Strategising anti-ableist action: pedagogy, praxis and community in the academy and on the internet

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Introduction

This thesis will approach the issue of pervasive ableism within two specific sites: the western academy and the internet, looking at the already existing ways that ableism has been directly or indirectly addressed, with a view to formulating alternative methodologies for building communities of care. I do this in order to propose ways to mitigate the widespread mental distress and physical illness that has emerged from a toxic culture which promotes competition, comparison and productivity over all else.

My primary focus will be on neoliberal-ableism, a term theorised by Dan Goodley which recognises 'the elision of key tenets of both processes [neoliberalism and ableism] that emphasise self-containment, autonomy and independence.'[1] Ableism and Neoliberalism are symbiotic in creating a survival-oriented competition between subjects, who could otherwise collaborate for their mutual good, by constructing unattainable values with social and financial sanctioning for those that fail to approximate them.

The internet and the academy are two very different sites, which are particularly rife with this neoliberal culture in different forms, but which also both have great potential for change, in the form of innovation, education and collectivity. I will explore the ways in which this change has already been attempted, how successful it has been and what can be learned from these studies to inform new approaches, reflecting on the development of disability theory from disability studies (Tom Shakespeare) to critical disability studies (Dan Goodley, Fiona Kumari Campbell) and disability justice (Mia Mingus, T.L. Lewis). In addition,

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[1] Goodley, Dan, and Rebecca Lawthom. '*Critical Disability Studies, Brexit and Trump: A Time of Neoliberal–Ableism*'. Rethinking History 23, no. 2 (3 April 2019): 233–51. https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2019.1607476.

I will map the ways in which the two spaces overlap, and how they influence one another, both positively and negatively.

I will also be privileging experiential knowledge throughout this thesis, informed by Robert McRuer and Merri Lisa Johnson's theory of 'cripistemology.'[2] This asserts that disability cannot be defined by medical or institutional guidelines, it cannot be pinned down or comprehensively understood, and that the most accurate knowledges about disability are gained through direct experience of it. I will be using the aforementioned theoretical texts to reflect and support these lived knowledges, concluding by beginning to open up imagined futures informed by cripistemology, transformative justice and disability justice.

In this paper, I will be speaking as a white, disabled, chronically ill woman. I will also be working with the social model of disability, which sees disability as being produced by social barriers, which disadvantage those with impairments[3] and thus, as not being located in the bodymind, rather than the medical model, which sees disability as being rooted in the impairment.[4] As such, the way inequality related to disability is addressed is different in the two models. While the medical model seeks to eradicate disability by medically treating conditions and differences, eventually erasing them from the genetic pool (eugenics), the social model seeks to change social structures and perceptions (dis/ableism) to make the world more accessible to disabled people. While there are valid complications to this

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[22] 'Merri Lisa Johnson and Robert McRuer. "Cripistemologies: *Introduction*." Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies 8, No. 2 (2014): 127-147. Https://Muse.Jhu.Edu/ (Accessed August 4, 2019).'
[3] physical or mental conditions which are considered outside the norm of human functioning.
[4] Shakespeare, Tom, "*The Social Model of Disability*" Ed. Davis, Lennard J. The Disability Studies Reader. 4th ed. New York, NY: Routledge, 2013. 214

framework[5], for the sake of this argument, I will be working with the social model definitions.

Firstly, I will investigate the word 'ableism' and its distinction from 'disableism', since, as the subject of this paper is anti-ableist action, we should be specific in identifying what we are opposing. It is worth quoting a range of voices here in order to articulate the subtleties of meaning within these definitions. In contrast to terms like racism and sexism, ableism is less self-evident in its definition, and less commonly used, even within social justice conversations. While the two terms are often used interchangeably, ableism does not simply mean 'discrimination against disabled people' (which is closer to the definition of 'disableism', here described by Dan Goodley in relation to capitalism, as an important socio-political context for ableism):

> 'Disableism relates to the oppressive practices of contemporary society that threaten to exclude, eradicate and neutralise those individuals, bodies, minds and community practices that fail to fit the capitalist imperative. This is a powerful narrative that guides the politics of disabled people's movements and politicised the experience of life in a disabled world.'[6]

In short – disableism is oppression directed towards people who fall within the category of 'disabled' in our society.

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[5] For example, Susan Wendell in *'Unhealthy Disabled'* critiques the separation of impairment and disability, as it alienates the chronically ill, who might be disabled by their physical or mental condition in addition to social oppressions.
Wendell, Susan. '*Unhealthy Disabled: Treating Chronic Illnesses as Disabilities*.' Hypatia 16, no. 4 (2001): 22.
[6] Goodley, Dan. *Disability Studies: An Interdisciplinary Introduction*. Los Angeles, Calif ; London: SAGE, 2011.

Ableism, on the other hand, has a subtle but significant difference (described here in a working definition by TL Lewis, who is part of the Disability Justice Movement, responding to a historically white-centred Disability Studies, as):

> 'A system that places value on people's bodies and minds based on societally constructed ideas of normalcy, intelligence and excellence [which is] deeply rooted in anti-Blackness, eugenics and capitalism. This form of *systemic* oppression leads to people and society determining who is valuable or worthy based on people's appearance and/or their ability to satisfactorily produce, excel & "behave."
> *Importantly, you do not have to be disabled to experience ableism.'*[7]

The key issue here, which Fiona Kumari Campbell argues in her book *Contours of Ableism,* is that when addressing disableism 'the site of reformation has been at the intermediate level of function, structure and institution'[8]. It continues to look at the disabled as the Other, and so efforts to solve individual issues and assimilate disabled people fail to address the root of the issue, which is not disabled difference, but ableism: the fact that this 'difference' is theorised at all. Ableism gives a more expansive view of the power structures and value systems which impact every bodymind, and which are inseparably intertwined with neoliberal capitalism, white supremacy and patriarchy. By recognising the ways in which ableism is maintained and produced, we can more effectively find ways to resist it.

Robert McRuer summarises:

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[7] Lewis, Talila A. "*Longmore Lecture: Context, Clarity & Grounding*." 2019 (accessed 31/05/19
https://www.talilalewis.com/blog/longmore-lecture-context-clarity-grounding
[8] Campbell, Fiona Kumari. *Contours of Ableism: The Production of Disability and Abledness*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. 4.

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'compulsory ableism is to disableism what compulsory heterosexuality is to homophobia. [...] As we study ableism, this engenders an analytical turn away from disability to ask: what do we mean by being able? What is valued by being as able as possibly or ideally one could be?'[9]

Ableism shifts the 'able-bodied lens' on disability to question what we mean by ability. When it comes to anti-ableist action, the problems to be addressed are not individual manifestations of disabled exclusion, but the source of those manifestations: the values systems which dictate them, specifically neoliberal values.

Moving forward, I will use the locations of the internet and the academy, in order to present concrete examples of manifested ableism within different social institutions and structures. Using real-life case studies also allows us to move and experiment within the spaces, testing possible strategies for change.

The strategies must be different in each situation: the internet, while exclusionary to some[10], is thoroughly embedded in the day to day life of many people, providing an almost infinite space in which to work, that is always growing and changing. This presents some practical problems in terms of the breadth of study, but provides potential to create connections with a huge variety of users from different backgrounds. Comparatively, academia is accessible to only a small percentage of privileged individuals, due to its grounding in standards of expertise and excellence, both requiring time, capital and other structural supports in order to meet them. This limitation does allow for a more controlled study, since the production of knowledge and data is more restricted and "quality

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[9] McRuer, Robert. *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*. Cultural Front. New York: New York University Press, 2006.
[10] For example, the visually impaired, or D/deaf people.

controlled" (in favour of academic norms) with the use of citation, publication etc. However, this limits the diversity of impact to those privileged enough to access the academy. Both sites are rich sites of pedagogy, and as such, are key in producing revolutionary thinkers and collective action.

The Problem of Ableism

Ableism is such a difficult problem to address because of its pervasiveness, invisibility and lack of representation. While intersections of race, sexuality and gender have become prominent topics, in both academic and in non-academic contexts, disability seems to be less of a focus.[11] It remains a word to be tacked onto the end of lists of marginalised identities. Perhaps this is due to fear of surveillance from the government on the part of disabled people, which could lead to losing benefits.[12] Or, perhaps it is because many who are most impacted by ableism do not have the resources or energy to protest it – as Johanna Hedva asks in their essay 'Sick woman theory' 'How do you throw a brick through the window of a bank if you can't get out of bed?'[13]

This is especially pertinent to those who Susan Wendell calls the 'unhealthy disabled' in her essay of the same name. Wendell highlights that some disabled people, alongside their physical or neurological differences, are still 'healthy' - they have energy and generally well-functioning systems, which means that without disableist social barriers, they would be able to do as much as a non-disabled person. People with chronic illnesses, however, are often constantly suffering from dilapidating symptoms which cannot be cured by social reform. These 'unhealthy disabled', who make up a large portion of disabled people[14], are often

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[11] However, there have been moves to bring disability into inclusion and diversity discussions in both fields. Examples in academia are Dan Goodley, Margaret Price. In online activism and academic spaces, the Disability Justice Movement.

[12] recoveryinthebin. '*The Invisible Prison – Panopticon of the DWP*'. Recovery in the Bin (blog), 27 July 2019. https://recoveryinthebin.org/2019/07/27/the-invisible-prison/.

[13] Hedva, Johanna*, Sick Woman Theory*, Mask Magazine: 2016 (accessed 02/06/19) http://www.maskmagazine.com/not-again/struggle/sick-woman-theory

[14] 'WHO | 2. Background - *The Global Burden of Chronic Diseases*'. WHO. Accessed 6 August 2019. https://www.who.int/nutrition/topics/2_background/en/.

alienated from disability politics due to their complex relationship to the social model, which does not see impairment as a negative thing.

> 'Cheryl Marie Wade (1994, 35) has criticized the new image of "the able-disabled" and the reluctance among disability activists to admit to weakness and vulnerability. She found that her identity as an activist made it difficult to acknowledge her physical limitations until her body broke down, endangering both her health and her self-esteem.'[15]

This rift between healthy and unhealthy disabled people could be another reason that disability politics is not more prominent, since there is not yet a fully unified theory on what disabled experience consists of, as well as the fact that so many do not have the energy to engage with 'healthy disability activism'.

However, just as the LGBT+ community had Stonewall, disabled people had the Disability Rights Movement, in which wheelchair users occupied the federal building in San Francisco in order to establish the *504 Civil Rights Act* [16] as well as the now well-established disability activism communities worldwide.[17] I fear that putting the problem down to limited energy would risk disempowering disabled activists, and downplaying the impact of their work; these movements were (and perhaps still are), as Wendell states, centred more on the 'healthy disabled', for whom energy is less of an issue.

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[15] Wendell, Susan. '*Unhealthy Disabled: Treating Chronic Illnesses as Disabilities*.' 22
[16] protecting disabled people from employment discrimination. See;
 "*A Brief History of the Disability Rights Movement*." Anti-Defamation League, (accessed 02/06/19)
https://www.adl.org/education/resources/backgrounders/disability-rights-movement
[17] such as the successful campaign for Britain to adopt the social model of disability in the UK, and the Disability Justice Movement in the US. See;
'*Disability Justice - a Working Draft by Patty Berne*'. Sins Invalid. Accessed 26 July 2019.
https://www.sinsinvalid.org/blog/disability-justice-a-working-draft-by-patty-berne.

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Crip Theory, coined by Robert McRuer, presents a more fluid definition of disability which encompasses the multifaceted nature of disabled experience(s). Julie Williams summarises the term crip in an introduction to the Breaking Silences, Demanding Crip Justice Conference:

> 'Crip theory considers disability to be a viable identity variable to be recognized, acknowledged and celebrated. Crip theory also recognizes the importance of the intersectionality of one's disability identity with all other identity variables. By doing so, Crip theory acknowledges the historical exclusion of diverse groups within the disability community (e.g. persons of colour, gay, lesbian, transgender) as a consequence of internalized oppression within the disability community.'[18]

This could also give space for the overlapping of impairment and disability that is an issue for Wendell in the original social model.

Perhaps the lack of attention to disability issues is due to the dehumanisation of disabled people – abled people are uncomfortable, even afraid, of the disabled, because we represent the fragility of their own bodyminds, their potential to lose their ability to produce, and as such, their role as a worker within capitalism, their social value.[19] It could be said that abled people cannot empathise with the disabled experience and, as such, do not give their attention to it. This is where the difference between ableism and disableism is especially crucial, because ableism impacts everyone, to some degree, regardless of impairment, neurodivergence, or lack thereof. Issues which an informed person might

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[18] 'Crip Theory | Wright State University'. Accessed 7 August 2019. https://www.wright.edu/event/sex-disability-conference/crip-theory.

[19] Devenny, Micheal J.V., and Clare College. '*The Social Representations of Disability: Fears, Fantasies and Facts*'. University of Leeds, 2002. https://disability-studies.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/40/library/devenney-PhD-Final-including-bibliography-.pdf.

describe as ableism are present in the lives of everybody living under capitalism – they are insidious, often being taken as inherent facts of life (for example, the notion that the ability to be independent is better than needing help.) Due to the fact that most people have little understanding of ableism's ubiquity, they see it as 'not their problem' or simply a problem too rare and distant for them to address, while in reality, the emotional and physical results of ableism (stress, exhaustion) can be dilapidating, even to the non-disabled, and can, in some cases, lead to disability. [20]

This is what Campbell (via McRuer) describes as 'compulsory ableness (or able-bodiedness)':

> 'Compulsory ableness and its conviction to and seduction of sameness as the basis to equality claims results in a resistance to consider ontologically peripheral lives as distinct ways of being human lest they produce a heightened devaluation.[21]'

Here, McRuer notes our tendency to dismiss or hide variation from the able norm due to fear of being marked as 'other.' Those who can convincingly perform ableness 'pass' as able, and those who cannot are categorised disabled. The reality is less of a binary and more of a spectrum – every body has different capacities and needs, but compulsory ableness under neoliberal capitalism forces us to assimilate and hide those traits which might make us seem like a burden, incompetent or unproductive.

In the next chapter I will begin to outline the particular manifestations of ableism in the western academy and the left-wing internet, and how these two sites are significant in their potential for social change.

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[20] Carnegie Mellon University. "*Stress Contributes To Range Of Chronic Diseases, Review Shows*." ScienceDaily. www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2007/10/071009164122.htm (accessed August 7, 2019).
[21] Campbell, *Contours of Ableism,* 4

Mapping the sites

I will now elaborate on why I have chosen these two sites as subjects of ableist study. As I have extensive lived experience in both areas, I am able to use my particular position to create new knowledges and develop strategies for the urgent issue of anti-ableist action. The subjects represent significant sources of knowledge production and pedagogy in different ways, and I believe that we can learn from them, internally and externally, to grow communities of care.

The Internet

As what is described as a 'late millennial', I grew up on the internet, and in my mid to late teens became involved with online activist circles. The internet, specifically the social media platform Tumblr, was responsible for my first real experience of feminist theory, albeit translated, and arguably sometimes misappropriated by other users. Arguably, some of my earliest interactions with academia were through this chaotic, often low-brow medium of the Tumblr microblog[22].

Over time, certain users would become well-known and respected for their political opinions; certain posts would become popular, then be critiqued by other well-known users, just as with theorists in academia. In short, the political internet developed its own micropolitics. Online political culture exists today in almost all social media platforms:

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[22] If you are not familiar with the platform, one has their own 'blog' on which one can post original content (words, images, videos etc.) or 'reblog' other's content onto one's blog. In doing so, one can curate a feed of information which represents one's self and interests, interacting with others through their blogs and posts

'Leftbook' (left-wing Facebook groups),), Twitter, Instagram; each community developing its own form in response to the site design.[23]

While participants in this kind of online community have been labelled as 'keyboard warriors' by both other (offline) activists and many besides, and despite many risks (which I will later discuss), I see online activism as having significant potential for change. Large numbers of people were engaging in (what was mimetically called) 'the discourse' on Tumblr every day, from debates about cultural appropriation to creating new queer identities. We have seen the effects that going viral on the internet can have[24], and, as I will begin to explore, the ripple effect from my, and subsequent, generations maturing in these online political spheres as widespread and continuing.

The internet is vital for anti-ableist action because it provides social agency to many disabled people who cannot otherwise participate in activism. While for some it can be damaging, for others it provides access and education. In *Disability Studies*, Dan Goodley explores the potential of technological activism:

> 'The speed at which information can be passed on […] allows us to think not so much about the narratives of past and present, but more about present and future. Key questions are raised, then, about the kinds of societies and citizens of future societies. For disabled people, this is crucial, in terms of configuring a place in the technological age. […] The community is stretched out and continuous. Hence, parents of disabled children, users identifying themselves as neurologically atypical, web users in search of companionship, can utilise the wide expanse of the web to,

[23] As well as their far-right counterparts, see; Nagle, Angela. *Kill All Normies: The Online Culture Wars from Tumblr and 4chan to the Alt-Right and Trump*. Winchester, UK ; Washington, USA: Zero Books, 2017.
[24] Financially and socially; eg. Memes and viral advertising.

potentially, form subjective relationships, activism and intercourse. […] The community for disabled people is there to be imagined. In this sense engagement with the virtual in many ways deconstructs fixed discourses of impairment and identity.' [25]

Goodley sees possibilities for technology to be used as a community building tool, rather than a transhumanist one. As fluidity and constant change become normalised through the medium of social media, binaries such as ability and disability can come into question, and ableist assumptions can be interrogated. Identity politics has become a huge part of online activism and, as such, online disabled community is easily found and created – those who, before, might not have felt able to identify as disabled can find others who share their experience, giving support and solidarity.

However, Goodley also adds, (citing Hardt and Negri) that we should be aware of the 'oligopolistic aspects of the internet' – meaning that knowledge production on the internet is still dominated by certain privileged sources[26]. This is true on a macro-scale – corporations like Google, Facebook etc. own the majority of social media platforms, thus controlling the information we see - but it also manifests within the micro-politics of social media activism, with influencers having huge sway over their audiences, at times encouraging the harassment of those they disagree with.

Firstly, one must consider how, if at all possible, we can foster communities of care on platforms which are designed to encourage neoliberal competition - a prime example being Instagram. Tiqqun's *Theory of the Young Girl* applies here; the assertion that individuals[27]

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[25] Goodley, *Disability studies*, 171-172.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Not only girls – Tiqqun uses the term Young Girl to represent the 'model citizen' in consumer society.

have been socialised to embody capitalism by continually marketing ourselves, or *'self-valorising'*[28]. Social media platforms do just that: they encourage users to externalise ourselves in a way curated to make us, and our lives, appealing to others, which in turn reinforces the need for others to do so, in comparing themselves to us.

> 'The Young Girl would thus be the being that no longer has any intimacy with herself *except as value,* and whose every activity, in every detail, is directed to self-valorisation. At each moment, she affirms herself as the *sovereign subject* of her own reification. The unquestionable character of her power, all of the crushing assurance of this flattened being […] all of this is immediately indexed to her *absolute transparency* to society.'[29]

The Instagram 'influencer' is a perfect example of this phenomenon. Users, primarily conventionally attractive young women, create a 'brand' by marketing themselves and their lifestyle, carefully editing photos and captions to match their chosen aesthetic. Companies will then pay for the association and exposure of having this user mention their product. The most successful of these influencers are ones which bring something seemingly new and exciting to the table, which is then invariably adopted by many others, until this trend becomes obsolete. Now that this cycle has become more apparent to us as consumers, we are more suspicious of the influencer, we search for something more 'authentic,' yet still

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[28] Tiqqun (Collective), and Ariana Reines, eds. *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*. Semiotext(e) Intervention Series 12. Los Angeles, CA : Cambridge, Mass: Semiotext(e) ; Distributed by MIT Press, 2012. 18
[29] Ibid.

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easily consumable.[30] This becomes the next stage: the organic Young-Girl, who emerges from the collapse of the industrial Young-Girl:

> Contrary to her predecessor, the organic Young-Girl no longer displays her urge for some kind of emancipation, but rather a *high-security obsession with conservation. For Empire has been undermined at its foundations and must defend itself against entropy.* [...] The organic Young-Girl would thus become responsible, ecological, "in solidarity", maternal, reasonable, 'natural' respectful, more self-controlled than falsely liberated.'[31]

As internet users begin to see the commodification of self that social media demands, we attempt to subvert it, perhaps trying to capture our authentic selves through confessional posts, or using our influence to promote social or political causes. This, however, fails to address the root cause of neoliberalism online, the need to self-valorise; we simply do this through different means.

So how then, do we escape the cycle of Young-Girlification, since it seems that by rejecting it, we allow it to reform in a more insidious incarnation?[32] Online activist spaces seem to be a particularly fertile ground for the organic Young-Girl. While approximating anti-capitalism, I fear that online activists risk maintaining the practices of competitive comparison, based around virtue signalling and distancing from problematic behaviour, increasing one's level of

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[30] Hunt, Elle. '*Essena O'Neill Quits Instagram Claiming Social Media "Is Not Real Life"'*. The Guardian, 3 November 2015, sec. Media. https://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/nov/03/instagram-star-essena-oneill-quits-2d-life-to-reveal-true-story-behind-images.

[31] Tiqqun (Collective) and Reines, *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*. 19-20

[32] Dazed. '*Is the Era of the Influencer over, or Just Evolving?*' Dazed, 13 June 2019. https://www.dazeddigital.com/life-culture/article/44850/1/influencer-era-over-evolving-instagram-bloggers.

'wokeness.'[33] This cultural shift has left-wing internet users switching from one neoliberal survival mode to another; while trying to create social change, we still measure our value and success through its appeal to a certain audience.

Online social justice demands constant, fast-paced evolution and learning, to prevent one from falling behind, making mistakes and thus being marked 'problematic.' While it is acknowledged that the inequalities addressed are structural, the individual repercussions of falling into hegemonic behaviours are often severe – reputations can be ruined, some receive death threats and are ostracised from their community.[34] Possibly in order to avoid this fate (in fear of being associated with them) others, who might have easily made similar mistakes[35], will strongly condemn these problematic people. My argument is not that there should be no accountability for causing harm, but that this particular method may be counterproductive in creating communities of care.[36]

In this newly created culture, identity politics is a key component. This subject is fraught with emotion because it taps into systemic oppressions, often creating a trauma response in those who have experienced them. To have one's lived experience rehashed and debated by strangers is a profoundly violent sensation. The 'wild west' of the leftist internet does not provide a safe space to open up about one's trauma – especially when there are no boundaries to who is participating- and yet this is what we feel we must do in order to make

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[33] *'Stay Woke'.* Accessed 28 June 2019. https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/woke-meaning-origin.

[34] 'Opinion | I'm a Black Feminist. I Think Call-Out Culture Is Toxic. - The New York Times'. Accessed 21 August 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/17/opinion/sunday/cancel-culture-call-out.html.
[35] Usually coming from similar privilege
[36] Building a caring kind of accountability is a collective responsibility, but those with more privilege and resources should use them strategically to deconstruct neoliberalism in their communities, rather than reinforce it.

social change. [37] If activists are to create spaces where we can be vulnerable with one another, there must be trust and established boundaries, to avoid voyeurism or exploitation of the oppressed.

When Young-Girlism creeps in to these intense discussions, anxious, otherwise privileged people may leverage marginalised aspects of their identity in order to protect themselves from criticism, or gain social standing.

An example I saw in the Instagram making community illustrates this; a white gay man claimed that users discussing racism within the community (primarily women of colour) were being too aggressive and divisive in their approach, also claiming that he had coined a certain hashtag, #diversknitty, which he felt had been misappropriated by these users. Many people shared their distaste at this tone policing; his defence was that: because he was gay (and as such, oppressed), he had licence to criticise how the activism was being done. Subsequently, his husband reported that he had suffered a mental breakdown due to the negative reaction to his post, and used this to shame anyone who continued to criticise him. [38]

This double weaponization of oppressed identity in response to calls for accountability shows how, within activist circles, participants can attempt to leverage identity as a form of social power.[39] This is because the result of accountability is something to be feared – this is

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[37] *'Trauma Porn: Hyper-Consumption Of Black Death And Pain'*. The Odyssey Online, 12 July 2016. https://www.theodysseyonline.com/trauma-porn-black-death-and-pain.

[38] I cite this article because it covers the basic events of the case most fully, including the original words that sparked the controversy. However, I do not support the stance taken by the author.
'Knitting's Infinity War, Part III: Showdown at Yarningham'. Quillette (blog), 28 July 2019. https://quillette.com/2019/07/28/knittings-infinity-war-part-iii-showdown-at-yarningham/.

[39] As noted, this is not to condemn identity politics as a whole – it plays a very important role in forming community for those excluded by neoliberal capitalism - one of the substantial positives noted by Goodley in

how harmful actions are prevented, in a similar way to criminal justice. What if, instead of this, we could create spaces in which being wrong was not something shameful, but an opportunity to build stronger relationships with our collaborators? I will go on to explore how the model of transformative justice works to build such spaces.

I will now go on to discuss findings from my own research: starting and co-facilitating an Instagram page for disabled artists.[40] Since theoretical analysis can only take me so far, I decided to undertake a collaborative online project to navigate the complexities of the left-wing internet community.

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the previous quote. It is in response to the toxic cross-pollination of capitalism and leftist political theory (both trying to destroy each other) that its participants are forced to resort to these survival techniques.

[40] 'Disabled Makers (@disabledmakers) • Instagram Photos and Videos'. Accessed 12 August 2019. https://www.instagram.com/disabledmakers/.

This is where the specific case study I have chosen becomes relevant. With my experience in both online and in-person activism [41] as well as my art practice and lifelong interest in craft, I created an Instagram page called 'Disabled Makers', in collaboration with another Instagram user. This initially came from my own search for disabled community on Instagram; there is a large crafting or 'making' community on the platform, which began its own conversations about diversity and inclusivity, specifically around racism, and, as such, people of colour were developing their own solidarities. Having seen similar spaces for disabled people on the internet, I made a post seeking fellow disabled crafters. I know from experience that craft is a very effective and popular therapeutic tool for disabled people (and many others who might not categorise themselves as such), but I could not find a space on Instagram that was actively for that purpose. After being approached by a fellow disabled woman who had read my post, we decided to make an Instagram dedicated to sharing the work of, and connecting, disabled makers.

The page gained a lot of followers and attention over the first few weeks. Unlike me, my fellow admin had little familiarity with online activism – the nuances, norms and values of left-wing internet culture. The first few weeks were very overwhelming for me: I felt the need to constantly check my notifications, answer messages, demonstrate our good intentions in various ways, in order to protect the project from judgement. Partly, this was due to my own

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[41] I also became involved with community building and organising around neoliberal ableism, mental distress and disability.

perfectionism and internalised ableism, but it was also founded in reality, since the consequences of making mistakes on the internet, as discussed, can be severe.

The main purpose of the project was fairly simple – creating a space to show the art and craftwork of disabled Instagram users, using a submission model, and forming a community for disabled people to exist, learn, and support one another. We were both surprised and unprepared for the huge response – neither of us having ever organised on this scale, especially online – and wished to reach out to those doing existing activism in the space, specifically people of colour who had been highlighting racism, to give respect to the conversations that were already taking place. What we soon realised, was that some people were suspicious of us and our motives, and so did not feel comfortable participating in Disabled Makers without us establishing our views publicly.

For example, I was creating a list of disabled makers of colour to highlight, with their permission. Some of the people we approached were happy to be included, while some did not feel comfortable – one user in particular fed back to us that she did not feel safe to engage with the community when we had not made a public statement on racism in the making community. I now recognise that by asking these people to publicly align with us, we were expecting them to take a risk, not knowing whether we would be creating a space and community that would welcome and support them. The consequences of that risk for marginalised people can be extreme, since there is also a huge far-right presence on the internet, who engage in doxing[42], verbal abuse and other hateful tactics.

This is where 'virtue signalling' serves its purpose – I had initially been reticent to post a written statement about our stance on the racism in the community, since I did not feel that,

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[42] Sharing personal information about someone online, e.g. their phone number or address.

as a white woman, my point of view was of most value, wanting rather to amplify the existing voices of people of colour. However, I came to understand that the specific situation of the internet requires a level of explicit allyship-signalling (for want of a better word) in order to communicate one's intentions. In fact, is that not what all social media is about? A curated externalisation of the self in order to project and communicate a certain persona to others?

In order to effectively communicate our-selves and form communities online, we must be clear about our values. In this instance, it was especially necessary to establish our views, since those people we were trying to converse with were the victims of structural and individual racism from people who looked like us – we owed them an explicit promise of respect. This is the same for any organising space which wishes to include marginalised people. There must be a public policy which does not tolerate wilful or unintentional violence against any marginalised group or individual. Otherwise, one cannot, in conscience, invite them into a space where they can be hurt with no consequences.

The internet allows for a huge variety of people from different experiences and social groups to encounter a space. It is essential that this is considered in any kind of online organising – just as one must consider accessibility for physical events, a well-thought-out online political space must consider what, and whom, it is designed for. Since it is impossible to be universally accessible (people's needs will often contradict each other) we needed to consider whose needs required more attention in Disabled Makers.

This takes me to the second point of importance: *intersectionality*, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, to describe the ways in which different social identities 'intersect' one another to

produce specific oppressions and privileges[43]. Crenshaw's theory argues that oppression cannot be viewed by a 'single axis framework'[44]. Following this theory, Disabled Makers should centre the needs of multiply marginalised disabled people in order to explore the full extent of ableism and disableism[45], for, as Crenshaw says (speaking here of black women in feminism):

> 'Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated.'[46]

A commitment to intersectionality does not mean that those who are part of fewer marginalised groups are not acknowledged, rather that their experience is encompassed in the wider scope of intersectional knowledges. It also recognises the fact that each person has their own, unique experience of neoliberal ableism – it is not a homogenous approach, but one that is rooted in deep complexity.

In my experience as a member of various online activist communities over the years, one of the things I have seen in spaces which are (successfully or otherwise) working with intersectionality, is that it produces huge anxiety in its participants, especially those who are privileged in some respects. An example of this is 'white guilt', where a white person centres their own discomfort around their privilege – usually, this takes place in the guise of anti-

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[43] Crenshaw, Kimberlé. '*Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*'. University of Chicago Legal Forum 1989, Issue 1: Article 8. 139-167

[44] for example, looking at a case of sexism without considering how race plays a role - since this plays in the favour of those who are only marginalised in one way (e.g. a wealthy, straight, cis, non-disabled, white woman) without acknowledging the nuance of multiple social disadvantages.

[45] For this reason, it is also important to have multiply marginalised people in facilitation roles, which Disabled Makers has intentionally pursued.

[46] Ibid. 140

racist action, the actual purpose of which is actually to assuage this racial guilt. [47] This is because the notion of centring multiply marginalised experience is often instead interpreted, (mostly by the privileged ally) as veneration, leading to the fetishization of oppressed identity[48]. With the limitations of communicating through the internet, nuance is lost, and many users reach for a set of rules through which to view the fast paced, ever changing flow of information. The ableist need for perfectionism and infallibility leads us to expect, of ourselves and others, an extremely quick unlearning of prejudices we have spent our whole lives absorbing. This leads to what Adrienne Maree Brown calls a 'mile wide inch deep' approach to activism; we have a surface knowledge of many concepts but give no time to deeply engage with ideas.[49]

Shallow knowledge inevitably leads to making mistakes, and hurting those who we are trying to support.

Due to the fact that accountability on social media is so public, it often becomes intense group shaming, sometimes leading to being 'cancelled'[50] (exiled from the community) – for those of us attempting allyship, it is easy to see oneself in these mistakes, so one may join in reprimanding them, arguably in order to distance oneself from their 'problematicness' or assuage our guilt.

This was true for many white influencers in the knitting community during the ongoing discussions about racism. One person would make a problematic statement or action, which would then be publicly called out. The anger toward the perpetrator would grow, and

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[47] Steele, Shelby. '*White Guilt*'. The American Scholar 59, no. 4 (1990): 497–506.

[48] 'Dr. Ange-Marie Hancock - *Beyond the Oppression Olympics* - YouTube'. Accessed 5 August 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5lvomJnkPq4.

[49] Brown, Adrienne M. *Emergent Strategy*. Chico, CA: AK Press, 2017. 20

[50] Bromwich, Jonah Engel. *'Everyone Is Canceled'*. The New York Times, 28 June 2018, sec. Style. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/28/style/is-it-canceled.html.

people would share their anger with their followers, either because, for people of colour, it reminded them of similar racial traumas, or, in the case of white allies, as either virtue or allyship-signalling. Often, this criticism from their community would lead to emotional distress on the person being called out, and sometimes they would leave the community entirely.

Accountability should not centre the feelings of the perpetrator; the harm done to the oppressed is much greater than the discomfort of being called out. This being said, is this particular method more conducive to reform, or alienation? Transformative justice[51] would argue that violence from individuals is a symptom of structural violence in wider society, and so accountability should not blame the individual, but work towards dismantling the conditions which led to it. Disability Justice activist Mia Mingus outlines this in her blog post on the subject:

> 'Violence is collectively enabled, has a collective impact and requires a collective response. This does not excuse people's harmful behaviour or mean that a person who has caused harm or been violent doesn't need to be accountable for their actions, but it does mean that we need to understand the context in which harm and violence happen.'[52]

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[51] a movement which aims to move past state-sanctioned criminal punishment to collective healing. 'Transformative Justice | TransformHarm.Org'. Transform Harm (blog). Accessed 13 August 2019. https://transformharm.org/transformative-justice/.

[52] Mingus, Mia. '*Transformative Justice: A Brief Description*'. Leaving Evidence (blog), 10 January 2019. https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2019/01/09/transformative-justice-a-brief-description/

Anger and solidarity for marginalised people are not the problem here, but the scale and speed at which these discussions operate tend to direct frustration at structural inequality towards individualised participant(s) or beneficiary(s) of said inequality.

As such, intersectionality, a concept founded in nuance, has, at times, been misinterpreted as a point scoring system where marginalised identity = 'clout', and privilege = shame and guilt.[53] Once again, it is down to the individualisation of systemic concepts. Instead of sitting with the uncertainty and shifting nature of power relations, neoliberal subjects seek a not-so-new replacement for our existing neoliberal values.

So, the question remains, how do we avoid the tendency towards neoliberal thinking that is inherent in any capitalist platform? How do we turn off survival mode and create spaces where we feel able to be vulnerable? Before I come to a conclusion on this, I want to examine the other subject of study – the academy.

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[53] although it should be noted that this does not reverse the actual power dynamics at play –centring marginalised voices does not mitigate their historic oppression.

The Academy

Many of the issues with the internet that I have just described are also true of the academy. As previously stated, the key difference is that the performance required by the academic is of a different nature, and, as such, different people are allowed to succeed. Theoretical knowledge is valued above lived experience; as Donna Haraway points out in *Situated Knowledges,* theory is seen to be more 'objective', when in fact, it simply adheres more closely to the experience of the 'unmarked' upper class white male, for whom academia was originally created. [54]

Jay Dolmage quotes Ellen Cushman in *Academic Ableism,* when she says that 'The Approach' to the university – imagining 'a set of stairs, long in disrepair' – is designed to keep the public from engaging with the scholars, and vice versa, to maintain the sense of exclusivity and superiority that higher education commands. [55]

> 'we reproduce this distance so long as a select few gain entrance to universities, so long as we differentiate between experts and novices, and so long as we value certain types of knowledge we can capitalize on through specialisation'[56]

This specialisation is gained not outside the university, through lived experience, but inside, through rigorous theoretical study. It is possible to become qualified in post-colonial theory, for example, without having experienced colonisation first hand. In fact, those who have not

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[54] Haraway, Donna. *'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective'*. Feminist Studies 14, no. 3 (1988): 575. https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066.

[55] We know this is true, because the 'community college' is held in so much lower esteem than the famously selective Oxbridge. If this high level of learning was easier to access, the mystique of scholarliness would be lost.

[56] Dolmage, *Academic Ableism*. 1

experienced such subjugations are at a distinct advantage in the university setting, due to the institutional oppressions at play.

This is where the values of academy and internet diverge. In online activist communities, those with the most privilege in a given situation, are generally seen as less knowledgeable than those who are marginalised, because the marginalised's lived experience of oppression gives them standing in related discourses. This is a positive of the activist internet – it creates a culture which inverts the current hegemony, and empowers those who are silenced in learning spaces such as the university – even if it can bring with it neoliberal-ableist values.

Academia has different ways of gaining standing in its culture – what I will call *academic performativity.* Academic performativity is based around the notion of the expert, of constantly striving to be better: more informed, more well read, more incisive. It is a collective pretence that we are more confident in our knowledge than we really are. Even in writing this essay, I am engaging in performance, by using specific language and format, in order to further convince other academics who might read this that my points are valid.

Take the Q and A session at the end of an academic talk as another example. Frequently, those who ask questions are those made to feel at home in the academic world: white men. Often, they are not in fact asking a question, but making a statement, designed to show the speaker and audience how knowledgeable they are, referencing many obscure theorists and complex terminology. This kind of posturing leads others who are not so confident to feel compelled to emulate these behaviours, so as not to be judged as unintelligent. Through the repetition of these performative behaviours, norms and expectations are formed, which associate verbosity with intelligence, etc.

While rigour, articulateness and productivity are not innately wrong, the privileging of these qualities as the keys to higher learning misses the point that, in order to learn, one must first admit that one is uninformed. In any pedagogical environment, both teachers and students should feel able to be vulnerable in admitting ignorance, in making mistakes.

However, just as on the internet, making mistakes or failing to perform has consequences in academia. The increasing marketisation of Academia in the UK is a significant factor in this. As the priorities of Management move from 'quality' to 'quantity' of students, in order to ensure maximum profits, academics are concerned that the university is shifting from hallowed halls of learning to a neoliberal corporation. Many say that students are becoming more and more powerful as 'customers' in the academic experience, meaning that lecturers jobs are unstable and at the whim of student feedback[57]. If a lecturer is accused of wrongdoing, whether in their teaching or publicly online, they know that they can be easily replaced, creating a sense of precarity in, and out of, the workplace. The demands on staff are becoming greater and greater with no compensation. As the generation raised on the left-wing internet come to university, the culture of group shaming reaches into academia, and those academics who were once safe in their published papers, are now exposed on the internet – just as capable of being 'cancelled' as anyone else.

For example, see Nina Power, a well-respected feminist scholar, who made transphobic comments on a Facebook post that was subsequently shared throughout academic circles online, damaging her reputation.[58] In their field, academics are the equivalent to internet

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[57] Ahmed, Sara. '*Against Students*'. Feministkilljoys (blog), 25 June 2015. https://feministkilljoys.com/2015/06/25/against-students/. (accessed 05/08/19)

influencers – people respect their opinions, and those that they choose to associate with. However, social media is causing this influence to become much more tenuous; information and learning have become more available, more mobile. This humanises the academic who before was only represented in their carefully curated words, but now can be found through a google search, on a blog or YouTube video, accessible to all. The internet age gives us both more and less control over how we are seen.

In response to these changes, many academics are trying to save the core values of academia. However, much of the frustration and pushback against marketisation is actually directed towards, and impacting, the students - specifically those who require more support. This is because cuts to welfare have left students with few options for support other than their lecturers. With such a stressful work environment, and little support themselves, lecturers react to students reaching out with panic and indignation. This, in my experience, can cause students to resent staff, and solidarity that could be utilised towards positive change is lost.

Furthermore, clinging to ideals of 'quality' and 'excellence' only serves to sustain the ableist roots of academia. Academic standards have always been biased towards the white, male, able, etc. and so efforts to keep university standards high simply promotes exclusion of marginalised peoples. Ask what a 'quality student' looks like, and you will see the blatant ableism behind this concept.

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[58] ART, TERFS OUT OF. '*Nina Power Outs Self as TERF / Transphobe #NinaPower #TERF #TransRights* https://Docs.Google.Com/Document/d/1Z2kWUUIdKO9ZrXyVQSA3ONu-NF6G8ngR8C9oX_fqzW8/Edit?Usp=sharing …'. Tweet. @TERFsOutOfArt (blog), 18 March 2019. https://twitter.com/TERFsOutOfArt/status/1107553974515875840.

Jay Dolmage illustrates this perfectly by juxtaposing two fictional students: 'super Samantha' and 'somnolent Samantha,' in response to a paper by president of Boston University, John Westling.

> 'In Westling's story, Samantha is a caricature [of a student with a documented learning disability] who greedily demands extra time on assignments and exams, copies of notes from lectures, a seat at the front of the class, and a separate room in which to take tests; most memorably, she also warns him that she will fall asleep in his class, and thus will need someone to take notes while she is asleep—thus he calls her "somnolent" Samantha. Later, Westling admitted that the story was a lie. But he argued that Somnolent Samantha characterized the unreasonable expectations universities were being held to by opportunistic students and the unfair challenges administrators and teachers faced in responding to their mandate to accommodate disability. His argument was, basically, that these students were exploiting the system and did not belong in university at all if they couldn't play by the "normal" rules.'[59]

Somnolent Samantha is the 'straw student' that so many academics have come to associate with the downfall of higher education, bolstered by the ableist sentiments often espoused by the baby boom generation, of millennial 'sensitivity' and interdependency. In response, Dolmage creates 'Super Samantha', an amalgamation of the desired qualities of a modern student.

> 'Super Samantha is much better at nonprint literacies than all of her peers and most of her teachers. She is technologically savvy, crafty, and has mastered modes that

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[59] Dolmage, *Academic Ableism*. 102

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her elders haven't even heard of (yet). She is Mark Zuckerberg and Doogie Howser

and Dora the Explorer with a brand-new backpack.'[60]

Super Samantha is, most importantly, multi-modal and multi-literate.[61] Creating this standard as something to which students should aspire profoundly disadvantages the disabled, and homogenises the kind of knowledges and, as such, academics, that the academy produces. Again, this comes down to 'mile wide, inch deep' knowledge – instead of encouraging different kinds of learners in the classroom to learn in the way each of them does best, this approach demands a broad but (for those who are not natural Super Samathas) inevitably shallow learning, leading to superficial scholarship. This level of multiliteracy is impossible to maintain as technology and research evolves, contributing to the anxiety and imposter syndrome previously discussed.

Rejecting ableism in academia starts with questioning our ideals and values, and rejecting our tendency to encourage assimilation over diverse expression. We must keep our academic performance anxiety in check, both individually and collaboratively. In the next section I will describe a collective attempt to address academic ableism from inside the university – specifically Goldsmiths – and consider our successes as well as what might be improved or built upon.

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[60] Dolmage, *Academic Ableism*. 103
[61] meaning she can learn and communicate within a wide range of mediums: textual, linguistic, spatial, aural, and visual.

This group was initially proposed as a Visual-Cultures-department-based weekly gathering on Goldsmiths campus, by my tutor Alice Andrews - another disabled woman who is concerned with academic ableism, coming from a staff perspective, while I would bring my experience as a disabled student. Our intention was to encourage discussions around problems of institutional ableism within Goldsmiths and academia in general, with the aim of consciousness raising, which might lead to personal and structural changes for a more inclusive environment.

For context, I will briefly explain my lived experience in this regard. While experiencing disability from the start of my BA, my physical impairments worsened throughout my second year, and I became largely unable to attend lectures. As such, I enquired about moving my joint-honours course to part-time in my third year, in order to protect my wellbeing and allow me to pace my work more effectively. One of the departments I belonged to refused me, stating that if I couldn't keep up with the course intensity, I should not be attending university at all – in hindsight, rather reminiscent of Westling. In order to return to my studies, I had to go through an exhausting, year-long complaints procedure, and eventually take my case to the ombudsman, who supported my complaint.

On my return to the university, I wished to create a space within the institution where disability could exist unapologetically in an otherwise inhospitable environment built on ableism. Alice and I planned to start a discussion and/or reading group to explicitly address ableism within our academic department, with a view to wider impacts within the

institution. While the 'mental health crisis' has been a huge discussion in recent years[62], with multiple suicides in, and outside of, our department, mental illness has rarely been spoken about alongside disability and ableism, which are seen as separate issues. Although there have been some discussions around how capitalism contributes to mental distress, ableism is a vital aspect which is yet to be publicly raised.

In the group, we first explored the meaning and implications of ableism, and then invited people to share their own lived experiences of it, particularly in academic contexts. Some weeks we would strategise ways to expand our anti-ableist work, while others we simply discussed what we had been thinking about throughout the week, but we always tried to begin with a 'check-in' to establish how each of us were coming to the space, physically and emotionally.

We found that while 7 or 8 people came in the first few sessions, by the end of the academic year, the number had fallen to 2 or 3. This was, in some cases, due to academic or other workloads, as well as health issues[63]. What we hoped to achieve was a community care model in which everyone contributed when they had the capacity to do so, with others picking up the slack when rest was needed.

However, the reality was that certain members felt able to prioritise the group more than others, and ultimately there was an uneven distribution of labour which did not reflect our individual capacities. In order to avoid burnout for these members, they had to put boundaries in place on how much they were willing to do. The hesitation in doing this,

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[62] 'The Gold Paper'. Accessed 7 August 2019. http://goldsmithsucu.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/The-Gold-Paper-Web.pdf. 34
[63] something that must always be taken into account in disability organising, since encouraging overexertion of individuals for the benefit of the collective is an unsustainable and counterproductive approach to anti-ableist practice.

which is so often the case in activism, was that if these key members stepped back from the work, the group would lose momentum, perhaps entirely.

All of these problems are a product of the neoliberal-ableist system in which we operate. We wanted to create a space which was a rest from the pressures of academia, but we could not separate from it entirely - the fact that our physical presence was needed, and most of our afternoon taken up by the group, meant that some people felt they could not afford to attend alongside their other commitments. Because the efforts of our group were not paid or graded in the same way as academic or waged work, the incentive to attend was not as strong, and the group used energy that might be otherwise spent on these things, which would ultimately contribute to the stability of the individual rather than the group – in other words, survival mode.

I should note that this is not a judgement of those who take part in this kind of self-preservation – in fact, it is necessary to ensure we have our basic needs met under capitalism, to allow us to sustain our activism. In an effort to respond to this, we applied for and received funding for some future projects so that participating members could be paid for their labour.

Despite these logistical and personal issues, members expressed how glad they were that such a space was being held; that even when they could not attend, they knew that others were in solidarity with them, imagining and working towards a less ableist and disableist institution in their own ways. What I have learned from this project, and other similar ones, is that while capitalism may slow down progress, sometimes the most important thing is to keep holding space, however small, because that space can always be expanded later.

Conclusion - Approaching the problem

In the face of compulsory ableness, how do we begin to address ableism? Reflecting on this practical and theoretical research on the academy and the internet, I propose a three stranded approach, using pedagogy, consciousness raising, and community care. Firstly, we must begin by clarifying the meaning of ableism and disableism, and how they intersect with capitalism, white supremacy and patriarchy, through disability theory. This should balance accessibility with deep learning – while theoretical texts can be wordy and, for some, difficult to grasp, they can be explored through group learning with time and space to process complex concepts. In *Academic Ableism,* Jay Dolmage notes the importance of disability studies in the academic field:

> 'Disability studies disrupts the idea that disabled people should be defined primarily through their disabilities by others, retaining instead the right for disabled people to define their own relationships with disability […] [it] critiques representations of disability as pathology, as needing to be cured or killed or eradicated, as needing to be overcome or compensated for, as an object of pity or charity, as a sign of an internal flaw or a social ill or signal from above'[64]

By insistently taking up space in academia, the field of disabled studies works to forge our own narratives. Disabled scholars can subvert (or 'crip'[65]) academic research methods and frameworks to bring radically new perspectives to a field rooted in ableist standards. Dolmage points out how ableism is literally built into the architecture of universities,

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[64] Dolmage, *Academic Ableism*. 5
[65] A reclaimed term used by disabled people, (derived from 'cripple) similarly to the use of the verb 'queering', to signify co-opting something into Crip culture, as theorised by Robert McRuer.
See; McRuer, *Crip Theory*.

illustrated by the 'steep steps' and 'ornate gates' which prioritise aesthetic and tradition over accessibility. By those of us who are able to access higher education (by convincingly performing ableness) working from within to deconstruct ableist structures in academia, we can start to create openings for those who have been denied access.

Secondly, the practice of consciousness raising can be used to develop a 'cripistemology' (as theorised by McRuer and Merri Lisa Johnson and referenced by Alyson Patsavas.) This will allow people to identify their lived experiences of ableism, both internal and external. Patsavas promotes a version of 'standpoint epistemology', in which knowledge is produced through the lived experience of subjects and the context in which they are positioned (for example, being working class, disabled, black etc.) She explains that it

> 'privileges experience as a source of knowledge and grants that marginalized positionalities offer unique vantage points from which to expose systems of oppression.'[66]

This is especially vital in disabled discourse because

> 'Disabled people have been systematically excluded from more "formal" processes of knowledge production. Our experiences have frequently been devalued and dismissed, particularly when it comes to pain. Yet experience is often the most accessible resource disabled people can leverage when it comes to knowledge production.'[67]

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[66] Patsavas, Alyson. "*Recovering a Cripistemology of Pain: Leaky Bodies, Connective Tissue, and Feeling Discourse*." Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies 8, no. 2 (January 2014): 203–18. https://doi.org/10.3828/jlcds.2014.16.

[67] Ibid.

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Oppressed people, as Donna Haraway asserts in her essay *Situated Knowledges,* have, in their lived experience, potential for extremely valuable knowledge, as a result of being positioned at the intersection of many specific power dynamics. She argues that the popular scientific view of objectivity (which also influences academia) is simply a 'god-trick': the false belief that the normative (white, male, cis, able) viewpoint is the most accurate, because it is unhindered by politicised identity and its associated experience. In contrast to the false 'objectivity' of the 'unmarked' bodymind, the non-normativity of disabled experience would put it as, in Haraway's mind, one of 'the least likely to allow denial of the critical and interpretive core of all knowledge.'[68]

These epistemological knowledges should be supported by academic theory in order to further infiltrate academic elitist spaces – to highlight the common themes in lived experiences and create a narrative that speaks to people of other kinds of experience. Despite my belief in privileging experience-centred knowledge, it must be said that theoretical argument provides a way to bring privileged people in to marginalised experience, or in Haraway's words, to 'inhabit the great underground terrain of subjugated knowledges.'[69]

Finally, community care should be the overarching support structure in the former two processes – a care centred activist practice can be built through the experience of listening, learning and sharing and by creating and maintaining these spaces in ourselves and our close communities, we can attempt to catalyse care in wider culture.

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[68] Haraway, *Situated Knowledges*, 575.
[69] Ibid. 584

A key aspect of this proposed approach which should be noted, is a focus on sustainability. As I have explored in my case-studies, many pitfalls in organising of any kind come from an unsustainable working model based on neoliberal-ableist values systems. In order to make anti-ableist action, we must first question our internalised and structural ableism in our relationships with our comrades and organisations.

While many activist groups tend towards an accelerated, intensive period of action, in order to achieve as much progress and visibility as possible in a short time frame, this invariably leads to a 'boom and bust' cycle, in which activists 'burn out' and drop out of organising either periodically or indefinitely. In this case, burnt-out activists often do not feel able to participate in their communities because they see themselves as having no value outside of their ability to contribute to their political cause [70]. This is also a crucial reason why many disabled people are excluded from activism which is not specifically disability-focussed, because ableism and disableism still go unquestioned in many activist circles. Without giving space for pacing and rest, our activism cannot be sustainable, and, as seen in internet activist communities, moving too fast often leads to precarity, as well as shallow understanding and connections. If activists are to create effective communities of care online (or offline), we must commit to unpicking the ingrained neoliberal values which exist in these spaces, resisting the impulse to accelerate and individualise so that we can build resilient solidarities, rooted in intersectionality.

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[70] Feel Tank Chicago calls this "political depression," the sense that customary forms of politi-cal response, including direct action and critical analysis, are no longer working either to change the world or to make us feel better. See; Cvetkovich, Ann. Depression: A Public Feeling. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012. 1.

Adrienne Maree Brown outlines a more organic methodology of change in her book of the same name: Emergent Strategy. This combines concepts of biomimicry with intentionality, to collectively reimagine our futures:

> 'Many of us have been socialised to understand that constant growth, violent competition, and critical mass are the ways to create change. But emergence shows us that adaption and evolution depend more upon critical, deep, and authentic connections, a thread that can be tugged on for support and resilience. The quality of connection between the nodes and the patterns.'[71]

Brown uses nature as a metaphor for collective action, invoking dandelions, roots and waves as examples of emergence, which, in the words of Nick Obolensky is 'the way complex systems and patterns arise out a multiplicity of relatively simple interactions.'[72] By many people making small, intentional, consistent actions, Brown asserts that we can shape the future in an 'imagination battle'[73] against capitalist, ableist colonialism.

To promote emergence over division and alienation, we must begin to rethink our approach to accountability, moving away from binaries of perpetrator and victim, recognising that these both exist inside all of us, and moving towards transformative justice, a radical practice of community care[74] which does not prevent hurt through the threat of punishment, but through the incentive of connection and community. As activist Mia Mingus writes in her blog post 'Dreaming accountability':

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[71] Brown, *Emergent Strategy*. 14-18
[72] Ibid.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Mingus, Mia. '*Transformative Justice: A Brief Description*'. Leaving Evidence (blog), 10 January 2019. https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2019/01/09/transformative-justice-a-brief-description/.

'What if accountability wasn't rooted in punishment, revenge or superficiality, but rooted in our values, growth, transformation, healing, freedom, and liberation? What if the work of accountability was held as so supremely sacred, that people who got to practice it—truly practice it—were considered lucky and those who had the honour of supporting it and witnessing it were also changed for the better from its power? What if we understand that no amount of "tough love" or punishment could ever hold a candle to the long and hard labour, fear and pain of facing our demons and our traumas? What if we learned to desire the challenging and the transformative, instead of the easy and the comfortable? After all, comfort and transformation do not live on the same block.'[75]

If we begin to see the hurt of our oppressions as a collective responsibility rather than an individual one, we can move past the anxiety of feeling blamed and isolated into a collective project of love.

These forms of utopian thinking align very closely with my own ideas around sustainable activist practice, namely the concept of 'catalysing care'. As a disabled activist, working with other disabled activists, avoiding burn-out while maintaining momentum is a common problem we wrestle with. Over time, I have accumulated a practice which aims to take into account the frequent unpredictability of my own, and my comrades', bodyminds, by looking for gaps (in physical and virtual communities) in which to rest, to open up dialogues and connections, and to make more space for ourselves and others. This space we make, which could be in the form of a single conversation or an offer to help, acts as a catalyst towards a

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[75] Mingus, Mia, '*Dreaming Accountability*'. Leaving Evidence (blog), 5 May 2019. https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2019/05/05/dreaming-accountability-dreaming-a-returning-to-ourselves-and-each-other/.

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more caring, (and as such, less ableist) environment. As these spaces proliferate over time, we create potential for linking those small spaces into larger ones. This kind of activism is much less demanding and overwhelming to me, and others in my community, than other kinds of activism, and as such, we who are often alienated, feel able to contribute.

This is not to say that catalysing care must be slow and gentle. As Brown states:

> 'Together we must move like waves. Have you observed the ocean? The waves are not the same over and over- each one is unique and responsive. The goal is not to repeat each other's motion, but to respond in a way that feels right in *your* body.'[76]

While those with less capacity for activity might engage best with a gentle kind of activism, there is also a space for those who respond with urgency. Those with energy can use that energy to support those with less – once we unlearn our false beliefs about value and productivity, we can choose to be productive, when it serves us, without a feeling of worthlessness when we need to rest.

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[76] Brown, *Emergent Strategy*, 18.

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