

Rejecting a Pre-COVID 19 Normal: An Autohistoria-Teoría Exploring (Dis) Ability Justice Reform in Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper is an exploration of disability justice in higher education in a post-COVID era. First, I use autohistoria-teoría, a lineage of autoethnography, to weave a story of my struggles with an invisible disability as a student and as a faculty member with the existing scholarship. Second, I extensively situate my intersectional identity as a queer, disabled Latina to situate my argument as to why crips need online options for education. I then critique the gatekeeping of educational programs that can provide financial liberation for marginalized community members. Lastly, this paper challenges the assumption that online education is not rigorous.

Keywords: Disability Justice, Higher Education, Post-COVID, Autohistoria-Teoría, Invisible Disability, Women of Color, Crips, Gatekeeping, Rigor

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Prelude

Rejecting a pre-COVID 19 normal; A call for (dis) ability justice reform in higher education

I slip into pandemic time with ease mingled with acute distress, the latter mitigated in part by the class privileges that a tenured job and light skin afford me. I observe many of my (nondisabled) friends and colleagues and wonder if they realize that they, too, are living some iteration of crip time now.

-María Elena Cepeda (2021, p.317)

What if I don't want to go back to normal? What if normal is what made it so hard to survive before COVID 19? Just weeks before Fresno State shut down in-person instruction, I was sitting in the office of the Masters of Social Work (MSW) program coordinator, being told that in no such way was it possible for me to attend any of my classes via Zoom. My disability services coordinator told me we could fight this, but I had nothing left in me. So on February 12th, 2020, I emailed my intent to withdraw from Fresno State's MSW program. On March 12th, 2020, the entire University went to online instruction. Like Cepeda

(2021), I, too, "have been writing this article in my head for years" (p.303). When bureaucracy and systemic violence crushes you, again and again, I am left with only my voice. That, they can never take.

It wasn't until we were forced online that I understood the essence of disability justice. When given the accommodation of working from home, I could now work almost full time, whereas, when I am forced to adhere to traditional working circumstances or class schedules, I max out at 3-4 classes a week. And even with limiting my schedule, sometimes I am coming home and combating pain and exhaustion. I was not alone in finding the pandemic lessening the symptoms of my invisible disability. I heard from peers with Lyme disease, fibromyalgia, and others who were suddenly experiencing fewer flair-ups because now they were receiving "real" accommodations. How do we go back to "normal" when "normal" is what caused us to be sick?

This article is inspired by Piepzna-Samarasinha's (2018) title to her introduction, "Writing (with) a Movement from Bed," which made me feel seen in ways I had not since I started having health issues. I got my Ph.D. from bed. If I had attended in-person college as a single mother of twins with complex post-traumatic stress disorder (CPTSD), I would not be where I am today. This paper is a manifesto of why

some of us “crips”¹ need online options for education. It is a critique of educational programs that can provide financial liberation for marginalized communities that are impossible to access if you are disabled, a single parent, or experience any variety of systemic oppressions. Finally, this paper challenges the assumption that online education cannot be and is not rigorous.

Disability Statistics

The Center for Disease Control (CDC) reports that 26% of adults in the United States have a disability. However, the CDC reports primarily on what they call “functional disability types,” categorized as mobility, cognition, independent living, hearing, vision, and self-care. Whereas in Academia, for the purposes of accommodations, there are four major disability categories: visual impairments, hearing impairments, motor impairments, and cognitive impairments (Crow, 2008). This disparity primarily relates to how disability is framed within public policy. From a governmental perspective, there is primarily a financial focus and an emphasis on specific disabilities that inhibit the ability to work and require social security payments. However, in Academia, the framework we are using is disability justice, which pertains to making education accessible to disabled people².

According to the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics (2021), approximately 12% of students enrolled in a postsecondary program report a disability. Since there are close to 22 million students enrolled in college around the United States, this means over 2.4 million of those students have reported a disability (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). In addition, approximately 3.89% of enrolled students have a verified disability (Services for Students with Disabilities, 2018). However, as explained by the Director of Services for Students with Disabilities at CSU, Fresno, “I do like to disclose that the numbers on the CSU website are not as accurate as we would like. This is because the numbers are pulled as of census date during the semester (students can apply for

services throughout the semesters/quarters), and it only collects those who are full-time enrolled” (Personal Communication, August 25th, 2021).

This points to a few problems with the data set. Primarily, the entire demographic of part-time students is wholly left out of the data. Further, access to reliable continuity of care and health insurance are known barriers to the most marginalized student populations. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2020) reports that one in three adults with a disability does not have a “usual health care provider” or have “unmet health care” needs. This makes it difficult to access the medical documentation needed to pursue disability accommodations. Lastly, there are still known stigmas to mental health-related disabilities that certainly would contribute to fewer students seeking a diagnosis. Only over 20% of verified disabilities at CSU, Fresno are considered a “Psychological or Psychiatric Disability.” As a Latina and a professor, I can attest that both cultures shy away from conversations around psychological disabilities. As a Latina, depression or anxiety, or any other mental health issue, were the kinds of things that put you in a facility. This tracks generationally with the prior approaches to disabled people, isolated from the world. As a professor, but more so as a woman of color professor, we cannot afford to be stigmatized further by a mental health disability.

Disability Justice Definitions

Schalk (2013) explains how disability studies and disability justice came from within the disability rights movement to “resist the medical model of disability and introduce the study of disability in the humanities and social sciences” (p.12). There was a political shift away from this governmental/fiscal/medical-focused definition of disability in the last several decades and a push for a more person-centered integration of disabled folks into everyday life (Linton, 1998). More recently, there have been further critiques by intersectional disabled scholars such as Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018) to move away from the “mainstream disability rights organizing’s white-dominated, single-issue focus” (p.15). Kafer (2013)

¹“Cripple” was originally a derogatory term meant to label people with varying disabilities. It has also been reclaimed within the disability community as a form of activism to name our own experiences and has now expanded into its own progressive disability theory called “crip theory” (Linton, 1998, Kafer, 2013).

²There has been a lot of back and forth around person-first language (person with a disability) versus identity first language (disabled person) and the preference varies drastically between groups of people. However, more recently disabled, and autistic scholars have pushed back against this framing of disability and

choose to claim the identities such as disabled or autistic. While I am still following the discourse on this, I choose to align myself with other disabled and autistic scholars’ movement to reclaim these identities for ourselves. Dr. Nick Walker has done some great work on this as a trans-autistic scholar. As I was editing this paper Dr. Walker published an essay on her website discussing this exact topic. You can find it here: https://neuroqueer.com/person-first-language-is-the-language-of-autistiphobic-bigots/?fbclid=IwAR2ytNdYP5zkXeF_Pyf2RBQOTm1LrpveecjQY0MrIru3b4wtvK4-3ke3eyA

mirrors these same critiques “not even the ivory tower of academia protected me from these dismal projections of my future: once I made it to graduate school, I had a professor reject a paper proposal about cultural approaches to disability; she cast the topic as inappropriate because insufficiently academic” (p.2), and “the voices and experiences of disabled people are absent” (p.5).

While acknowledging the field has improved drastically in terms of representation, Schalk (2018) makes similar critiques around the whiteness of the field: “the field of disability studies, while often attentive to gender and sexuality, has often avoided issues of race, remaining centered on white experiences and representations of disability” (p. 4). Schalk’s (2013, 2018), Kafer’s (2013), and Piepna-Samarasinha’s (2018) critiques reflect discourses around intersectionality theory and representation in academic scholarship. The origin of the term intersectionality came from scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) to define the unique compounded experiences of systemic oppression, and institutional failures to protect, Black women from discrimination that is based on their negative associations with racialization, sex assignment, gender, class, and more. Nash (2008) expanded Crenshaw’s original intention of intersectionality and articulated how this compounded experience could include any variety of identities of oppression such as ability, religion, class, sexuality, etc. We see this issue come up in feminist discourse ad nauseum.

Our Tenure Track (TT) professorship is overwhelmingly white and male, followed by white women, then men of color, with women of color at the bottom. For example, at The California State University (CSU), white men and women represent almost 60% of the TT faculty, while women of color in the TT only represent 18% (CSU Faculty, 2019). When the discourse does offer “diverse” voices outside of the white male perspective, it overwhelmingly prioritizes white women’s and men of color’s experiences. Additionally, because of various politics around publishing and systemic barriers to publishing, the truth is we see far less research published from complex intersectional identities, especially in peer-reviewed journals. The CSU does not have data on how much of their professorship has a disability. We can only guess that disabled women of color professors, occupying multiple oppressed identities, represent a much

smaller percentage than the 18% total at the CSU. And it is not that we don’t write; we do. You find our narratives on zines, blogs, Instagram, and other places that require less gatekeeping to get our stories out there. Piepna-Samarasinha (2018) herself quips “essay books don’t sell” (p.27) to signify the importance of telling our stories but how they are equally not valued in a capitalist academic elitist paradigm.

Not only are there consequences for marginalized faculty to disclose disability (Cepeda, 2021), but there continues to be critiques from scholars around utilizing autoethnography as a valid form of knowledge production. However, a autoethnographic methods, especially by scholars occupying several marginalized positionalities, exists as a transgressive form of knowledge production to disrupt the centering of privileged white voices in academic spaces. Therefore, I come to this paper with my unique positionality to bring another perspective to the scholarship of disability accommodations for disabled students. I further cite the validity of this approach to autoethnography in the next section.

Living/Falling Between the Cracks

As a critical woman of color feminist/scholar³, I must frame all my writing within my intersectional identities. I do not believe we can be objective about research, especially when it pertains to something so personal. I can, however, be responsible for naming the spaces in which I have privilege and also the spaces where I have experienced oppression. For this purpose, I am going to tell you about myself extensively⁴. While this can thwart the hard-core academic’s eye for being too casual and informal, there is a pedagogical foundation for me writing in this manner.

Saliency was a term that was pivotal for me in naming myself. I first came across this term in Robin D’Angelo’s (2018) *White Fragility* to highlight how multiracial people fit into discourses on anti-racism. Later, I came across it being used in the counseling field (Swanson & Fouad, 2015). It is used to understand what intersectional identity has the most impact on a client when working with them. Saliency is about understanding the hierarchy of how intersecting identities impact lived experience.

My salient marginalized intersectional identity is that of a border crosser. I never fit in anywhere. There

³ I adhere to the Loretta Ross definition of woman of color that comes from the 1977 National Women’s Conference in Houston, Texas. I come to the term as an ethnically Cuban American minority who is aligned in the fight against oppressions of other women of color, and specifically with Black women’s agendas.

⁴ These reflect feminist values of critical reflexivity and Gloria Anzaldúa’s “risking the personal”, both of which are foundational in *Autohistoria-Teoría*

is no box for me to check. I am always both inside and outside of spaces at the same time. Anzaldúa (2015) calls border crossers *nepantleres*⁵ and defines them as “those who have survived (and been transformed by) their encounters with/in *nepantla*” (p.245). *Nepantleres* are folks who have a unique vantage point from the lived experience of being between spaces. The most apt analogy for *nepantleres* is the dandelion that forges their way through the cracks of concrete. I have had access throughout my life to various systemic privileges. I have also experienced systemic oppression based on my gender, ethnicity, class, ability, and conditions under which I have mothered⁶. However, as a *nepantlere*, I am constantly moving between these spaces as a complex amalgamation of privileged and oppressed.

I am a decolonial Anzaldúan scholar by heart. My writing is meant to break the fourth wall of academia, the personal is political for me, and Anzaldúa’s (2000) concept of “risking the personal” (Keating 2000) is foundational in her form of the autoethnographic writing method she coined, and called this form *autohistoria-teoría* (Anzaldúa 2015). While *autohistoria-teoría* is under the umbrella of autoethnography, there are some distinct differences in the approach to knowledge production. I explain the lineage of autoethnography from autotheory to *autohistoria-teoría* from a decolonial perspective.

Autoethnography is about connecting one’s stories to cultural critiques, whether political, social or beyond (Ellis & Adams, 2014). Autotheory moves a step further to critique the Cartesian split in knowledge production and utilizes a relational approach between embodied knowledge and traditional academic scholarship to assist theory in coming alive (Johnson, 2003, Young, 1997). *Autohistoria-teoría*, unlike the above methods, prioritizes the auto by “writing within oppressive structures” and connects to “interwoven individual and collective identities” (Anzaldúa, 2015, p.242; Arfuso, 2020). It is a paradigmatic shift from western critiques of navel-gazing because when an individual is a part of a marginalized person of color community, we are tapping into what Allen (1986) refers to as the “tribal psychic consciousness.” Allen utilized this

metaphor to reflect how Indigenous people are a part of a collectivist culture; therefore, it impacts how they tell stories.

While not all people of color are American Indigenous, a similar phenomenon has been identified for other marginalized scholars of color. For example, with Cuban American writers, Alvarez-Borland (1994) refers to it as our necessity to connect to other Cubans both on and off the island. The collective trauma of our exile from Cuba and the ever-changing U.S. politics making it unreliable and difficult to maintain a connection to Cuba cannot be separated from our scholarship. A recent publication by Dr. Cepeda (2021) utilizes *testimonio*, another Latina-centered form of autoethnography, to tell her own story of disability in academia. She crushingly echoes, “Crip time is lost time” (p.302).

This entanglement and complexity of lived experience with crip time are shared among disabled folks. Bhattacharya and Keating (2017) make similar articulations about writing from the position of “Other” within colonial paradigms. Additionally, throughout this paper, you will notice extensive footnotes of where I have come across specific perspectives. As an academic in marginalized spaces, much of the cutting-edge theorizing comes from these relationships that cannot be quantified via peer-reviewed journals. Our communities’ discourses behind closed doors of oppression and marginalization are collective knowledge. I can elevate these voices and perspectives by utilizing footnotes. While there is much more to be said about the validity of prioritizing a marginalized perspective in academic writing, I am not here to discourse at length on this topic, but I am here to tell you who I am and my lived experience, such that we can glean new possible futures for disabled bodies in a post COVID era⁷. I will explain in better detail a few examples below: first, my experience as a white assumed Latina, secondly, my experience as being invisibly disabled, thirdly being a “passing” queer, and finally, my experience with social class.

I am a white assumed (Bueno-Hansen & Montes, 2019), multiracial daughter of a Cuban refugee, and a first-generation French/Italian son of immigrants. For

⁵The “proper” term here is “*nepantlera/o*” however, since I am positioning myself as a border crosser in this paper, and as being between spaces, I feel it’s most accurate to step away from non-binary language for the purposes of this paper. While there are many ongoing debates within the Latina/o communities on how this should be accomplished, I am choosing to go with the option of placing a neutral “e” instead of “a/o” or an “x” because the “e” is more natural for native Spanish speakers, which is who I would like to center as my audience for this paper, specifically those of us who are first or second generation.

⁶While the conditions under which one mothers (or parents) is not officially considered an intersectional identity that experiences systemic oppression, I make the argument of it being as such in my dissertation (Arfuso, 2020).

⁷While I have attempted to delineate a brief validation of this writing method, I have a much more comprehensive discourse on this topic in the following publications: *Illuminations: An Autohistoria-Teoría of the Cuban American experience healing trauma through mothering and breastfeeding*, and “Whispers of the Soul; Autohistoria-Teoría as Decolonial Knowledge Production.”

the first six years of my twins' lives, I was a sole parent and a recipient of food stamps and state-sponsored medical insurance. When I was 17, I was raped by a serial rapist and spent the last 20 plus years living with CPTSD. Since COVID, I have identified myself as living with a disability. As disabled. Although, I have been disabled since I was 17. I adhere to Linton's (1998) definition of disability versus a medical definition of disability for state-sponsored disability pay. I can work like any person if I am given reasonable accommodations. This looks like flexibility with my in-person responsibilities, which could include hybrid and online course offerings, or the option of telecommuting for some of my campus responsibilities. Disability justice is about critiquing systems that create outsiders, Others, deviants, etc., instead of finding ways to accommodate a diversity of minds and bodies.

Although I identify as a Cuban American and have lived my life as a Cuban American, folks constantly collapse my complex racial ancestry into whiteness. As is often quipped in my home, some Cubans may appear white. They can even be our social construct of what racially white is (with *only* European ancestry); however, most Cubans are some mix of Spanish, Indigenous, and African. The constant erasure of the profound influence the African enslaved diaspora has had on Cuban racial identity and culture is one of the many passive yet, profound ways Cuban Americans enact anti-Blackness in our everyday lives. However, I look white, primarily because my father is a peachy-pink French Italian and my Cuban family mainly has Spanish ancestry. That means I absolutely have white privilege. It also means I have been raised within the paradigm of whiteness and the privilege it affords, and even in the best of times, I cannot escape that. My ongoing joke with my peers and in my writing is that sometimes I still sound like a Becky, no matter how hard I try⁸. Bueno-Hansen and Montes (2019) define this experience as being white adjacent.

I am not physically disabled. You cannot see my disabilities. I have what are called invisible disabilities. The CPTSD I mentioned earlier, although its onset happened when I was raped, is a rather insidious disease I have not been able to overcome because of the various severe traumas I had experienced before and after being raped. It has changed the way my brain is wired. Living for over twenty years with an overactive startle response and hypervigilance has taken its toll on

my body. I have been diagnosed with chronic fatigue, that more likely is the result of fibromyalgia, which goes up and down depending on my stress levels. However, because of continuity of care issues I mentioned earlier, I am recently with a new provider, and having to start over in terms of diagnosis. In search of a diagnosis for my exhaustion, I also discovered that I have a congenital heart defect. My heart is incredibly healthy; however, I will likely need aortic valve replacement surgery at some point in my life. To maintain the integrity of my current valve for as long as possible, I must do cardio exercise regularly. Frequently I am negotiating the exhaustion from a trauma trigger and the imperative of working out for my heart. Working out does help reset my parasympathetic nervous system, but when it's bad, I will find myself unable to do much beyond my job responsibilities for two-week stints. This means take-out for dinner, or my husband taking on a larger load of household duties.

I am queer. I am a cisgender woman married to a cisgender man. Again, I pass. I've always known my sexuality to be fluid. As I got older, I realized it went beyond a binary. However, being passing in so many areas of my life, and because I've primarily been in heterosexual relationships most of my life, it's been an identity I have not felt authentic to claim consistently. The first time I identified myself as queer was not the first time I had ever been romantically with a woman, but the first time I seriously dated a woman. Many years later, when I had twins with a man, I decided it was no longer appropriate to call myself queer. Finally, decades after my first encounter with a woman, I sat down with my husband just a month ago and had a more serious talk about "coming out" as queer. He has always known I was fluid; I just never put much emphasis on it. But I realize as I get older, I care more about all parts of myself being seen, even if they are messy and do not fit into perfect boxes⁹.

I have lived my life at various socioeconomic statuses. I recognize that being raised in severe poverty as a child wires your experience with class in a way that I could never fully relate to. A good friend of mine who was raised in severe poverty often reminded me of the privilege of just "touring"¹⁰ poverty. However, the first six years of my children's lives that I usually spent on the verge of housing insecure as a sole parent were to an extent neurologically wired into my

⁸Becky is a term used to refer to young white or white passing women who utilize their white privilege in problematic ways (often in ways that oppress other marginalized peoples).

⁹Thank you to my husband for validating my words here. He asked why I wanted his only high school educated input on this

paper, and this is exactly why, real academic work to me transcends the exclusivity of traditional academia.

¹⁰Thank you to Dr. Ayana Jamieson for giving me this language (and the critique).

existence¹¹. I was never a planner or a saver. Being poor the way I was for so long traumatized me and got wrapped into my CPTSD; I now over plan and save for the future. It did change me. It also allowed me to review my history as a child through a different lens. I was able to see the times my mother, who was also a single mother for a period of my upbringing, was struggling. That 39 cent tacos from Taco Bell, ramen, Rice-a-Roni, mac 'n' cheese, which were often my dinners, tells me both how much privilege I had and a reality check that is far from my now (very) occasional splurges at Whole Foods for fancy cheese.

Today, I work as an adjunct professor. [I am turning 40-years-old this year. I do not have a retirement. I do not own a home¹². My work is considered contingent. Just sit with what that all means. I still publish and write with this full-time schedule, and now with COVID, I also do all the above while I homeschool my 8-year-old twins until they can access the vaccine. When Schalk (2018) refers to how crip theory can inform systemic oppression, I am defining this for myself as operating on crip time because I have fewer "spoons" each day and, because of systemic inequities, I must accomplish more with less support. I have seen this manifest as accomplishing similar life milestones to my peers many years after them throughout my life.

In this way, I combine Kafer's (2013) reference to "crip time" being "the extra time needed to accomplish something" (p. 26) both in the mundane of every day but also from a broader analysis of my life. Simultaneously, I can critique how my upbringing did not afford me access to the sort of support I needed after being raped. For example, health insurance was not compulsory, nor was Medi-Cal¹³ or Obamacare accessible to single parents like my mother. Additionally, growing up in an ethnically Latino home, mental health care and medication were not a normative inclusion in health discourse. Additionally, when I went off to college in 1999, shortly after being raped, there were no comprehensive student services with disabilities office at my University, nor was CPTSD considered a disability. As a result, I flunked out of college. It took eight years to get my undergraduate degree because the support was not available from my mother, nor yet a recognized part of mental health services normalized on the college campus.

As is easily discerned in these examples, I have always lived in a constant tension of complexity

around my identity. However, I also believe strongly that my position as a nepantlera has given me such a unique perspective with my writing and scholarship. It is through these above positionalities that I will explore the following topics in this paper: a critique around the accessibility of terminal professional degrees; challenging the premise that online programs are not rigorous, and an exploration of what it means for equity and access in higher education if state schools should adapt online and hybrid formats in addition to in-person formats.

Gatekeeping of Professional Degrees

As a crip, if I want to survive in this capitalist society while honoring and listening to the hard limits my body has, I need a professional degree or a tenure track position. Petrilli's (2017) findings show that over a lifespan, earnings increase close to \$50,000 above the poverty line for folks with bachelor's degrees. Considering inflation and the rising cost of living in metro cities across the United States, a \$60,000/yr income in your 50's is not going to cut it. But what if you get a professional degree in the field of Social Work or Counseling, where the starting salary for a new graduate is where bachelor's degrees cap? The answer is just shy of \$70,000, with exponential upward earnings potential.

Petrilli (2017) argues the importance of prioritizing technical college over a pricey bachelor's for upward mobility out of poverty. However, when we look at the average salaries for a Master's in Social Work (MSW) or a Marriage and Family Therapy degree (MFT) versus the cost of schooling, these pathways are some of the most secure routes to a solid middle-class income. Therefore, unless you are earning a bachelor's degree in a very specialized field that is in high demand (think accounting, finance, bachelor's in nursing, etc.), the discourse shouldn't be about how college improves upward mobility but how technical degrees and terminal master's degrees (earned at state colleges) impact upward mobility.

Starting salaries for a person with a MSW or MFT are generously within the \$70-80k a year range. Once a person with a MSW or MFT achieves licensure, they can quickly charge anywhere from \$100 to

¹¹There has been an emergence of literature pertaining to pregnancy and early post-partum as a critical brain development period for mothers (Hillerer, K.M, et al., 2014).

¹²Thank you, Alexis Mobley (ABD), for emphasizing how important these statements are that they each need to stand alone.

¹³Medi-cal is a form of universal healthcare that is accessible in California for families with low incomes and for most people has zero shared cost.

\$175/hour in private practice¹⁴. However, professional degrees have some of the highest demands in terms of time and sometimes even money if you look for flexible instruction options such as online learning, hybrid formats, or accelerated programs. Public school programs run about \$20,000, whereas private (also read online/hybrid options) can run well over that, closer to \$50,000 and up. Many programs also require extensive internship hours (ranging from 500-1,000 hrs. depending on the program) to complete the program¹⁵.

In my opinion, internship hours are unpaid labor and, in my experience, one of the primary barriers to equity in professional degree programs. Another challenge beyond the cost of master's programs varying drastically between public and private institutions and the many required internship hours is the issue of accessibility to public programs. For example, I attend the MFT program at Fresno State University, and due to CACREP accreditation requirements, they can only admit 18 students a semester¹⁶. The MFT program receives anywhere from 100-150 applications in an admissions cycle, with numbers only increasing¹⁷.

Additionally, we need to consider the community that Fresno State serves. Like the entire CSU system, the California State University, Fresno (Fresno State) are considered Hispanic and Asian, and Pacific Islander serving institutions. This means that the majority of our student population comes from various racial and ethnically marginalized populations. Moreover, suppose you are lucky to be part of the minority that accesses higher education in severely economically disadvantaged areas like Fresno. In that case, you have a less than 17% chance of getting into a program like our MSW or MFT program.

We see similar issues with local nursing programs where the least expensive option, located at Fresno City College, is so impacted it runs on a lottery system. The program at Fresno State is not much easier to access but is far more expensive and is a Bachelor's in Nursing (BSN), a 4-year intensive program, whereas a Registered Nurse (RN) program is only two years. I could make several manuscripts worth of commentary

¹⁴These salary numbers are common knowledge among mental health practitioners, more data on mental health job salaries by area and by classification are available on *Payscale.com*.

¹⁵These numbers are also easily accessible by googling different program options, you can start with a comparison of the California State University tuition scales to some of our private institutions in California such as University of Southern California, which runs a well-respected online Social Work Master's program, or California Institute of Integral Studies, which runs a weekend cohort hybrid online option for Marriage and Family Therapy.

¹⁶This information is also available on the website at www.kremen.fresnostate.edu/masters-mfcc/apply.html

on how we have a problematic chronic shortage of competent interdisciplinary medical and mental health providers in Fresno and very little money going towards changing that situation. However, for the purposes of this paper, we will just focus on how to make these programs more accessible to our disabled population.

As I shared in the prelude of this paper, these are all truths I discovered when I enrolled as a student in the MSW program at the California State University, Fresno (CSU). I discovered a lot of the additional information mentioned above while finding alternative programs to the MSW in which I was enrolled. My search has since expanded as my husband has expressed multiple times how much he wishes he could leave his manual labor union job and go to school to get his RN. I know this much about jobs and our local economy because they are a part of my husband and I's discussions daily about systemic inequities in our community.

We experienced first-hand the extent of these issues during the COVID pandemic when we could not access the COVID vaccine for his mother, who has heart failure. Still, we knew more privileged folks without pre-existing conditions getting vaccine access through different loopholes. I remember sitting in a quantitative methods class as a student and the professor shared a paper about "poor people" accessing preventative care with the class. When I mentioned how challenging it was to see a doctor in Fresno for preventive care (due to our chronic shortage of providers) or that marginalized community members often do not trust doctors, he responded genuinely unaware of these issues in our communities. This experience only exasperated my feelings of the gap between the folk producing knowledge and who it impacts. Again, I digress.

I was just finishing up my Ph.D., but, like many others in my shoes, I realized that the job market for tenure track (TT) jobs was dismal at best and lecturer work is incredibly difficult to make reliable and sustainable. I thought about the options I had available to me and decided to apply to the local CSU to work on my MSW. I also know from having several friends

¹⁷As both a faculty member and student at Fresno State, I often have dual-role conversations with professors in the counseling program. These are numbers I have been given by TT faculty in the MFT department at FS. I cannot cite them as personal communication as I do not remember when exactly we had this conversation. This is the type of information I cited as foundational when utilizing autoethnographic methods to impart information that comes from unique positionalities and as a tool to de-privilege information only accessible to academics. While anyone can call and access this information, it is not private information. Part of what I do throughout this paper is bring forth questions and answers I discovered on my own path that help make academia more accessible to the everyday person.

in the mental health field that a private practice would be an excellent way for me to make a living wage without working full-time. I also have the option for another TT position in the counseling field since Women's Studies, and Ethnic Studies positions are few and far between. I was still a sole parent at that time, and financial stability and balance were the qualities I was looking for in a career.

A few weeks before I found out I was accepted into the MSW program, in February of 2019, I came down with Bell's Palsy after a performance of my storytelling piece "White Cubana" for the Yonsei Memory Project Fellowship. The anxiety and stress I was having about performing caused half of my face to be paralyzed for over a month. I was in excruciating pain for several weeks, but most scarily, suddenly, I was unable to do much at all physically. Before Bell's Palsy, I taught Zumba several times a week, lifting weights and rock climbing. Overnight, I was now barely able to walk my kids across the street to take them to school. Over two years later, I have still not recouped my pre-incident energy levels. I have made tremendous strides, but I remain limited. I worried for months over whether I would be able to swing a full-time school schedule. My friends assured me I would get better.

Fall of 2019, I started the semester with five classes and a requirement of fifteen hours a week of internship. I was also teaching one class. After three weeks of coming home in excruciating pain, unable to get out of bed, one day, I just left my internship early and called it quits. This began an almost six-month-long struggle with the Social Work department. Luckily for me, before the semester had started, I had already started seeking accommodations with the Services for Students with Disabilities office at Fresno State. My disability counselor worked closely with me during this time to help me advocate for myself. First, I was chastised for leaving my internship and putting myself on a part-time schedule without consulting anyone. Then I was bullied anytime, I would reach out to try and solve ways for me to work through this program without damaging my health further. I had a Ph.D. with a dissertation written using a qualitative research method and two doctoral-level qualitative research method courses. The department refused to give equivalency to their master's level qualitative research methods course. It is an accreditation-related issue; they only accept equivalency for courses taken in other accredited MSW programs. I asked if I could attend any of my classes virtually so that I could

manage an internship in person while simultaneously doing coursework. I was told it was unreasonable to expect any professor to have the bandwidth to accommodate this request. I asked if I could do my coursework separate from the internship and was told that the credential was designed, so there was no way to work around this. The worst part, I was not alone. My good friend gave birth during this time and was treated the same by the Social Work department¹⁸.

And then COVID happened. In a week, the Social Work department and every other college campus had to figure out how to put their programs online. I realized then it wasn't a matter of not being possible but a matter of rigidity.

Rigidity versus Rigor

Kafer (2013) explains how "flexibility" is what matters concerning crip time (p.27). I postulate in this paper that while flexibility is a known necessity for disabled folks, there is a gap between disability justice discourse and integrating concepts such as flexibility more comprehensively in academic programming. I had long theorized that academia's obsession with "rigor" was rigidity weaponized as rigor. I was not new to struggling within the system. As I continually pushed through my Ph.D. program as a sole parent of twins, I often heard leadership use rigor as a way of explaining why they could not change things.

While I was at Fresno State, what was different this time was that I was teaching my first class as a lecturer in the Women's, Gender & Sexuality Department while I was simultaneously a student in the MSW department. A gain, I was a nepantlere, while department chairs and other figureheads told me there was no way possible to accommodate me and my disability, I was also practicing what I called at the time a radical engaged pedagogy with my students as a professor. hooks (1994) coined the term engaged pedagogy, which aligns with the lineage of Paulo Freire's (2010) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which is concerned with bringing our true selves to our teaching, such that we reach our students on a human level. They become engaged and invested in their education.

I considered my approach to hooks engaged pedagogy as radical because I am radical about accommodations. But really, I am just flexible, which, if we are honest about academia, is a radical concept. While anecdotal, most of my students will generally follow the guidelines, and each semester about 5-10%

¹⁸ While this friend wishes to remain anonymous, I dedicate this article to her. It was in the many hours of commiserating over our experiences that I decided to write this paper. Unlike her, I had the

privilege and access to tell my story, and at the end of the day, this is what women of color and crip solidarity is about. And in that spirit, I gave her full editorial power over what I wrote in regards to her, albeit brief.

of my students fail regardless of my radical accommodations. However, I have now seen students who might have failed without my flexibility end up passing my class. I have even had students who barely get by their first class with me and then come back and take another class with me and earn an A.

By practicing a flexible pedagogy, my students are also more engaged in the actual work of learning in my class versus performing regurgitation for the sake of a grade. For years in my academic upbringing, I have heard how important it is to be a stickler on deadlines; otherwise, students take advantage of you. I have also heard about how this is real-life training. And yet, I entirely disagree. In real life, you do not meet deadlines - deadlines are extended, projects are canceled, people take time off to have babies or mourn the death of their loved ones, especially if you are a crip. Crips know all deadlines are flexible. But in academia, we are forced to adhere to the theater's fourth wall rule; we are not allowed to be human beings while also being students or professors. These ideas are critiqued extensively in hooks' (1994) book *Teaching to Transgress*. While hooks' primary argument is finding ways to be authentically yourself, we must consider: Who is safe in academia? Is this equally accessible for all students and faculty? We see this discourse come up frequently in relation to systemic oppression in academia. One example is the erasure of mothers and other various intersectional identities within academia. For example, Anaya's (2011) work explores the invisibility of graduate student mothers of color (GSMOC) within Crenshaw's (1991) framework of intersectionality. What we know is, the further you are from the western ideals of academia (with white CIS straight men as the center), the more marginalized you become in academia.

Herein lies the problem with the discourse around rigor. If rigor is just a weaponization of rigidity, who was it designed to serve? We know the foundations of research are in colonialism (Smith, 1999); therefore, it only follows that the standards around academia (i.e., rigor) were also designed with a colonial paradigm of belonging and (un)belonging. We must constantly remind ourselves that the paradigm of the Academy was about exclusivity, hoop-jumping, and gatekeeping. When the University decided to pivot to include diverse community members in their student and professorship, they forgot that these institutions' very origins and frameworks were designed to keep most people out. It has nothing at all to do with rigor.

Frankly, it is about racism, antisemitism, ableism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and any other form of systemic oppression.

A popular cartoon image many have seen circulating tries to simplify the issues around equality versus equity versus liberation so that most folks can better understand these concepts. These images portray three persons of various heights trying to watch a baseball game. For equality, each person has a box they are standing on to watch the game, but the shortest person still cannot see over the fence. For equity, each person is given the number of boxes they need to see over the fence. In liberation, there is no fence. To create liberation for our marginalized students and faculty, we must reimagine our educational system outside colonial paradigms. In applying a crip theory logic to academic quips of rigor, we need to move away from rigidity and think more of flexibility in terms of pliant like our old 1980's friend Gumby.

Imagining Liberation in Education

In my journey to leaving the MSW program, I ventured over to the MFT program. First and foremost, the MFT program has a much less intensive internship requirement - it has 400 fewer internship hours. Secondly, internship requirements are in the last two semesters of the program, when the course load is much lighter. Thirdly, because the school does not dictate the internships, it is also possible (but perhaps quite difficult) to have a paid internship while getting your hours for graduation. Additionally, without any special accommodations from the program, anyone who is financially able to take summer and winter session courses to lower their course load during the semester¹⁹. I may need some accommodations throughout the program. Still, the department already offers 9-12 units of the 60 required units online, and I have some ability to shift my schedule according to my needs without asking for special accommodations. Finally, during my process of applying to this program, some changes were made in terms of a cohort model mandated by the licensing board. This change made it more stringent regarding the pathway one must take with the classes. The MFT program was incredibly accommodating for students of all types before this change. With my disability accommodations, the MFT released me from the cohort model by allowing me to take as many units worked for me each semester²⁰.

¹⁹This deserves its own commentary on how people with more class privilege can afford flexibility, and how flexibility is bought, but for length considerations, I will just mention it here in this footnote.

²⁰ Even with the flexibility from the MFT program and the accommodations from my department, I still had to leave the MFT program, COVID has left me weary, my twins have been homeschooling for the past year-and-a-half, and I am teaching six

With the MFT program designed as it is, I need to ask for little to accommodate the program to my needs as a disabled student. However, there has been a push in educational pedagogy to strive for what is called universal design in coursework. While some accessibility scholarship focuses on universal design as a format for making online education more accessible to students with various disabilities (Crow, 2008, Grabinger, 2010), others focus on students' narratives to explore how to make college more accessible to disabled students (Hong, 2015). While all this scholarship is informative, I am proposing a deeper dive into this concept of flexibility in addition to universal design. Further, I am tasking us to blueprint these same principles and apply them to entire degree programs. So often, students are forced to choose between a rigid, less expensive, brick-and-mortar program at a college or a more flexible, pricey, online college.

Flexible options should not be accessible only to those who can afford them. However, if brick-and-mortar educational institutions adopted a more diverse offering of program approaches, we would be better serving our students and our faculty. For example, when we give online options, hybrid options, in-person options, students can tailor classes to their needs. Additionally, if programs have diverse offerings, there are more options to accommodate disabled faculty. This ends up serving many different intersections besides just students with disabilities, for example consider student parents. We know that childcare is costly, and most daycare facilities do not operate past 5 pm. Yet, many evening classes that would be the only option for working parents are incredibly difficult to accommodate when considering childcare²¹. However, if a class is online and done at your own pace, students can do it when there is a natural break with their children, such as naps, school hours, or bedtime²².

The same applies to students and faculty with disabilities. For some people, their disabilities require them to have in-person learning. For others with invisible disabilities or chronic illnesses, having the option to forgo a commute is the difference between

experiencing severe pain or tolerating a workout to improve their health.

Programs such as Cal State Online (founded in 2013) have started to address the complex challenges of today's students by offering various online programs throughout the CSU system. However, they still only provide nine undergraduate and thirteen master's options for these online and hybrid programs. At Fresno State specifically, we have recently launched an online Bachelor's Completion program geared towards helping students complete their program who dropped out just a few classes shy of graduation. I taught for the inaugural cohort in the Fall of 2020. Although it is undeniable that today's student needs flexible options, further expansion of these programs will undoubtedly make higher education more accessible for students with a variety of disabilities.

Conclusions

If we gleaned anything from COVID, it is not that we were unable to make accommodations; it is that we were unwilling. COVID should be just a starting point for academia to reimagine how to design itself such that it is accessible to all. This paradigmatic shift also allows us to start having honest conversations about gatekeeping in academia. If our objectives are ultimately concerned with making academia accessible to marginalized community members, we need to think outside the box. This process also helps us reframe the validity around diverse modes of knowledge production. Social justice discourses continue to push us beyond gender binaries into non-binary ways of existing, such as neurodivergency and intersectionality. Similarly, the experience of crips, with invisible disabilities, during this COVID era is instrumental to these discourses challenging us to dismantle systems that no longer work.

What we learn from Cepeda's (2021) emotional testimonio of disability in Academia is the sheer exhaustion of navigating a mental health disability in academia as she titles her paper "thrice unseen" to call out the multiple ways she is violently rendered

classes, while still publishing. I have decided to give the tenure track job market another go. There is another manuscript here on the compounded impact of COVID on disabled bodies.

²¹I've been meaning to find a place to express gratitude to Dr. Alexis Mobley (ABD), fellow queer, neurodivergent, spoonie who graciously and enthusiastically was a hype woman reader for me on this paper. Her commentary on this point was "I took night college classes in high school since this was the only time it was offered that I could get a ride and accommodate work. This is so, so true." Her notes were very affirming throughout this paper, as I wanted to know that this paper felt like it centered the disabled WOC in Academia experience. Thank you, Alexis. Truly.

²²While student parents are outside the scope of this paper, I still think the example is beneficial to the ethos of this paper. For more discourse and activism on the barriers to education for student parents please see work by Dr. Larissa Mercado-Lopez. I will also add that as I am a disabled parent, there are others of us who occupy both of these spaces, hence why I mentioned it. There is also substantial scholarship done by Chicana M(other)work to discuss the intersections of mothering and being a women of color and access to childcare during after school hours is one of their cited institutional barriers in academia for mothers of color.

invisible in the Academy. Although she often repeats her privileged positionality of being a light-skinned Latina and tenured, she waited until she was tenured to write her story, and this tells us something profound. Mental health disabilities continue to be underserved, and overly stigmatized via traditional disability accommodations. When Cepeda (2021) explains the number of requests she receives to help other invisibly disabled faculty request reasonable accommodations, it exemplifies how ill-equipped the Academy is to make accommodations for mental health disabilities. While this paper focuses on flexibility as an intervention for universal design in degree programs, I also posit that as we develop more flexibility in academic programs, it will not only become easier to accommodate both disabled students and faculty, but will also make Academia more generally accessible to multiply marginalized populations.

In closing, scholars Berne, Morales, Langstaff, and Invalid (2018) defined the movement of disability justice with ten tenants: intersectionality, the leadership of those most impacted, anti-capitalist politic, cross-movement solidarity, recognizing wholeness, sustainability, commitment to cross-disability solidarity, interdependence, collective access, and collective liberation. To meet these ten tenants of disability justice, I believe we must superimpose Schalk's (2018) systemic lens to crip theory and start to explore routes of creating radical flexibility in higher education. If COVID can only teach us one lesson, I hope that we learn that higher education can be more malleable than the neoliberal Academy wants us to believe.

Epilogue

As I am wrapping up the writing of this paper, I am in the process of obtaining faculty disability accommodations at Fresno State. I started working as a lecturer more consistently during the fall of 2020 when we were in the throes of COVID. Since we were only teaching online, I did not need to apply for disability accommodations. However, since the plan is to return for in-person instruction in the Spring of 2022, I needed to start this process. So, I made an appointment with my primary care physician, who also filled out my disability accommodation form as a student back in the fall of 2019. He wrote down my diagnosis of chronic fatigue and CPTSD and cited I needed a reduced course load and flexible course instruction.

When I went to get the same form completed for accommodations as an employee, he wanted to get into an argument with me about disability. He told me all four of my limbs work; therefore, I am not disabled. I sat and argued with him for a good fifteen minutes and endured various ableist remarks regarding people just trying to get out of work and other vile comments. In the end, he did sign the form, but the damage was done. I ended up having another flair-up, accompanied by a cold sore, and a week working from bed and without being able to work out. The irony of it all was that I was writing this paper when this happened. My doctor knows I have a Ph.D., and still, I was powerless to his uneducated opinion of disability. Transversely, I have received incredible support from my chair in the Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Department with disability accommodations and thankfully, I now have a consistent course load. However, I know this is not the norm, and this makes me very privileged. Therefore, I feel a responsibility to tell my story, even if publishing this paper comes with its own associated risks²³. Regardless, I remain an asset to my students and the Academy. And that is essentially the imperative for this paper. We need flexibility built into the design of higher education to remove barriers in accessing accommodations that are intrinsically: tied to privilege and access to decent health care and caring healthcare providers; subject to unchecked systemic ableism; and are often compounded with other systemic inequities. If telecommuting and flexible course instruction were the norm, those that needed those options would have easier access to them.

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²³ Thank you to my colleague Dr. Leece Lee-Oliver for taking a last look at this article for me, this is the type of invisible labor and cross solidarity that happens among WOC faculty.

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