Beyond Accommodations: Imagination, Decolonization, and the Criping of Writing Center Work

Karen Moroski-Rigney
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Abstract    This article examines connections among disability, colonization, university policies, and writing center work in North America. By positing that university policies have long mimicked medical and scientific processes for creating—and then discriminating against—perceived categories of disability, this article makes interventions into traditional writing center practices and pedagogies without dismissing the spirit with which these aspects of our field came to be. The article has several central claims:

• Disability has been constructed by nondisabled entities (including doctors, scientists, and institutions).
• Disability’s “drift” and myriad forms act as both specter and insidious insurance against progress or inclusive design.
• Writing center scholarship has consistently made claims toward equity yet still must reframe its points of engagement.
• Disability itself provides opportunities to reconstruct not only our relationships to one another but to our field and world.

While these claims do situate writing centers (under the auspice of the institution itself) as agents of colonization and control through their ableism and expectations for bodies, bodyminds, and identities, they also leave ample opportunity to imagine and build upon the values that shape our praxis. What
can we imagine for one another, beyond accommodations and retrofits? What
does a decolonized, disabled body have to offer? How can we find out?

Keywords disability, colonization, university policies, writing centers

Disabled bodies are regulated bodies—bodies made recognizable
through diagnoses and definitions, welcomed or affirmed through paperwork and
accommodations (when welcomed at all). Disabled people, framed as liminalities
whose experiences and possibilities are stunted by the otherness of inaccessible de-
sign and implicit ableism, find themselves at odds with the convenience of others,
with the realm of acceptable or best-liked practices, with their own bodies and body-
minds. Living within what Dan Goodley and Rebecca Lawthom have posited as a
21st-century form of apartheid (2012), disabled bodies are controlled or defined
through difference (rarely get to do the defining for themselves)—in this way, they
are colonized, wherein “colonialism is not merely a metaphor for power; rather,
colonization is a processual lived reality for the peripheral Other—communities
who have been constituted as disabled” and “disability serves as both a marker of
difference and a rationale for differing” (Presley, 2019, par. 6). Some disabled bod-
ies work and write and administrate in writing centers, quietly navigating this “dif-
ference” and the control mechanisms that writing centers place upon engagement,
professionalism, and collegiality—and while disabled writing center practitioners
love writing centers and want to belong to them, they want and deserve to belong
to themselves, too.

What histories connect the stories of disability, education, and writing centers?
What frameworks has the field of writing centers employed to (whether intentionally
or not) colonize disabled bodies in the name of collaborative best practices? What
can we do—together, power-with, not power-over—to decolonize both how the
field of writing centers perceives disability and how the field recursively designs/
defines itself in trainings, scholarship, and community?

CONTROLLED BODIES,
CONTROLLED EMBODIMENT

The year: 2010. I remember shifting in my chair, rubbing the toes of my checkered
Vans sneakers on the floor, waiting for the writer to sit down, and trying to slow
my rapid heartbeat. Hey, sure, I mean, sit anywhere. Get comfortable. I remember the
thought of making eye contact bursting like a ball of fire in my brain. Eye nose table
I wouldn’t know until ten years later that there are several valid reasons I find eye contact challenging, ranging from the social experience of being ill-at-ease around those who are ill-at-ease themselves with my visible queerness to the neurophysiological reality that autistic people (of whom I am one) find eye contact challenging almost always. I remember bracing myself for the small talk that starts a session, for having to sit on my hands so I didn’t fidget, for enduring the experience of autistic masking wherein I am sociable, gregarious, and warm to someone I don’t know. Can you believe it’s snowing again? I remember the constant triangulation and translation of social cues, trying to make sure I was “doing things right” and that the writer felt comfortable, while I usually felt anything but—for me, rapport-building has frequently given me the sense of being a marionette. I remember dreading busy shifts when multiple consultations happened at once—I could feel my veins buzzing with being overwhelmed when I tried to focus on just the voice of the writer across from me but couldn’t filter it through the sounds around me. I remember finding it difficult to (literally) speak when my shifts ended; decades later, I would learn there’s a phrase for that: selective mutism. I’m all people-ed out. Except I didn’t select it—I never would—it was selected for me by my body as a bio-evolutionary protective response to job responsibilities that challenged my neurology in ways I didn’t understand at the time. I wouldn’t be diagnosed as mildly autistic (ASD) or as having attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) until my early thirties. Instead, I just spent decades quietly wondering why so many seemingly simple things were so hard for me.

I remember that I did love my job as a writing tutor during my undergraduate years at Penn State, and that the writing center was the singular place I did feel most accepted in my queerness on campus. (It was 2007–2011, and it was not yet trendy to be queer; in central Pennsylvania, it was still quite dangerous.) I remember what it was like to live in my body with undiagnosed disabilities, and how exhausting it felt to move through the ordinary motions of writing center work—and of being alive, generally—without understanding that both autism and ADHD (as much as my queerness) acted as the kaleidoscopes through which I saw myself, my fatigue, and my desire to belong. I did so want to belong: the writing center had a “personality” I very much admired—personable, warm, open-minded, able to put others at ease. It was a place where my skills with writing and rhetoric had value—a place where I had value (rare to me at the time). And yet my experiences as a consultant were fraught with complete depletion, anxiety, and having to try so hard to blend in (whether with colleagues or writers). And so: I was unsafe even in my safest space—a situation neither my colleagues nor bosses nor I intended, nor understood, and thus couldn’t change at that time. I write this article now as someone who does understand, and as someone who hopes to help change happen.
And I write this article as a person who occupies only a small corner of the world, with experiences only representative of my own life. Disability sprawls, shapeshifts, resists definition even as institutions continually seek to define it—in Sarah A. Mucek’s “Identity and the Disabled Tutor: The Possibilities of Re-Constructing Selfhood in Peer Writing Conferences,” Mucek sheds light on the circular problem of defining disability: “The question dogging disability studies becomes, ‘What connection actually exists between those identified as disabled?’ . . . No one characteristic unites [disabled people] outside of the category itself” (2017, p. 106). Mucek succinctly notes, “That the category of disability has no essence is an assertion at once both doubtful and obvious” (2017, p. 106) and notes that the ambiguity of what/who counts as “disabled” makes very challenging the process of equitable redesign of our world (and our writing centers). An insidious effect of this ambiguity is the hazy sense it generates that disability is both everywhere and nowhere, common yet invisible, something we’d address if we could locate it—yet something we choose to leave unfound. Within this same ambiguity, though, dwells immense possibility and room for imagination. There is so much reason to hope: as Mucek puts it, “if disability is constructed—has been constructed—it follows that it can also be deconstructed and reconstructed,” leading to “the possibility of positive disabled identity-making in the space of university-based peer writing conferences” (Mucek, 2017, p. 107). If disability is colonized—has been colonized (Goodley & Lawthom, 2012)—in writing center practices over time, it follows that it can also be deconstructed and then reconstructed to center positive identity creation by our disabled writing center peers themselves.

To begin the work of imagination and reconstruction, we must first understand what has already been built—and how—and most importantly: why.

WRITING CENTERS AND EXPECTATIONS

Writing centers—and, indeed, most professional settings—have constructed, intentional codes of conduct or expected behaviors for employees. Some of these expectations are explicit: no shirts with profanity; be on time; fill out your report forms, and so on. Some are implicit: make small talk; use reflexive listening; learn to make others comfortable; sit at one table during your session and model your attentiveness by not fidgeting, by not looking away; act enthused when a stranger drops in for a session; remain calm even when confronted with something hurtful or upsetting; manage time wisely. These explicit rules are meant to shape a workplace; these implicit rules are meant to shape the performance of bodies and bodyminds\(^1\) within a writing center. In this way, the writing center is complicit in colonizing
the bodies of writing consultants (and writers, and administrators) by having expectations for engagement, for community-building, for communication—and by determining bodies who cannot meet those expectations to be in error. To be clear, I am using the word “colonizing” not as equal to or comparable to the experience of racial domination or oppression, but rather as an indicator of a power relationship (Presley, 2019) in which the less powerful party’s body is subjugated to suit majority needs, expectations, comfort zones, or expected practices. For purposes within this article, I will define colonization thus: Colonization is a process through which a possessor of power uses that power to demand subservience, reshaping, or silence from a (perceived) subordinate such that the subordinate is encouraged to hide or forfeit their core self or basic needs to remain welcome within the nexus of power. In layman’s terms, I am positing that writing centers—under the auspices of the academy—exert control over disabled bodies, forcing them to flexibly comply with writing center expectations or to find themselves excised from the community.

It may seem extreme to say that a writing center colonizes disabled bodies (in the Foucauldian sense), but consider the ways in which physical, emotional, and social behaviors within a center all come with implicit instruction manuals. And then consider that some bodies and bodyminds cannot perform the instructed behaviors “as written”—or can, but at great harm to the disabled individual. In so doing, an irrefutable recognition emerges that writing centers, writing center culture, and writing center pedagogies were not designed with disabled contributors in mind. Instead, we must reconstruct ourselves in the image of one who belongs—because we want to belong. Doesn’t everyone? Don’t you?

In Laura Greenfield’s Radical Writing Center Praxis, Greenfield notes that “scholarship related to resisting oppression or building toward justice and peace in and through writing centers has not fundamentally unsettled the dominant stories of practice in the field” (Greenfield, 2019, p. 6), and goes on to point out that “sometimes people oppressed by an institution can be among its most outspoken supporters and the most vitriolic critics of their own community (Hooks 2003)” (Greenfield, 2019, p. 23). Disabled writing center practitioners who can seem to manage the rigors of daily life in the center face a devil’s bargain: mask and minimize your challenges so you can be part of the community, and in so doing, separate yourself from disabled peers who cannot or will not do the same. The price of belonging is high, indeed. And education, as a colonizing force, knows it—and knows we’ll pay. (Dolmage references this contradiction by referencing Lauren Berlant’s work on cruel optimism—an instance “when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing” (Dolmage, 2017, p. 139).

And the payments are sometimes egregious and shocking: my mentor, Dr. Jon Olson, experienced a spinal injury that left him initially unable to even enter the doors
of our writing center in his powerchair. Deaf, hard of hearing, and visually impaired writing center practitioners are regularly left without consideration or resources. Those with invisible disabilities are rarely considered when writing centers develop training courses, work schedules, or locations/modalities (it’s possible this will change as we move forward from the recent pandemic). Often, the steep cost of disabled folks’ engagement (or their absence, due to impossibility of engagement) just drifts hazily into and out of the frame of a day. Most folks don’t even notice. Depending on how slight the microaggression, even the disabled person themselves might not notice the transgression because it’s just how things are—“that collective power of many people positioned to act upon their biases that creates institutionalized oppression. It is that pervasiveness, that insidiousness, that inescapability, that makes it so devastating” (Greenfield, 2019, p. 23). To survive in the academy, and indeed within a writing center, disabled bodies must minimize disability and maximize flexibility.

In McRuer and Bérubé’s introduction to Crip Theory, the authors describe the way “flexibility” is weaponized against disabled people. Flexibility—sometimes called “masking” (for autistic folks), or tangled up in descriptions of coping mechanisms or accommodated engagement—is, for McRuer and Bérubé (2006), a “condition of postmodernity” (p. 17) that “militate[s] against subjective wholeness.” They go on to write, “The flexible subject is successful precisely because [they] can perform wholeness through each recurring crisis . . . they manage the crisis, or at least show that they have management potential,” and in their most impressive form will act as though no crisis (and the crisis, here, is the subject’s own disability) even exists. “Attention must be drawn to the crisis in order for the resolution to be visible,” McRuer and Bérubé caution, “but to draw too much attention . . . to the fragmentation and multiplicity of its effects, would be to perform—or act out—inflexibility” (McRuer & Bérubé, 2006, p. 17). To be inflexible is to be a problem. No one wants to be a problem.

Disabled writing center practitioners, perhaps in a state of Berlantian cruel optimism, want to be part of the writing center community, but that community is gatekept by an assumption that disabled bodies and bodyminds can be flexible enough to participate in traditional writing center practices, pedagogies, and modalities as they’re carried out in the United States. Why? Because the writing center is not, itself, flexible in return; writing centers continue to set a table of expectations and practices evocative of a menu that does not/has not yet changed.

We still assume that most writing center directors are not disabled and can/will travel to conferences, give presentations, network on their campuses, and navigate an overwhelming list of executive function–style tasks necessitated by the daily grind of administration. What of the directors with speech impediments or whose health prohibits travel? What of the directors who struggle to manage the social fatigue necessary to represent
the center, to train consultants, and to navigate the task-switching challenges of a day in the center? We still assume tutors can successfully complete multipart, complex training courses. What of the student with chronic health issues or executive function challenges who can’t complete a semester of observations, practicum, and the like? We still bristle when tutors request to be online-only or work remotely, despite the pandemic showing that these modalities function just fine. What of the autistic tutors who suffer with eye contact? What of the anxious or agoraphobic or physically disabled tutors who prefer to work in the comfort of their controlled home space? We spend time and energy scouring institutional data to better understand various other barriers to student success, but few if any of us are researching whether or not disabled students come to our centers or work in our centers or are our administrative peers. Why don’t we care that we have no information on disabled writers, consultants, or administrators, and why aren’t we investing energy in cultivating relationships with the disabled community? While writing centers have great potential to change their relationship to disability, thus far the pressure has been on disabled individuals to become flexible enough to fit into the writing center community as it currently exists, or—alternatively—to accept unbelonging. This, from folks who pride themselves on being “people oriented” (Harris, 1990, p. 22).

While writing centers purport to value collaboration and power-diffuse relationships, those values can’t mask the social and physical expectations for how power will be diffused and how collaboration will be carried out. In “Disability in the Writing Center: A New Approach (That’s Not So New),” Kerri Rinaldi (2015) writes:

The very foundation of writing center theory is based on the idea of a conversation between two equals—a space in which we construct knowledge together as peers, not instruct from a position of power. The writing center is not a site of remediation, but rather the ideal tutoring session is one in which egalitarian and collaborative conversation occurs. (p. 9)

Rinaldi goes on to describe the scholarly complications made to the consultant/writer relationship dynamic over time:

Trimbur, for example, states that tutors experience a contradiction in roles: They are encouraged to disassemble the hierarchical structure of academia despite that they have been rewarded in the past—and will continue to be rewarded—for observing and upholding this hierarchy. (2015, p. 23)

Shamoon and Burns (1995) likewise complicate the idealized orthodoxy of writing center practices—that is, collaborative, nondirective instruction that is student-centered and does not appropriate the student’s text (p. 135). They argue that a
one-size-fits-all approach is not sustainable, especially when transmitting discourse community knowledge (Shamoon & Burns, 1995, p. 139). Because unorthodox techniques can give tutees access to rhetorical knowledge that is often kept hidden to uphold others’ status and power in academia, nonstandard tutoring practices can actually empower students (Shamoon & Burns, 1995, p. 146).

We can see from these complications that power, its use, and its dominion still influence writing center dynamics. Rinaldi (2015) notes that the field of writing centers’ general approach to disability is “antithetical to the theory of writing center practice,” as our purported valuing of power-diffuse collaboration halts when a disabled writer or consultant enters our space; at that moment, we tend to enact our conditioning that “disability is an ailment and strategy is the cure” (Rinaldi, 2015). In an effort to accommodate, we assume a position of power over disabled bodies and bodyminds again. And that, of course, is when we do make the move toward accommodation (progress!) or retrofit (not good) at all. Writing center trainings, spaces, and lore are full of implicit ableist practices that alienate and/or control disabled participants.

Disabled bodies or chair users might not be able to use those beloved round tables meant to dispel the confrontational vibe of a “face to face” consultation. Autistic writers or consultants may struggle with the environmental and social stimulation of a vibrant writing center space, and may not appreciate sitting side by side with their counterpart (personal space, people!). Neurodivergent writers and consultants may find that their own preferred methods of organizing (or lack thereof) are infrequently accommodated in a session, and that if they struggle with open-ended questions and nondirective strategies they may leave the session as unhelped (or unhelpful) as when it began. Writers or consultants with stimulation and movement needs might find their fidgeting or roving eye-tracing interpreted as disinterest; they might feel increasingly overwhelmed as they force themselves to sit still in a chair instead of flapping their hands, walking around, or moving/sitting in a soothing way. Yet all these people—and the bodies they inhabit—want to be there. They want to be in the writing center—whether to get help or to be helpful—and those who come through our doors are willing to push aside their comfort and access needs to either receive consultation support or to take on the role of consultant. In so doing, they find their bodies and bodyminds “adjusted” to meet expectations for engagement within that setting. Be yourself, as long as you can be yourself in a way that feels comfortable for everyone else. If you can’t do or be that, just . . . be someone else. Be a Good Writing Consultant. Be a Compliant Writer. Be easy. Be normal.

There’s an internet meme that comes to mind—one that always makes me laugh—wherein a new friend says to an autistic person, “I love hanging out with you! Isn’t it so cool that our personalities are so similar?” And the autistic person says, “Aw, thanks! I’m glad you like my personality. I made this one just for you!” Such
is the experience of a neurodivergent person (especially in this instance an autistic one), recreating themselves in the image of belonging, of acceptability—a form of self-colonization. Shahd Alshammari describes this process as “passing,” “a concept [that] can have different meanings depending on racial, social, and gender ideologies. Disability passing, crossing the boundaries between able-bodied/disabled, normal/abnormal, and visible/invisible disabilities is a complex act that challenges rigid dichotomies that attempt to fix an otherwise fluid identity” (Alshammari, 2017, p. 31).

The unfixity of disability complicates the unfixity of passing—and the unfixity of who must attempt to “pass” and how. While much of my examples thus far focus on the experiences of disabled consultants or writers, I know these ideas apply with equal (or more) insidious force for writing center administrators who are then tasked with sustaining lore, training, culture, programming, and practices that they may find personally damaging.

I am not here to critique the intentions or even the practices of writing centers, but rather to encourage conversation about the price disabled consultants, administrators, and writers alike pay for their belonging and to seek new ways to lessen that burden. Amy Wan describes classrooms as “proto-public spaces” (Dolmage, 2017, p. 31), that is, a space that can shape larger communities. Writing centers, too, are proto-public spaces full of radical possibility. In Academic Ableism, Jay Dolmage calls us to action: “If rhetoric is the circulation of discourse through the body, then spaces and institutions cannot be disconnected from the bodies within them, the bodies they selectively exclude, and the bodies that actively intervene to reshape them” (Dolmage, 2017, p. 9).

This article is an intervention.

“DID YOU GET YOUR PAPERWORK FROM THE DISABILITIES OFFICE YET?” ON DISABILITY AND COLONIZER RHETORICS

On university campuses, disabled students and faculty alike are typically asked to “present their papers” when seeking an accommodation for their disability. These accommodations (extra time on an assignment, remote tutoring/work, etc.), while usually straightforward and easy to supply, still often meet scrutiny and resistance and are equally often addressed through retrofit (meaning, only once there’s a “problem” is there any attempt at a “solution,” and the “solution” is singular/individualized and never reflected in a change in programming or built-in flexibility/options). This university accommodation practice—under the auspices of the medical
model of disability—has historical connections to disability-as-pathology and strategy-as-cure.

Indigenous scholar Richart Atlea’s book *Principles of Tsawalk* describes how Darwinism was transformed into eugenics rhetorics weaponized against Indigenous peoples to enforce colonizer ideologies of difference and inferiority, effectively disabling Indigenous peoples “by eugenic and settler colonial ideology and then disabled—literally, starved—by science” (Dolmage, 2017, p. 15). James W. Trent’s *Inventing the Feeble Mind* traces how the rhetorics of eugenics made their way into testing, research, and even promotion in North American universities (including Harvard and Stanford) and points out that “North American Academics systematically developed the means to segregate society based upon arbitrary ideas of ability—the university was the place for the most able, the mental institution or asylum or school for the ‘feeble-minded’ the space for the least” (Dolmage, 2017, p. 15). Over time, disabled people have been experimented upon and pathologized by the academy—and imprisoned, sterilized, abused, and even killed beyond the academy based on academy “findings.” The academy has long weaponized its constructions of disability in the services of elitism and power.

In Diane Pothier and Richard Devlin’s *Critical Disability Theory: Essays in Philosophy, Politics, Policy, and Law*, the authors state plainly: “Disability is not fundamentally a question of medicine or health, nor is it just an issue of sensitivity and compassion; rather, it is a question of politics and power(lessness), power over, and power to” (Pothier & Devlin, 2006, p. 2). This succinct explanation evokes the tensions between medicalized models of disability, wherein disability is a medical malady requiring diagnosis, requiring treatment or research toward cure, and the social model of disability, wherein disability is a social construct created by inaccessible functions of culture and opportunity. In the former, a disabled person knows themself as disabled because a doctor calls them disabled; in the latter, a disabled person knows themself as disabled because the world around them recursively constructs itself to exclude disabled bodies and bodyminds (causing the disabled person to then identify as “other”).

Both models imply that disability is specifically relational—and may themselves reproduce frameworks within which disabled people do not belong to themselves, uncovering what Rachel Presley calls “a gap that remains largely unexplored . . . the indigenization of our bodyminds; the decolonization of lifeways towards an autonomous sovereignty that rewrites disability as a social condition rather than a social identity.” In both the medical and social models of disability, the disabled person is marked as “other,” and their needs are seen as counter to cultural values or as disruptions to cultural coherence—it’s just that in the social model, the burden of flaw is located in culture itself rather than in the disabled person.
Further, histories of colonization link disability to questions of productivity and value (questions equally compelling to/within the academy, and thus in writing centers)—that is, capitalism. To again reference Presley: “In spaces where the immediate biological engineering of ‘productive’ and ‘capable’ bodyminds is unattainable, marginalized communities are oftentimes subjected to a disabling process instead” (Presley, 2019, par. 10). In short, those who cannot perform productive labor will have that failure pathologized. We see this in classrooms, in consultations, in the tenure process—the academy’s general structure enforces constant productivity assessments, and those whose ways of expressing or contributing or being evaluated are non-normate earn failing marks. In Adria L. Imada’s *A Colonial Disability Studies?*, the author explains: “In the broadest sense, colonialism demanded able bodyminds from subordinated subjects. Colonial projects imposed impossible regimes and expectations of self-regulation its subjects would not be able to perform. Thus, the colonized were *always already figured and constituted as disabled*” (2017, par. 2). The writer who cannot address the prompt, the tutor who struggles to employ nondirective strategies, the administrator who struggles to do the people-work so common in writing center administration, all are failing to reproduce capitalist measures of success upon which the academy (and, indeed, the writing center) thrive. Both the medical and social models of disability are in direct relationship to capitalism and to the ways productivity and value are conflated in conversations about identity.

How might these tensions play out in a writing center setting?

- In the medical model of disability, a disabled writer/administrator/consultant is identified through medical paperwork and a seal of approval/validation provided by the university’s disability services office. This model creates the culture of students timidly handing over a letterhead printed list of approved accommodations, or administrators moving through the murky waters of seeking faculty/staff accommodations for themselves so their own supervisors will facilitate their access needs.
  - The medical model of disability creates the culture through which faculty refuse to accommodate student needs without the “proper paperwork,” or wherein our own writing consultants or administrators claim helplessness in the face of supporting disabled writers because they “aren’t doctors themselves,” “can’t diagnose someone,” or “don’t know enough about XYZ to help,” or need to protect their “numbers.”
- In the social model of disability, a disabled writer/administrator/consultant is not seen as “in need of accommodation” or as lacking in some way, but rather as a person whose participation in the writing or consulting process is blocked or obstructed by ableist programming/posturing. This model locates the “fault”
not in the disabled person but in the culture around them, suggesting that disability would perhaps cease to exist as we know it if only writing centers and professors assigning writing would be more inclusive in their design. As Presley (2019) suggests in her “indigenization of bodyminds,” a disabled writer/administrator/consultant has “autonomous sovereignty” and would see disability as a social condition, rather than as an actual identity.

- The social model of disability serves as vast improvement over the medical model in that disability is no longer seen as a fault/inherent flaw. In a writing center, we might see the social model of disability informing programming when a writing center uses universal design in its materials, or trains its staff to provide better accommodations for disabled writers by fostering the belief that as service providers, consultants should be thinking ahead on how to best serve disabled clientele instead of waiting until a disabled person arrives and then relying on retrofit (Dolmage, 2017, p. 70).³

Somewhere beyond both these models is a promised land I hope the academy reaches, wherein disability is not seen as a social condition nor a medical one, but as an aspect of intersectional identity claimed and celebrated by disabled people themselves and the people around them as a part of personhood not related to productivity or opportunity, but just . . . part of being a person. The groundwork for this framework has long existed in the writings and teachings of Indigenous cultures, and I will address it in the final sections of this article.

Both the medical and social models of disability—and the ways universities uphold and engage each model—are symptomatic of higher education’s relationship to (and defining or colonizing of) disability and disabled bodies. Given that both frameworks rely entirely on a relational and external understanding of disability, both frameworks silence the generative potential of disabled people themselves as agents of self-definition—the exact opposite of writing center pedagogies that elevate self-expression and self-determination. But that’s what the academy wants; that’s what the academy has built; that’s what power looks like. Dolmage asks the haunting question: “Why single this group of students [or faculty, or staff] out as a cost rather than as an investment?” (Dolmage, 2017, p. 108).

“POWERFUL MANDATES”: ON EDUCATION, DISABILITY, AND COLONIZATION

In Academic Ableism, Dolmage declares, “Academia powerfully mandates able-bodiedness and able-mindedness, as well as other forms of social and
communicative hyperability, and this can best be defined as ableism” (Dolmage, 2017, p. 70). Disability, here, is akin to nonproductivity within capitalism and the ways productivity is akin to power: “The disability category was essential to the development of an exploitable workforce in early capitalism and remains indispensable as an instrument of the state in controlling the labour supply today” (Russell & Malhotra, 2002, p. 214). If a person gets an education so they can be a productive member of society, what happens when that person cannot successfully navigate the ableist moors of the academy? Can they still be a citizen? A member of society? Can they be part of the writing center?

Writing centers have been pondering this productivity question for some time. For example: Elston, Green, and Hubrig’s “Beyond Binaries of Disability in Writing Center Studies” (2022), which asks Who gets to define disability?; Keedy and Vidali’s “Productive Chaos: Disability, Advising, and the Writing Process” (2016), which asks Who gets to define productivity?; or Rowan’s review essay, “Towards a Disability Literacy in Writing Center Studies” (2015), which asks How can writing centers challenge notions of belonging and ableism? The work continues to be urgent.

Shahd Alshammari writes, in “A Hybridized Academic Identity: Negotiating a Disability within Academia’s Discourse of Ableism,” that “disability holds negative connotations and is associated with lack, failure, and loss,” and again emphasizes the fatigue of hiding disability: “Working as an academic with a disability has been problematic at times. I have become experienced with the art of hiding pain, of hiding a huge part of me, that is, of my body” (Alshammari, 2017, p. 31). Alshammari goes on to connect the dots that bring conversations about disability and “ungovernability” into conversation:

Similar to western ideologies that suggest the mind is a powerhouse and treat the body as controlled by the mind, Eastern conceptions of the body remain stigmatizing. The Mind is supposedly capable of willing the body into place, setting it straight; positive thinking can change your reality, and the shameful corporeality of the body is deliberately ignored. (Alshammari, 2017, p. 27)

The pathologizing of a “failing” mind/body or bodymind connection reflects a dangerous and ignorant undercurrent in the academy: “Those invested in higher education have refused to believe that the body traversing the steps could be disabled, that the elite mind could be imperfect” (Dolmage, 2017, p. 62). Further, universities put great emphasis on avoiding perceived infirmness or impairment—think of university “wellness initiatives,” wherein everything from self-care workshops to mental health seminars place the burden on students, faculty, and staff to do all they can to avoid being “unwell” while completely ignoring situational factors
beyond the reach of a bubble-path and a Headspace subscription. Dolmage pushes against this culture:

What if higher education isn’t creating knowledge and ability and is instead systematically disabling? Or perhaps less stridently or controversially: What if higher education construct both knowledge and disability? What if those constructions rely on one another? Finally, if disability is in part socially constructed by academia, how do we feature and highlight the constructions that make space for agency, community, solidarity, and resistance? (Dolmage, 2017, p. 58)

How, indeed?

THERE CAN BE NO LACK

Indigenous scholars—and, more importantly, the Indigenous cultures they study and uplift—describe a worldview within which there is no concept of disability, only of personhood. In her article “Disability as a Colonial Construct: The Missing Discourse of Culture in Conceptualizations of Disabled Indigenous Children” Nicole Ineese-Nash (2020) describes the varying ways North American Indigenous communities understand or interpret disability (Lovern & Locust, 2013), noting that many of the Indigenous languages of Turtle Island (North America) have no word for the concept of disability, perhaps because many of these languages are verb- and context-based (Gross, 2016). Ineese-Nash writes that in Anishinaabe culture, individuals are named in reflection of the gifts or responsibilities they contribute to their community (Willmott, 2016), and thus the way an individual knows themself centers on possibility and contribution—a child comes to know their unique gifts and focuses on what they offer their community or what they will teach their community. There can be no concept of disability, because there is no concept of lack. Imagine, if you can, a world where there is no “disability” because there are only gifts, no deficits.

I’ll speak, here, about my own neurodivergences: autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Receiving my diagnosis at age 31, I think I went through every stage of grief, all blended together with both the devastating (at the time) mantle of realizing “something really is wrong with me” and the gasp of oxygen provided by the finalized recognition that I had been right about my difference all along. I have written elsewhere (Moroski-Rigney, 2022) about my diagnostic experience and the ways it directly influences my work as a writing center practitioner; I have written less—but hope to write more—about the ways my understanding of my
own neurodivergence has changed over time: first, I moved through the medicalized understanding of my bodymind. Then, I felt angry at the ways in which the challenges I face are often socioculturally created. Then/now, I see myself as magical and as beyond any binary understanding of wellness/unwell or abled/disabled: I have a brain that mixes lightning, Pop Rocks, tenderness, and every prismatic color into every thought and no amount of medical diagnoses or social intervention could take those things from me. The kaleidoscope cannot be pried from my eyes. In short, I am my disability—and my disability is my gift. North American Indigenous scholars’ prescient work on individual grace and gift has provided me a new way to see into myself and has helped me unlink the chains that bind colonialism, disability, capitalism, and productivity.

Writing centers, too, have the footholds here in our own scholarship to reflect on these ideas (and expand them). Famed rhetorical texts like Krista Ratcliffe’s “Rhetorical Listening: A Trope for Interpretive Invention and a ‘Code of Cross-Cultural Conduct’” (1999) promote opportunities to make space for and believe our peers about their lives, needs, and bodies—strategies we can apply to redesigning our field to better welcome disabled peers. Ken Bruffee’s “Collaborative Learning and the Conversation of Mankind” (1984) has always stood as a beacon of mindful collaboration, communal world-making, and the realization that we cannot share what we have not experienced—from which we can be reminded that our disabled peers deserve our willingness to receive their stories. Peter Elbow’s “Bringing the Rhetoric of Assent and the Believing Game Together—and into the Classroom” (2005) asks us to trust—from which we can see we have a lot of work to do when honoring access needs and accommodations for our disabled peers.

In more recent texts, writing center scholars address disability and ableism specifically: Janelle Dembsey’s “Naming Ableism in the Writing Center” opens bravely, “We need to tell the truth: writing center discourse has a long history of discriminating against disabled people” (2020, par. 1). In Sue Jackson and Margo Blythman’s “‘Just Coming in the Door Was Hard’: Supporting Students with Health Difficulties” (2006), the authors insist: “Universities must become more flexible” (there’s that word again, and finally in the right place!), suggesting that institutions must do continual and considerable faculty (and student) development trainings to prepare the academy for disabled peers and that classroom pedagogies, practices, and assessments must become more inclusive (p. 248). Anglesey and McBride’s (2019) “Caring for Students with Disabilities: (Re)Defining Welcome as a Culture of Listening” asks us to reconsider what counts as listening—are we really doing what we say we’re doing? My own recent articles—“What About Access?: Writing an Accessibility Statement for Your Writing Center” (Appleton Pine & Moroski-Rigney, 2020), which provides pragmatic strategies for addressing ableism in writing centers, and “Seeing
the Air: Neurodiversity and Writing Center Administration” (Moroski-Rigney, 2022), which provides narrative recollection of my experiences as a neurodiverse writing center director—attempt to bring disabled voices and experiences (including my own) into the advocacy work required for disability justice. I acknowledge my own privileges (institutional, health, and ability) in being able to write and publish on these topics—not every disabled peer in our field will have the same opportunities or ability to share their stories or research, which reinforces the urgency of raising up the disabled voices that do emerge in our scholarship and in our field.

Calls for radical trust, collaboration, listening, and equity have always been part of writing center scholarship. But disabled people have not. I posit that writing centers can pull from a long tradition of deeply held beliefs in equity and flexibility to truly become equitable and flexible in deed, not just in theory, and that in so doing, we can decolonize our field’s relationship to disabled people and make visible both the imagination and opportunity necessary to include disabled peers in our writing center communities. We can live up to these values we espouse. I believe we want to and will.

Greenfield writes that “the work of writing centers is implicated in these various systems of oppression and that we have an ethical responsibility to intervene purposefully” (Greenfield, 2019, p. 6). Rebecca Day Babcock and Sharifa Daniels’s 2017 book Writing Centers and Disability centers the voices of disabled administrators and consultants, declaring:

> We hope that when we talk about diversity in the writing center, it includes disability and that disability will be taken into account in all future writing center work. As disabled and temporarily able-bodied people, we cannot have it any other way. Disability will be and is a part of our work, whether or not we recognize it and discuss it openly. (2017, p. 12)

I am part of their hope come true—a former writing tutor who would go on to be a director, finding ways to disclose and center my disability in my work. This article is part of their hope come true, too. What lies before us remains the urgent call to that very hope, to imagination, and to the joyful possibility of reconstructing our field to align with our values, abandoning colonial expectations for bodies and bodyminds and, instead, creating a new praxis of liberation and disability integration.

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NOTES

1. Disability scholar Eli Clare (2016) describes bodyminds: “I use that phrase to resist the duality in white, western culture that says body is over here and mind is over here. I believe that bodies and minds are so entwined they’re actually one entity rather than two” (par. 7).

2. Bodyminds is a term originating in trauma studies (Rothschild, 2000) that disability scholar Margaret Price weaved into her scholarship: “According to this approach, because mental and physical processes not only affect each other but also give rise to each other—that is, because they tend to act as one, even though they are conventionally understood as two—it makes more sense to refer to them together, in a single term” (Price, 2015, p. 269).

3. Dolmage: “Retrofits are not designed for people to live and thrive with a disability, but rather to temporarily make the disability go away. The aspiration here is not to empower students to achieve with disability but to achieve around disability or against it, or in spite of it” (2017, p. 70).

REFERENCES


