

SHIFTING THE WEIGHT OF INACCESSIBILITY: ACCESS INTIMACY AS A CRITICAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL ETHOS

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Your friend invites you to a concert. “It’s an accessible venue,” they say, “so you should be able to join us!” The sentiment is nice (you guess). Your friend has at least considered your access needs before inviting you to an event. They clearly haven’t planned their *choosing* the event around your access needs, however. You go online to buy a ticket. While the venue’s website says the venue is indeed accessible, there is nowhere for you to purchase a specific ticket recognizing your accessibility needs. You then email the address you find on their website for customer service concerns. You are sure to ask detailed questions about what type of accessibility options are available, where they are available, and how you can access them. You do this because the simple question of “is your venue accessible and how?” is often not enough for you to get the types of answers you need. You wait two days for a response. The response turns out to be (surprisingly) wonderfully helpful! Customer service responded to all your questions with detailed advice. You look forward to attending the concert with your access needs met.

But is this truly the case—have all such access needs been met? Let’s presume you show up to the concert venue and all proceeds smoothly. What were the conditions that led up to this achievement of access? The point of this paper is to show that a focus on logistical access fails to account for a variety of accessibility needs and perhaps the question “have your needs been met?” isn’t even the right question to ask in the first place if we want to generate responses to ableism that take seriously the depths to which it penetrates.

For example, in the above scenario, it is clear that your friend, while perhaps well intentioned in inviting you, has done so in a way that shows a lack of desire or capacity to imagine their life and plans being shifted given access concerns. The presumption is one of accommodating you in existing plans, rather than preparing a plan for themselves and others that begins from an awareness of ableism and an ethics of accessibility. Additionally, while the venue was built to be accessible, there were a set of emotional, cognitive, and physical labors that went into the various exchanges between you and your friend and you and the customer service agent. Perhaps your friend’s framing of their invite caused

you to feel like a burden or a last-minute addition. Perhaps after thinking this, you tried to comfort yourself with the sentiment, “well, at least they tried.” (Meanwhile, your friend pats themselves on the back for inviting you in a way that recognized your access needs). In addition to this emotional labor, you performed the cognitive labor of verifying certain accessibility accommodations and figuring out *how, when, and where* to access them, as well as the physical labor of typing an email.¹ None of this emotional, cognitive, or physical labor was shared nor was it acknowledged by any individual or institution. And yet, all your access needs were “met.”

The achievement of what we might call logistical, accommodationist access fails to fully appreciate the depths of access-related issues. In what follows, I survey the state of disability activism as it relates to notions of access, comparing rights-based vs. justice-based platforms. I claim that rights-based frameworks, those working primarily from a logistical, accommodationist lens, ultimately fail to envision the depths of transformation necessary to address our current ableist world. I then turn to justice-based frameworks and the notion of “access intimacy” that has emerged from these activist circles. Finally, I explore access intimacy through the lens of critical phenomenology, which I argue helps illuminate the problems with a rights-based framework and makes clear the stakes for building a more liberatory access framework.

Critical phenomenology begins from a set of philosophical (and sociopolitical) assumptions concerning the self and the world that differs from rights-based approaches to accessibility. The subject of critical phenomenology is not the bounded, unified individual we find in rights-based approaches. Rather, in attending to the structures of lived experience, critical phenomenology provides a relational, intersubjective understanding of the self. Beginning from this notion of the self, the stakes of accessibility are (re)clarified. If our social world is not comprised of individuals conceived of as bounded units for accessibility programs to “bring into” its existing organization, then accessibility can be expanded to include attention to some of the most fundamental elements of our ways of living, acting, and being. Accessibility would thus be about intervention at the level of our sedimented patterns of relating and belonging. Additionally, critical phenomenology is particularly attentive to how our familiar patterns of inhabiting the world are informed by structural patterns of oppression. Methodologically, a critical phenomenological approach aims to “[suspend] commonsense accounts of reality in order to map and describe the

¹ Arlie Hochschild has used the term “emotional labor” within the context of wage-based labor to describe the work of employees within professions requiring them to regulate their emotions in particular ways (1983). Many uses of “emotional labor” have arisen since Hochschild’s original coining of the term, which have expanded this definition to include arenas outside the “workplace.” I am using the term more broadly than Hochschild here (and perhaps in ways she may reject—see *The Atlantic’s* 2018 article “The Concept Creep of Emotional Labor” by Julie Beck) to simply remark on the type of unnoticed, unappreciated, and non-reciprocal energies expended in interactions and relationships that demand such acknowledgement. Specifically, I am using it to address the unnoticed, unappreciated and non-reciprocal labor of disability access.

structures that make these accounts possible, to analyze the way they function, and to open up new possibilities for reimagining and reclaiming the commons” (Guenther 2019, 15). Accessibility beyond a rights-based framework and informed by critical phenomenology would thus attend to a host of intersecting oppressions—ableism, racism, sexism, sizeism, classism, heterosexism—to name a few.

Fundamentally, I propose that access is not a practical and isolated *thing* or *event*. It is not about what one person or institution can do for another person 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 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.

I. DISABILITY ACTIVISM: ACCESSIBILITY, RIGHTS, AND JUSTICE

Accessibility has been a vital concern for those concerned with disability rights and justice. The tensions between disability “rights” and “justice,” however, illuminate the different resonances “access” can have. In a rights-based framework, where the norms of inclusion and equality are paramount, access becomes mainly about specific *logistical achievements* of “accommodation” (Mingus 2017). For example, disability activism in the late 20th century U.S. succeeded in establishing legal provisions through the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requiring most business and facilities to provide “reasonable accommodation” for all disabled clients, customers, and members of the public.² This has mainly included addressing mobility constraints with ramps or elevators or providing communication accommodations such as braille or captions. More recently, this has also included the use of content or trigger warnings to address mental health conditions.

The radical nature of the ADA at the time of its inception and today should not go understated. Working against a history of social and physical isolation and discrimination of disabled individuals, the ADA helped to conceptually transform the focus on disability as a so-called “defective” state of an individual to a “defective” state of *society*, demonstrating the move from a medical model to a social model of disability (Silvers 1996).³ At their best, legalistic approaches have fundamentally and forcefully altered built environments to allow for a range of individuals with various disability statuses to literally be together in space.

² Notwithstanding the ambiguity of “reasonable” here as well as the implicit emphasis on physical disabilities, this style of rights-based activism has made significant legal, civil, and social gains.

³ The ADA did not *create* the social model of disability, which was born in the UK in the 1970s; rather, the ADA used the social model of disability in its language and policies.

The ADA signaled a public attempt at rectifying the exclusion of disabled individuals, thus contributing significantly to the necessary material and symbolic anti-ableist transformation of society. Yet too often in practice rights-based frameworks fall short of the radical transformative potential of disability activism by allowing legalistic, accommodationist inclusion to be its pinnacle achievement. Such accommodationist inclusion allows for change only insofar as the central structures and values of society are maintained. For example, independence remains valorized and so “access” amounts to disabled individuals independently accessing those spaces that non-disabled individuals can now access. The focus here is on individual inclusion *into* such spaces, rather than the radical alteration of these spaces to prevent the need for individual accommodations in the first place.⁴ The legalistic, rights-based framework of access ultimately assumes independence as a condition of equality and then presumes equality as a matter of sameness, thus leaving intact fundamental pillars of an ableist society.

Certain assumptions regarding the ontological status of the self, the sociopolitical landscape, and the goals of liberation are evident here. First, a rights-based platform holds a liberal, atomistic view of the self. That is, the bounded, singular individual is the locus of concern—access accommodations are directed at or for the individual. Additionally, rights-based frameworks employ a *reactive* approach to the way in which the organization of society is expected to change. The primary goal is fitting disabled individuals into a world constructed through ableist thought and practice rather than transforming the conditions of such a world in the first place. The goals of liberation in a rights-based platform thus include granting greater individual freedoms in an accommodationist fashion.

Various problems arise with the rights-based framework. First, accessibility remains positioned as a retroactive “fix.” This framework fails to anticipate disability in the world and correspondingly fails to build a world where disability is assumed, centered, and valued. Rights-based notions of accessibility generate the façade of aspirational total independence and self-reliance, neglecting to acknowledge the ways in which no one fully “independently” accesses spaces or relies on themselves to achieve their goals. Our agency or our ability to access spaces (both built and social) is supported (or not) given one’s proximity to the norms and values of a given society.⁵ Take for example the norms of our current capitalist society and the case of chronic illness, pain, or fatigue. In capitalist societies, bodies are evaluated in terms of their productivity and their ability to contribute to a competitive economic market. In this context, rights-based accessibility accommodations more often than not entail what Aurora Levins-Morales describes as “better access to exploitation [and] greater integration

⁴ Consider the discourse and practice of the accessibility philosophy of “universal design” here. In brief, universal design is defined as “the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design” (The Center for Universal Design, 2008).

⁵ Consider here María Lugones’s discussion of “active subjectivity” in *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes* (2003).

into a profit-driven society that is driving thousands of species toward mass extinction and making the planet uninhabitable for humans” (2019, 51). If this is the case, the “work” of rights-based accessibility ends where capitalism begins and a whole host of bodies and minds remain structurally precluded from access-related care and concern. Bodies and minds that cannot be accommodated by a capitalist system that emphasizes efficiency and productivity and produces alienation and exploitation (and oftentimes disability itself) are left out of rights-based discussion of access, narrowing our field of concern for fighting ableism and advancing more liberatory futures. Levins-Morales continues: “The last thing we need is more opportunities to do our part in keeping the interlocking wheels of class, white supremacy, heteromale supremacy, and imperialism turning” (51).

If we are to truly transform our present ableist world, we need to seek fundamental changes to such norms, values, and ways of being, knowing, and acting. Accessibility is not simply about logistics or building a “check-list” style response to inaccessibility (e.g., do we have ramps, braille, etc.). There is a difference between a reductive notion of physical access as accommodation and a more transformative notion of physical access that begins with a commitment to broaden access from the start. The latter views access as embedded in the reasoning for creating built environments themselves; bringing together differently embodied folks becomes a core design feature. Additionally, a radical conception of access goes beyond physical means and demands attention to the wealth of social, emotional, and mental diversities of ways to inhabit the world. The use of content warnings has marked a transition from ignoring to recognizing various psychological diversities. However, when used to “accommodate” students by merely excluding them from the classroom space or from engaging with the material, content warnings do little to anticipate and construct a space acknowledging a range of social and psychological backgrounds.⁶ Rather, understanding, anticipating, and valuing such a range of experiences is key to developing a more just and anti-ableist world. Transformative notions of access attend to the conditions in which we are able to (or not able to) materially and socially build the types of communities we want. In this way, a deeper understanding of accessibility concerns practices of world-making (and re-making) themselves rather than inclusion into an already existing (ableist) world.

Thankfully, disability activists have already begun this important work under the heading of disability *justice*. The disability justice framework was launched in 2005 by individuals working within progressive and radical movements fighting ableism. Disability justice has emerged as a burgeoning movement whose founding members include Patty Berne, Mia Mingus, Stacey Milbern, Leroy Moore, Eli Clare and Sebastian Margaret (Berne 2015). In 2015, the performance collective launched its “10 Principles of Disability Justice.” In this statement, Sins Invalid describe disability justice’s commitment to anti-capitalist,

⁶ Here I am thinking of content or trigger warnings that “accommodate” by simply removing a student from the classroom space or removing a resource from the syllabus for a student without further pedagogical attention to the matter. This absolves a professor of responsibly discussing course content in ways that are more radically inclusive.

intersectional solidarity-building and “cross-movement organizing” and “cross-disability solidarity.” As the authors state:

We cannot comprehend ableism without grasping its interrelations with heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, colonialism, and capitalism, each system co-creating an ideal bodymind built upon the exclusion and elimination of a subjugated “other” from whom profits and status are extracted. (2015)

Disability justice understands all bodies as “unique and essential” and as “[having] strengths and needs that must be met” (Sins Invalid 2015). This is not a problem to be overcome, but the position from which we generate new ways of relating and belonging. If we begin from our inherent interdependence (instead of from aspirational independence) and acknowledge world-making as a collective human practice, a different set of demands for access are raised. Access involves not only the literal inclusion of disabled people into spaces but addressing the fundamental conditions of our ableist status quo. Deeper issues of access include the cognitive and affective dimensions of (in)accessibility and the isolation faced by disabled individuals as they navigate getting their access needs met. While as a society we might perform the motions of providing accessibility at discrete moments in time, there will remain ongoing elements of access to address, involving everyday feeling, habits, values, and worldviews.⁷ Attending to these elements of access commits us to more transformative thought and action. Liberatory endeavors demand transformation at the level of our interpersonal patterns of relating and belonging, which are inextricably tied to the material and social structures in which we find ourselves. Interpersonal relations are not divorced from the context of our built, spatial relations; they are crucial to any fully “*world*”-shaping struggle. In the remainder of this essay, then, I turn to the notion of “access intimacy,” a term used to name the feeling, practice, and politics of interpersonal relationships as they work to shape the world differently.

“Access intimacy” is a term introduced by writer, educator, and activist Mia Mingus on her blog, *Leaving Evidence*, in a post entitled “Access Intimacy: The Missing Link” (2011). Mingus introduces the term to address the interpersonal and socially transformative elements of access typically neglected in standard rights-based approaches to access. Access intimacy is about *liberatory* access rather than what we might call integrationist access. It demands collective attention to reshaping the norms, values, and beliefs structuring our world. For Mingus (2017), access intimacy refers to a mode of relation between disabled people or between disabled and non-disabled people that can be born of concerted

⁷ I use the term “elements” of access to capture myriad facets of accessibility beyond singular, easily identifiable, and oftentimes physical access needs. “Elements” suggest the intertwining nature of physical and mental/emotional needs related to access and also of interpersonal and institutional dimensions of transformative notions of access.

cultivation or instantly intimated and which centrally concerns the feeling of someone genuinely understanding and anticipating another person's access needs. Against a rights-based framework of accessibility that prioritizes the logistics of access, such as if a ramp is in place to accommodate movement with wheels, Mingus's notion of access intimacy calls attention to a deeper level of access needs. She writes: "the *weight* of inaccessibility is not just about ramps, ASL interpreters, straws and elevators It is just as much feeling and trauma as it is material and concrete" (2012). Access intimacy centers recognition of the *impact* of inaccessible environments on disabled (and non-disabled) people and the norm of abled-existence, instead of taking access *achievement* as its main goal.⁸ It demands abled people inhabit the world of disabled individuals rather than better "fitting" disabled individuals within the abled world (Mingus 2017). Access intimacy is the shared sensorial, epistemological, and political labor of transforming the grounds from which inaccessibility is expressed and understood.⁹

While it is often used to name the specific skill disabled individuals have in understanding other disabled individual's needs, writer and activist Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha has been keen to point out that access intimacy is not necessarily "automatic" or "magical"; it is a "process and learnable skill" and can thus be developed by disabled and abled individuals alike "through asking and respecting [disabled individuals'] knowledge" (2018, 252). In what follows, I take as my point of departure the provocations of Mingus and Piepzna-Samarasinha to consider access intimacy as a practice that generates different (anti-ableist) values, norms, and habits for conceiving accessibility.

II. ACCESS INTIMACY: FEELING, PRACTICE, AND POLITIC

In her blog posts, Mingus (2011) develops the notion of access intimacy in relation to disability justice, interdependence, love, and forced intimacy, among other themes. In these pieces, she describes: 1) the *feeling* of access intimacy, 2) the structures of the practice of access intimacy, and 3) access intimacy's relation to liberatory world-building. I address these three elements of access intimacy in what follows.

Mingus explores in great detail the *feeling* of access intimacy from her perspective as a disabled individual, describing it as the "closeness [she] would feel with people who my disabled body just felt safer and at ease with." The feeling of access intimacy is that "*elusive, hard to describe feeling when someone else 'gets' your access needs.*" This comfort, she describes, is purely on an access level, meaning that it is not characterized by emotional or political intimacy, sexual attraction or romantic desire (though access intimacy may be expressed

⁸ This is of course *a* main goal, but not the "end" of access as a liberatory practice.

⁹ "Shared" here does not signal "same" or even "singular." According to Mingus, access intimacy feels like conditions in which access needs can be freely expressed and are met without expectations of repayment in the form of emotional currency or senses of ownership.

within any of these other intimate relations). It is a “freeing, light, loving feeling” that emerges from the ease of sharing or not having to perform the emotional and cognitive labor related to building access (2011). Access intimacy works against feeling the “weight” of inaccessibility, described by Mingus as:

The fear of being left by the people you love and who are supposed to love you. The pain of staring or passing, the sting of disappointment, the exhaustion of having the same conversations over and over again. The throbbing foolishness of getting your hopes up and the shrinking of yourself in order to maintain. It is an echoing loneliness; part shame, part guilt, part constant apology and thank you. (Mingus 2012)

For Mingus, access intimacy is not charity, an ego boost, or a trade for survival. It is a feeling that both generates and is an expression of new patterns of relating and belonging. It builds certain structures or forms of living, being, and relating.

Access intimacy is thus importantly also a *practice*. For Mingus, it can describe cultivated forms of intimacy or instantaneous connections. That is, one might experience access intimacy as a result of years of relationship-building or she might experience it through a more fleeting, ephemeral, singular experience with a stranger. We may call the former “patterned-access intimacy” and the latter “passing-access intimacy.” These describe two types of interpersonal relationships defined by their temporal dimensions. While these relations may be different in appearance and expression, I don’t think they are different in terms of the kind of conditions and relations they generate. Both require an underlying awareness and cultivation of norms, attitudes, and values against the grain of dominant ableist society (though this does not have to be self-consciously articulated to oneself).¹⁰ Whether one experiences access intimacy to be born of transparent self-cultivation or instantaneous connection, it is fundamentally about an *orientation* emergent from and reliant on enacting certain ways of relating and belonging (either repeatedly in passing interactions or within a patterned relationship). Indeed, patterned-access intimacy may condition one to enact passing-access intimacy as a habitual practice itself; that is, one’s patterned practice of access intimacy in an enduring interpersonal relationship might condition one’s habitual *openness* to the passing practice of access intimacy in everyday interpersonal encounters.

What is important is that both patterned and passing access intimacy share a backdrop wherein individuals have built or are building anti-ableist patterns of relationality. As Mingus describes, this way of relating:

¹⁰ Experiencing disability does not make one automatically capable of providing access intimacy. Instead, whether constantly cultivated or instantly intimated, access intimacy emerges from the backdrop of certain decisions about how one is going to live and orient themselves to others.

. . . . has looked like relationships where I *always* feel like I can say what my access needs are, no matter what. Or I can say that I don't know them, and that's ok too. It has looked like people not expecting payment in the form of emotional currency or ownership for access. It has looked like able-bodied people listening to me and believing me. It has looked like people investing in remembering my access needs and checking in with me if there are going to be situations that might be inaccessible or hard disability-body-wise. (2011)

As a practice, then, access intimacy is an emotional, cognitive, and physical labor, though it is not necessarily oriented toward achieving a specific access goal. As Mingus notes, “[s]ometimes access intimacy doesn't even mean that everything is 100% accessible. Sometimes it looks like both of you trying to create access as hard as you can with no avail in an ableist world” (2011). There is a sense in which the core of access intimacy lies in “staying-with” the constant struggle of inaccessibility—going through the mess with someone who understands, takes seriously, co-commiserates, and affirms the reality of the situation. Thus, access intimacy is a type of “interdependency in action” that “calls upon able bodied people to inhabit our (disabled people's) world” rather than fitting disabled people into the abled world (2017). By assuming the inherent value of disability and valuing disabled people's lived experiences, access intimacy calls for a relational transformation of being and becoming-different *together*.

Finally, while access intimacy is a practice rooted in interpersonal relationships, it is fundamentally a liberatory, world-building exercise. Access intimacy helps develop an ethical orientation to the world that is relational and interdependent in nature. Rooted in a disability justice framework, it demands social *transformation* rather than mere integration, reform, or adjustment. Against the myth of independence and the high value placed on striving to be independent, access intimacy calls for a shift from individual to collective responsibility for access. Instead of relying on disabled individuals to identify and instigate access needs, access intimacy shifts the field and locus from which access needs are articulated. That is, it seeks to build the liberatory *conditions* in which access can be grounded and take place, developing a different value system and thus different expectations and commitments for “access” in the first place: access is no longer simply a need of disabled people but a need of the ableist world. What I mean by this is that access intimacy urges us to direct our attention to the deficiencies of an ableist world rather than the supposed deficiencies within individual bodies that must be “corrected.” As a world-building politics, access intimacy fundamentally rejects the status quo, seeking transformation *of* rather than inclusion *into* the abled world. Ultimately, as Mingus describes, “access shifts from being silencing to freeing; from being isolating to connecting; from hidden and invisible to visible; from burdensome to valuable; from a resentful obligation to an opportunity; from shameful to powerful; from rigid to creative” (2017).

In this section I've outlined the tripartite dimensions of access intimacy as a feeling, practice, and political vision. These dimensions are interrelated. For example, the feeling of access intimacy that Mingus wishes to capture emerges from a particular character

of a relationship. Additionally, access intimacy concerns a specific type of project: it is a project of world-building through the development of interpersonal practices shaped by the recognition and value of interdependence and body/mind variation. Furthermore, there are large-scale political implications given the values, norms, and attitudes shaping interpersonal relationships of access intimacy. Beginning from the point of interpersonal relationships, access intimacy is the hinge for generating both a particular transformation of personal feeling as well as broader attempts at changing our world's social and material organization.

III. CRITICAL PHENOMENOLOGY, ONTOLOGICAL INTIMACY, AND CONCRETE INTIMACY

In the previous section, I outlined Mia Mingus's description of access intimacy. Mingus depicts access intimacy along multiple registers: personal feeling, practical orientation, and sustained political vision (micro, mezzo, and macro levels, respectively). In this section, I will outline how access intimacy can be understood philosophically, particularly through the methodological lens of critical phenomenology. My reason for using critical phenomenology here is twofold. First, it radically challenges the oftentimes taken for granted notions we have concerning the relations between selves and between selves and the world. Critical phenomenology fundamentally challenges understandings of the subject as distinct and bounded. In so doing, it provides a different field of reference to creatively think through some of our most pressing social problems. Second, in attending to the structures of experience in a world built via patterns of oppression, critical phenomenology enacts a liberatory political practice by "struggl[ing] for liberation from the structures that privilege, naturalize, and normalize certain experiences of the world while marginalizing, pathologizing, and discrediting others" (Guenther 2019, 15). My aim is ultimately to clarify, deepen, and explore the notion of access intimacy through this lens.

Kym Maclaren (2018) discusses intimacy in the context of critical phenomenology in her essay "Intimacy as Transgression and the Problem of Freedom." The typical approach to understanding intimacy in the context of structural oppression is to envision intimacy as something *affected* by systemic forces of oppression, but not "in itself an institution or practice that strips us of freedom" (18). It seems to follow, then, that in liberating our intimate relations from external structures of oppression we might produce a safe haven from or even build resistance to society's oppressive forces. In this rendering, a critical phenomenological approach to intimacy interrogates and develops ways of living that mitigate the systemic forces of oppression that hinder it. But Maclaren takes a different approach. She argues that our intimate relations are *themselves* the site of a fundamental imposition of "unfreedom" that would remain even if all systemic forms of oppression ended. She names this fundamental imposition "ontological intimacy" (20). She remains interested, however, in theorizing the promotion of greater freedom, agency, and becoming for individuals. In exploring the multiple layers of what she calls "concrete intimacy," Maclaren argues that by "owning up to the unfreedom that we inevitably

impose upon our intimate others, and learning, precisely through an acknowledgment of that inevitable imposition of unfreedom” we “will enable the cultivation, within intimate relationships, of forms of agency that can stand up to and transform systems of oppression” (27, 19).

Maclaren’s vision of intimacy is grounded in a phenomenological view of the subject and freedom. She differentiates this view from the Cartesian conception of the self as atomistic, individualist, and self-governing. Any *limits* to this bounded Cartesian self enacting their agency are imagined as coming from the outside, from external relations of power that are imposed on an otherwise freely acting self. When it comes to intimacy, the Cartesian account understands intimacy in terms of certain beliefs and feelings one has concerning another person. In this account, intimacy arises when one believes one knows another and feels known by them or feels the same way as another person. This type of intimacy operates at the level of distinct consciousnesses generating representations of the other. Intimacy here does not equate to actually being with another but being with a version of another generated by beliefs and feelings one has about another person. As Maclaren writes, on the Cartesian view, “it is only our judgments and feelings that are intimately present to us” (2018, 21). We are in a sense locked into our individual ways of making sense of the world and encounter others’ behaviors only as objects in our world.

Against the Cartesian model, Maclaren follows a Merleau-Pontian account of intimacy and of the experience of selves in the world. In this account, the other first “touches us, moves us, inhabits, and is inhabited by us” rather than being first “represented by us” (2018, 21). Prior to the other being experienced as an object, they are what Maclaren (through Merleau-Ponty) describes as a “co-intentionality: a coexistence towards the world” (23). In this account, we do not simply discover other consciousnesses “out there” in the world, for they are “already at work within our ways of being in the world” (22). Maclaren provides the example of a child showing a parent a worm found in the dirt. Initially excited by their find, the child is redirected by the parent’s intentionality, which suggest, through a bodily response, that “dirty” is “bad.” This “sweeps the child’s experience up and carries it along with it to relevant realities in the world.” In effect, “the parent’s stance transgresses into the child’s and attunes him in a certain way towards the world of dirtiness and cleanliness” (23). This element of transgression lies in sharp contrast with the Cartesian model, according to which there is “no such seeing with” (24). In the Merleau-Pontian model, transgression into others’ worlds is immediate and fundamental. As Maclaren writes:

The rules, policies and norms into which I am disciplined carry with them . . . visions of what it is to be a subject, and my proper relation to self, others, work, knowledge, and so on. But these rules that we live by are themselves communicated to me, for the most part and most powerfully, not by explicit assertions but by the bodily behaviors and embodied attitudes of others. (22)

Our intimate encroachment on others and their intimate encroachment on us is something that is ongoing and fundamental, according to Maclaren. This need not be understood as a negative form of disciplining, however, but as a condition of learning, acting, and being itself. The transgression of others on our experience “open[s] up for us new possibilities while also revealing the limitations of our characteristic modes of sense-making.” It is only because we “co-inhabit others’ perspectives” and “are drawn into their way of perceiving or they transgress into ours” that new dimensions of reality are opened for us. This transgression into another’s perspective, named “ontological intimacy,” forms the basis of all interpersonal relating. It is ontological in the sense that “it occurs simply by virtue of the kinds of beings we are—intersubjective beings” and a matter of intimacy because “the other touches and shapes me not just from the outside, but within my most ‘private,’ personal experience” (24).

Access intimacy is both informed by and a response to our ontological intimacy. Access intimacy explicitly calls our attention to the various failures of acknowledging the fundamental ways in which we are intertwined as human beings. It contests the notion that subjects are or can ever be fully cut off from one another. Access intimacy, then, implicitly accepts a phenomenological account of selves as fundamentally intersubjective and interdependent. Beyond making these ontological claims, however, access intimacy makes explicit the ethical stakes of the matter: if we are tied in these ways by virtue of our very being, how will we respond? This question is central to addressing ableism and inaccessibility. What makes access intimacy something worth naming and claiming in the first place is the utter lack of interest in or attention to the many failures of responsibility occurring on both interpersonal and institutional levels regarding access. Therefore, the ontological intimacy underpinning notions of access intimacy invites us to *ask new questions* regarding what is required to build a more liberatory world. For instance, what does it mean to be constituted by others, especially when it comes to the variety of bodyminds we inhabit?¹¹ How ought we respond to power asymmetries inherent in interpersonal relationships, especially those where one partner may need the other for their immediate survival? In what ways are individuals in an interpersonal relationship transformed by virtue of their everyday intimacies?¹² In the final section of this paper, I address these questions in greater depth.

¹¹ I take this term from Sami Schalk’s *Bodyminds Reimagined: Disability, Race, and Gender in Black Women’s Speculative Fiction* (2018) to refer to the inextricable enmeshment of body and mind.

¹² Much work addressing these questions has been done within feminist relational ethics. Particularly, the notion of autonomy has been transfigured from a vision associated with Cartesian ontologies of the self and freedom to one recognizing the ways in which “individual” autonomy is supported via intersubjective relationships and broader institutional structures. The term “relational autonomy” has been used to capture this. Additionally, as relational theorists make clear, it is not only the case that we are empirically relational in that we influence and shape the lives of others around us, but that our relationality is fundamental and essential to the existence of selves. For further reading, see Mackenzie and Stoljar (2000) and Downie and Llewellyn (2012).

Maclaren provides helpful heuristics for answering these questions in her analysis of concrete experiences of intimacy. She understands concrete intimacy as operating on two interrelated levels: momentary mutual recognition and shared habits of recognition that persist through time. Together, these produce the philosophical architecture for how we might reconceive practices of liberatory world-building. While ontological intimacy constitutes our fundamental being-with others and is thus operative to some extent whether we are engaging with a stranger or close intimate, concrete intimacy may be experienced as an ephemeral, in the moment interaction *and/or* as the development of shared habits enduring through time. Distinguishing concrete intimacy from ontological intimacy helps us understand the harmful or beneficial character of everyday encounters which are mediated through ontological intimacy. There are ways in which one's fundamental encroachment on another can be (and often is) painful, alienating, and oppressive. Consider the earlier example of the child and parent provided by Maclaren. The parent's redirection of the worm as "dirty" or "bad" can produce an alienating effect on the child wherein their initial self-image as a "good explorer" is supplanted by the image of themselves as "bad and dirty." This, then, would not be an example of concrete intimacy. For Maclaren, there can be momentary concrete intimacy without shared habitual concrete intimacy and shared habitual concrete intimacy without momentary concrete intimacy. However, concrete intimacy is most fully realized when the two work together such that the "layer of shared institutions supports mutual recognition and growth, and the layer of current mutual recognition can nourish and transform the shared institutions" (2018, 28).

Mingus's account of access intimacy distinguishes between two levels or registers in which access intimacy may occur, as well. To recall, access intimacy as described by Mingus can be experienced through what I've called "passing" and "patterned" access intimacy. These appear to loosely map onto the fleeting and lasting forms of concrete intimacy described by Maclaren, respectively. In a moment of passing access intimacy, individuals establish an instantaneous connection wherein one (or both) individuals anticipate and recognize fully the other's access needs. Via the establishment of patterned access intimacy, *routines* of anticipating and recognizing another's access needs form over time. For Mingus, these are represented as two distinct expressions of access intimacy. What makes access intimacy transformative and a world-building endeavor, however, is when these layers work together so that passing encounters fostered by access intimacy become an orientation or way of life and patterned relationships provide the field of reference for the ongoing enactment of freedom found in the sense of mutual recognition and shared becoming. A fuller account of access intimacy will require further attention to enduring patterns of relating and belonging and the momentary mutual recognition that occurs within these relationships.

Maclaren describes enduring patterns of relating and belonging through the language of "interpersonal institutions." Interpersonal institutions are patterned behaviors or structures of relating shared between individuals. Think here of the mundane within an intimate relationship: "shared customs around dinner-making, money-spending, television-watching, and conflict." These are microcosmic instances of interpersonal institutions that

coalesce to provide a “specific character . . . in the ways in which these dynamics establish and support a certain identity and position for each member of the relationship” (2018, 29). This character provides a frame of reference for actions and installs shared values and assumptions. It “found(s) an ‘intersubjective or symbolic field . . . which is our milieu, our hinge, our jointure’” (Merleau-Ponty 2010, cited in Maclaren 2018, 29). Key to interpersonal institutions is the sense in which they are ongoing practices without an explicit purpose. Rather, such practices are about generating the dimensions of a shared field of learning, living, acting, being and perhaps most importantly, *becoming*. When it comes to access, then, a more liberatory account of accessibility would emphasize the generation of this shared field rather than the literal achievement of what we now tend to understand as “access” (legalistic, logistical, rights-based access). Access intimacy invites us to practice forms of care and what I would call sociopolitical and epistemological orientations to the world as practices of access themselves. For instance, a disability justice framework encouraging the development of access intimacy would include attention to and remedies for social isolation in the face of unachievable logistical access. If inaccessibility is characterized not only by logistical challenges, but the generation of certain feelings—such as “the fear of being left by the people you love and who are supposed to love you, the pain of staring or passing, the sting of disappointment, the exhaustion of having the same conversations over and over again”—which are brought on by the failure to acknowledge ontological intimacy (resulting in failed *concrete* intimacy), then accessibility will need to respond to these concerns on a sociopolitical, epistemological, and phenomenological level (Mingus 2012).

IV. THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ETHOS OF ACCESS INTIMACY

In this concluding section I elucidate the ways in which access intimacy is not only a critical phenomenological practice but an *ethical* one. It involves what we might call an *ethos of accessibility*. I use the term “ethos” to describe how a transformative notion of accessibility primarily entails the development of a certain character or fundamental orientation to the world rather than adherence to certain rules of action. In line with my earlier critique of disability rights and other legalistic approaches to access, an ethos of accessibility goes beyond responding to a checklist of duties. Instead, it speaks to what is basic to human existence, our ability to care and be connected to others and to connect in ways that manifest possibilities for human flourishing. Maurice Hamington describes the “corporeal-centered epistemology” of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology that “demonstrates care to be a human capacity that can be developed or suppressed through habits” (2004, 39). While Hamington is speaking in the register of “care” and in conversation with and against care ethics as an established field of study, his attention to what an embodied ethos entails is helpful. If the body is our medium for having a world, the body is also the medium for morality, according to Hamington, and we can choose to cultivate our fundamental bodily capacities for care or allow them to deteriorate. “Bodily” capacities here should not be reduced to “physical” capacities for care but rather include a range of possible body/mind interactions. Additionally, such a phenomenologically-based ethics

does not remain at the level of the individual but expands to include the cultivation of social habits informing both private and public realms.

What would an ethos of accessibility entail in a disability justice framework centering access intimacy? If our goal is to build more liberatory forms of relating and belonging, what practical elements ought we acknowledge? Since, as Maclaren describes, concrete intimacy is most fully realized in a situation in which interpersonal institutions and momentary recognition work in tandem to build freedom, I will discuss access intimacy in the context of these enduring relationships.

If, ontologically, we inevitably intimately transgress into the worlds of others, then in situations of close, enduring relationships, the ethical task of managing such transgressions becomes most apparent. The goal then, as Maclaren writes, is to:

... live our enduring relationships, with their inevitable transgressions and their resulting institutions, in ways that allow for genuine becoming: for a creative taking up and expressive transformation of the past, for the establishment of new institutions—personal and interpersonal—that better support each person’s growth. (2018, 33)

For Maclaren, freedom is understood as becoming and is realized in a process of creative self-transformation. It is not about isolated choices in a given instant but generating a new way of life itself. Ultimately, this development of freedom concerns a certain responsibility one has by virtue of their inevitable transgressions onto/into another. Supporting and promoting an intimate other’s becoming requires partners to help each other allow new ways of life and of being to germinate, opening each other up to the tensions within each person’s shared field of reference and “to find therein an impetus and means for going farther, for self-overcoming, and for realizing new, freer ways of being [themselves]” (35).

In disability justice circles, “crip doulaing” is one term used to help identify this work of germination and freedom-building. In conversation with Stacey Milbern, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha reflects on Milbern’s terminology of crip doulaing, or the process of “crips mentoring and assisting with birthing into disability culture/community, different kinds of disability, etc.” This experience is both ubiquitous in disability communities and invisibilized in an ableist world. Crip doulaing concerns the rebirth of the self as disabled or as differently disabled. It is a practice of becoming that involves, as Milbern describes, “learning how to get medicine, drive a wheelchair, hire attendants, change a diet, date, have sex, make requests, code switch, live with an intellectual disability, go off meds, etc.” (quoted in Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018, 240). Support in navigating this process is indispensable and necessary in a world that lacks such structures of support. Naming “disability doulaship” helps build alternative worlds with lexicons acknowledging the role of doulaship. As Piepzna-Samarasinha describes, the transition to becoming disabled within an ableist culture is often seen as a type of death or end to one’s previously abled or more-abled self, but:

. . . naming disability as a space we can be born into, not alone but supported and welcomed by other disabled people—and then again and again as we acquire new disabilities or discover words for things that have been there all along—that warm doulaed space creates a container that changes not only the entire way both individuals can experience disability but the ways disability communities can be formed. (2018, 241)

Piepzna-Samarasinha is describing here both a type of ethos needed for generating new communities and the ethos of such already-existing alternative communities. Access intimacy is a *practical ethos* in that, while it might reject the notion of a set of preexisting moral principles to which one's actions ought to conform, it nevertheless relies on the habitual formation of everyday, embodied actions and relations.

Our everyday habits and relations are not only repetitive acts. They are what Hamington describes as “physical anchors that can be used as launching points for the imagination” (2004, 96). For Piepzna-Samarasinha, *crip doulaship* relies on “crip *wealth*,” or the myriad ways in which disabled folks develop knowledges, skills, and “wildly imaginative solutions” to navigating the everyday. It illuminates the ways in which “disabled people . . . [think] of ideas abled people never would have, primarily by focusing their time and efforts on using what they do have, the space between them, rather than putting their attention on the limitation or lack of ability.” Crip wealth recognizes these ways of living without sensationalizing them. Piepzna-Samarasinha aptly describes crip wealth as “the gift of [disabled individuals] being the normal” (2018, 252). It is a centering of what we might call the “disabled every day” in order to build a space where shame and strangeness about everyday tasks have no place. Crip wealth and crip doulaship are integral to access intimacy. They act as expressions of the everyday, practical ways in which one might take responsibility for our inevitable encroachments on others in ways that enhance another's freedom rather than alienate it.

As a practical ethos, access intimacy also centers the shared work “to build the conversations and piece together the relationship and [the] trust that we know we [disabled folks] need for access—that we know we need in order to survive.” This trust moves the work of access outside simply the realm of logistics and into the realm of relationships, “understanding disabled people as humans, not burdens” (Mingus 2017). The rejection of burden language is accompanied by an understanding of the positive project of access intimacy as taking on and building a shared map or topography of access, whereby in virtue of the connections constituting such a project, the conditions in which one enacts one's aims shift. Within relations of access intimacy, one becomes differently oriented and able to generate different capacities. For instance, as Ami Harbin describes in her work on disorientation, in situations of illness, one may “need to pay attention to [her] own or others' bodies more than usual, to care for them differently, or to stop using them in ways we have done unthinkingly in the past” (2016, 100). Disorientations can, according to Harbin, have “tenderizing effects” and produce a variety of capacities (119).

Such effects include a heightened ability to sense vulnerability, to live unprepared and against the grain of dominant norms, and to develop a shared communal feeling, or what she calls “in-this-togetherness” (112). Harbin’s use of the term “tenderizing” refers to the ways in which our taken for granted habits and expectations become more pliable and changeable, allowing one to “embody social norms and practiced habits of interaction differently, in ways more responsive to the ways the fragility, relationality, and non-ideal realities of the world affect lives” (120). When one’s habits and practices are “tenderized,” they generate a portal, an openness to the needs of others around them. This allows one to realize relevant and achievable needs, but also such needs that are unexpected, inexpressible, and perhaps presently cannot be met. An ethos of accessibility inspired by access intimacy more fundamentally shifts one’s relation to others and to an ableist world. It rejects the tacit acceptance of the values of control, mastery, and certainty and the norms of independence and self-reliance. Such an ethos instead involves a choice, whether conscious or unconscious, to begin with the awareness of our fundamental connectedness to and reliance on one another for the development of more liberatory forms of relating and belonging.

The goal of access intimacy, we might say, is to invite us to recognize the ways in which we are already infiltrating each other’s worlds and to take responsibility for that. For example, an “inter-abled” relationship may demand an acknowledgment of an inherent power imbalance given our current ableist world.¹³ The response to this ought not be to aim to “correct” that imbalance by trying to make the disabled partner “more like” the abled partner in terms of developing normalized paths of independence, but to demand the abled partner inhabit the world of the disabled partner and to take on and grapple with the conditions of ableism as their own (since, in the critical phenomenological rendering of intimacy, they are, in a sense, their own). As a liberatory approach to access, access intimacy does not produce or demand specifics like an “accessibility checklist,” wherein if everything were “checked off” access would be achieved. Rather, access intimacy is about incubating shared plans of action as a space of empowerment and intimacy, or empowered intimacy, we might say. As Harbin writes:

Being tenderized leads to capacities to relate to vulnerable others more gently and generously and to exercise one’s powers more reluctantly One comes to relate to others and a moral landscape in more tentative, dynamic ways that can change in keeping with changes in that landscape. (2016, 122)

Access intimacy involves a rigorous ethos of accessibility. Such an ethos is ongoing and shifting. At base, it requires others, leading to dependencies and uncertainties that demand accountability, both momentary and enduring. Above all, access intimacy is about shifting our values to emphasize freedom through connection and collective, rather than individual, responsibility for access.

¹³ By “inter-abled” I mean a relationship where one partner is disabled and another is non-disabled.

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