefit. Likewise, concern for how Cultural Competence methods can teach bigotry is no reason to resist open discussion of topics including cultural difference, academic code switching, and representation. The inaccuracy of learning styles as a fixed property unique to individual students across disciplines is no reason to abandon the practice of providing classroom materials in multiple media as a way to increase access. It is important to resist the appeal of brightly colored pictures of brains and unsupported claims of scientific proof of pedagogical efficacy, especially when those are used as part of marketing for an expensive product that promises to contain all the answers to the challenges of teaching in an unjust society. Still, any set of methods that work for an individual instructor or their students should be embraced when useful and set aside when not.

Finally, I would like to introduce a philosophy of access taken from the activist spaces of the Disability Rights Movement, which I find tremendously valuable when applied to educational goals: Mia Mingus's model of Access Intimacy. Mingus is an activist, educator, and

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[17] D'Agostino, n.p.

writer, and her personal blog on her disability justice work serves as a space of rigorous theory in practice of disability inclusion. She first described Access Intimacy in 2011:

> Access intimacy 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…Access intimacy is also the intimacy I feel with many other disabled and sick people who have an automatic understanding of access needs out of our shared similar lived experience of the many different ways ableism manifests in our lives.[18]

This ineffable, hard to describe feeling can perhaps best be summed up as being seen and valued for who you are as a disabled person, rather than dismissed as a social and legal problem that must be solved by existing in space and by needing - and expecting - the required accommodations that are too often only offered begrudgingly and minimally, if at all. Access intimacy can happen within abled spaces and abled communities when disabled individuals are embraced and supported proactively and generously; it is not something that can only be found in disability culture or in disability justice communities.

Access Intimacy may be hard to describe but its effects are profound. It is most visible when missing, at least for me. For example, while a small inconvenience in the grand scheme of ableist oppression, my experiences attending academic conferences in a wheelchair have routinely left me yearning for Access Intimacy. Being forced out of the designated audience space due to lack of wheelchair parking or having to park in front of the rest of the audience, or in the aisle in the way, or having to fight my bodily limits to move chairs so I can physically fit my wheels in the room - all occurrences I have negotiated at multiple times within the same event and across multiple events hosted by multiple academic and professional theatre

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[18] Mia Mingus, "Access Intimacy: The Missing Link," *Leaving Evidence* (blog), May 5, 2011, https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/05/05/access-intimacy-the-missing-link.

organizations - makes it clear that I and those like me are at best tolerated as a disruption to the

"normal" flow of business. These moments are humiliating distractions from the work I do; they

make my body and my wheels into a freak performance disrupting the experience of the intended

audience. More frustrating for me personally, the official and unofficial social events at

conferences routinely take place at bars in which everyone stands or huddles around high top

tables. In a wheelchair my head is under the table, my drink awkwardly held in my hand, while

the actual work of collaboration happens quite literally over my head. It is hard to think of a

clearer message of the planners' indifference to disabled scholars and theatre workers. Even

actual hate would involve being seen, and it starts to seem comparatively desirable when I'm

sitting under a table occasionally being tripped over. Still, even in those uncomfortable

conditions, Access Intimacy can sometimes be conjured - like when someone kneels down on the

bar floor to join me at my height, sharing my experience and meeting me in my exile. In the face

of dehumanizing erasure of presence from abled spaces, Access Intimacy blooms through being

known and being valued in our whole beings, disabilities included, yet never eclipsing our

individuality.

As a model for disability inclusion, Access Intimacy is valuable but its true revolutionary

potential was made clear by Mingus's expansions to her views in a 2017 speech at the San

Francisco State University Paul K. Longmore Institute on Disability. A brief bio in her

influential blog's "About" section makes clear Mingus's experiences in multiple

marginalizations of her identities, a fact that drives her emphatically intersectional approach to

activism:

> She is a queer physically disabled korean [*sic*] transracial and transnational adoptee
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> raised in the Caribbean. She works for community, interdependence and home for all of

us, not just some of us, and longs for a world where disabled children can live free of violence, with dignity and love.[19]

This intersectional position drove her to offer a broader perspective on Access Intimacy as a tool for justice and inclusion:

> For me, I understand Access Intimacy as something that can transform ordinary access into a tool for liberation, instead of merely reinforcing "inclusion" and "equality"…I want us to tap into the transformative powers of disability, instead of only gaining access to the current system…We don't simply want to join the ranks of the privileged, we want to challenge and dismantle those ranks and question why some people are consistently at the bottom.[20]

This refusal to accept existing power structures combines with an approach to access that demands interdependence and co-equal sharing, wherein hierarchy is explicitly rejected and the habits of the dominant class are not privileged:

> **The power of Access Intimacy is that it reorients our approach from one where disabled people are expected to squeeze into able bodied people's world, and instead *calls upon able bodied people to inhabit our world.*** [Emphasis original] …Access Intimacy continues to be a game-changer, a way to queer access into a tool we can use to get free. It has been a way to shift and queer how I and others understand disability and ableism. And because of the inherent interdependence of access intimacy—the "we" of access intimacy—it has transformed the kinds of conversations I am able to have with

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[19] Mia Mingus, "About," *Leaving Evidence* (blog), https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/about-2/.

[20] Mia Mingus, "Access Intimacy, Interdependence, and Disability Justice," *Leaving Evidence* (blog), April 12, 2017, https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2017/04/12/access-intimacy-interdependence-and-disability-justice/.

some of the able-bodied people in my life…It has required me to demand more from the people in my communities and settle less because I know things can be better.[21]

In this view, Access Intimacy is only achieved through the simultaneous embrace and celebration of all elements of identity, so that all who are present are seen and embraced in their full complexity, creating a shared space of safety and representation. It is the opposite of what Mingus calls Forced Intimacy:

> The common, daily experience of disabled people being expected to share personal parts of ourselves to survive in an ableist world. This often takes the form of being expected to share (very) personal information with able bodied people to get *basic* access, but it also includes forced physical intimacy, especially for those of us who need physical help that often requires touching of our bodies. Forced intimacy can also include the ways that disabled people have to build and sustain emotional intimacy and relationships with someone in order to get access—to get safe, appropriate and good access.[22]

Access Intimacy requires the proactive work of creating physical and emotional welcome and support through recognition of individual need and in shared effort at meeting those needs. This work must be done without resentment, condescension, or dehumanization as Desiree Valentine explains it:

> Fundamentally, I propose that access is not a practical and isolated thing or event…but involves an ongoing, interpersonal process of relating and taking responsibility for our inevitable encroachment on each other. At base, access intimacy invites attention to our fundamental intersubjectivity, our inherent vulnerability, and the asymmetries of power

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[21] Mingus, "Access Intimacy, Interdependence, and Disability Justice."

[22] Mia Mingus, "Forced Intimacy: An Ableist Norm," *Leaving Evidence* (blog), August 6, 2017, https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2017/08/06/forced-intimacy-an-ableist-norm/.

in any relationship. Beginning from these assumptions, the question of whether access

needs are met cannot fully be answered via attempts at equalizing or accommodating

(though these are nonetheless necessary elements of access in our present moment). It

must be answered through the development of individual and collective (re)orientations,

ways of being responsive to our primary interdependence.[23]

It means replacing Othering with interdependent networks of support, building to shared

liberation rather than promotion to the ranks of the privileged for some at the cost to others. It

means recognizing intersectionality because accepting one element of identity while rejecting

another means rejection of the whole person. Humans cannot be broken into parts and survive.

Part ideal to pursue and part ongoing practice in inclusion, Access Intimacy demands

recognizing when and how our efforts at individuation of support fail, and immediately work to

fix the exclusion, not treating the excluded bodymind as a problem in need of repair.

Furthermore, when individual access needs exist in conflict, the interdependent and coalitional

nature of Access Intimacy provides an approach to compromise that does not require hierarchical

determination of "who matters more" or "whose needs are most urgent," but instead serves as a

call for a shared goal of meeting all needs through creative solutions and mutual support.

Ultimately, no philosophical approach to access and inclusion can entirely prevent interpolation

into the neoliberal tactic of turning programs of inclusion into excuses for removing supports for

disabled and other marginalized student populations. Institutions of higher education and their

financially-motivated administrations are always looking for opportunities to "replac[e] hard-

fought provisions with new contractual relations that in fact remove the university or college

from responsibility for individual students' rights, and demand that each individual manage their

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[23] Desiree Valentine, "Shifting the Weight of Inaccessibility: Access Intimacy as a Critical Phenomenological Ethos," *Puncta: Journal of Critical Phenomenology* 3, no. 2 (2020), 78.

own access."[24] However, as Access Intimacy is created through and defined by the shared actions of the community in ensuring all are welcomed and supported, it is particularly and even uniquely resistant to place the issue of access onto the bodyminds of those excluded from power.

Infinitely flexible and adaptive, Access Intimacy as a pedagogical philosophy can serve to encompass all of the beneficial elements of other models of access without recreating their flaws: by recognizing students, faculty, and staff within higher education in their complete matrix of intersecting and even conflicting identifications, respecting their priorities and primary and secondary alignments within their multivalent complexity, and proactively co-working to build course structures and materials that match the needs of the specific group while remaining responsive and non-defensive when adaptation of plans turns out to be required. Access Intimacy is not a product for sale and does not claim to have solved all the challenges of creating equity. Thus, it avoids the flaws inherent to Capitalist answer-in-a-box "solutions" to large scale, systemic problems. Also important, Access Intimacy is not currently a politicized term or subject to anti-DEI/A legislation, making it valuable language for a pedagogical philosophy of care that goes beyond mere individuation but does not violate existing policies or laws.

Turning to theatre specifically, this approach creates the individual recognition and support structure necessary for students to feel safe sharing their vulnerabilities and emotions by ensuring the necessary combination of representation and support needed to promote artistic risk. It counters the manifold forms of forced intimacy that are endemic to the field, an ongoing crisis that has resulted in the recent emergence of intimacy coordination as a profession. Performing is hard enough work without negotiating a lack of access or concerns that the performer's embodiment is being judged rather than their craft assessed. Access Intimacy is, at its heart,

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[24] Dolmage, 140.

about creating safety in community, wherein one's full self is both recognized and respected. By building classrooms and rehearsal halls that provide this foundation of justice and inclusion, we are able to remove some of the most pernicious barriers to student success. Ultimately, creating the effect of student access, support, and safety is far more important than the educator's individual philosophy of accessibility. So, find what works for you, your program, and your students. Access will never be perfect but the closer our work gets to that goal, the better for everyone.

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