

# Conclusion

## *Collective Accountability and Gathering*

### COLLECTIVE ACCOUNTABILITY

Collective accountability is one way—perhaps the only viable way—to shift from an individually focused, accommodations-driven approach to access toward a more relational and sustainable approach. Twelve years of work on the Disabled Academics Study have convinced me of this. We’ve given the individual-accommodation approach more than a good try. Attempts to repair or improve that system may help in the short run, but moving toward access in ways that take relations, space, time, cost, and, above all, justice into account will require a different approach altogether.

How, then? How is it possible to move toward collective accountability in an institutional setting that presumes the importance of competition, scarcity, and individual reward and punishment? There’s no shortage of works that document the failures of a system based on those principles. A recent overview comes from Peter Fleming’s *Dark Academia: How Universities Die* (2021, 27), which argues that “[overwork in universities] is not voluntary but linked to externally imposed demands on our time, something that the recent Covid-19 crisis raised to new heights. In many cases, lecturers are tacitly expected to overperform in all parts of their job like some modern day *uomo universal* [universal man], excelling in teaching, publishing, research grants, administrative service, public engagement, and so forth. That they are subsequently overwhelmed, both mentally and physically, is to be expected, with burnout an endemic occupational hazard.” Fleming’s focus is not on minoritized inhabitants of academe, but copious work indicates that—to put it briefly—the worse it gets, the worse it gets.<sup>1</sup>

It’s tempting to label these conditions a crisis, and, indeed, academe seems fond of announcing a new crisis every year or so. However, labeling a phenomenon a *crisis* implies a temporal bounding: the phenomenon arose suddenly, probably surprisingly, and must be treated (like a temporary illness) until it goes away (Berlant 2007). Critical university studies

has recognized for some time that using *crisis* to label the systematic extractions of academe not only is inaccurate but serves as a misdirection. Drawing on Lauren Berlant's concept of "crisis ordinariness," Abigail Boggs and Nick Mitchell (2018, 441) ask: "On what categories does the rhetoric of crisis rely upon and pivot? Are there potential disagreements that are made invisible, inconvenient, or unavailable by the sense of urgency implied by the now-ness of crisis? How do efforts to manage the crises, even when done in the best of faith, reduce the horizon of strategic approaches and possible futures in their complicity with, rather than disruption of, narrow conservative imaginings of what the university can and should be?" The dynamics of academe are often compared to the dynamics of a harmful or abusive family unit, and one strong similarity is that both love a crisis.

Examples of the "potential disagreements" Boggs and Mitchell mention were abundant during the summer of 2020, as schools cut budgets and forced employees to scramble for the coming semester or quarter. In my experience, budgets were not cut all at once or in a single stroke. Rather, my colleagues and I were asked to write endless "rationales" for the programs, classes, and projects that had already been funded (often with our own external grants or targeted donations) but were now up for grabs. This busywork kept us occupied for months, after which we were informed whether or not our budgets had been cut or our programs eliminated. The school where I work, like most others in the United States, urged employees to come together and fight for the imagined shared cause. Like many other schools, OSU developed slogans, logos, and marketing materials (including swag bags) to go with the effort. But my role in the effort itself largely had to do with being obediently distracted by the imagined crisis of lost revenue, which turned out not to materialize after all.

Invoking the term *crisis* suggests that urgent attention and abundant resources will be forthcoming, but in fact the opposite often turns out to be the case. Having worked in staff, non-tenure-track, and tenure-track positions for more than half my life, I now experience the news of a new academic "crisis" with the same confidence I bring to the recorded assurance, "Your call is very important to us." And yet, despite all this, I continue to believe that forms of collective accountability are possible to build in academe—some forms, in some parts of academe.

I have no definitive solution. As Theri Alyce Pickens (2019) argues, perhaps some things should be undefinable, including responses to the difficult questions raised over the course of a book. Rather than using a

conclusion to neatly close a disruptive work, Pickens suggests, “The only way out is through” (113). What I offer instead of solutions or conclusions, then, are stories: stories of collectivity as it has taken hold and made change in academic life.

Akemi Nishida’s work, including her book *Just Care: Messy Entanglements of Disability, Dependency, and Desire* (2022), demonstrates many ways to imagine working with academic institutions while also fostering and being a part of care collectives. Nishida argues that, although the purpose of disability justice is to support radical access in social justice movements, its principles “also guide us in how to conduct our everyday lives in more-just ways” (20). Having worked with Nishida on various projects, I could offer many examples of ways that she helps foster collective accountability in the spacetimes she inhabits. In 2016, we joined with three other people to propose a collaborative makerspace for the Cultural Rhetorics conference in East Lansing, Michigan. Our panel comprised two tenured professors; a graduate student; and two community activists who weren’t affiliated with academe. At Akemi’s suggestion, we pooled our resources so that all expenses, including flights, hotel rooms, and food, were considered shared expenses, and any available funding, such as reimbursements from academic departments, were subtracted from the group’s shared bill. We shared resources such as hotel rooms and food and split out-of-pocket costs evenly. Our strategy matched some aspects of collective conference-going described by Mia Mingus in “Reflections on an Opening: Disability Justice and Creating Collective Access in Detroit” (2010b). Rather than assuming each attendee was on their own, we worked as a group, sharing resources and treating our capacities and needs as interdependent.

The strategy was simple, but it was a new experience for me. It pulled my attention to the fact that I’d always treated conference reimbursement as something that “I got,” as opposed to something I might share with my community, just as I shared other resources at conferences. It also pulled my attention to the fact that some members of our session would not have been at Cultural Rhetorics if Akemi hadn’t led this act of becoming an ad hoc care collective. I learned not only how to be part of a care collective when attending conferences, but also that the endeavor was much less fancy than I would have imagined. Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (2021) points out that “crip mutual aid is often low-key”—just a few people, maybe for a short time; rarely involving “thousands of people in a spreadsheet”; and rarely written up in *Trend Hunter* or proudly reported on social media.

The research project at the heart of Nishida's *Just Care* (2018) is similarly collective in nature. Throughout, Nishida emphasizes a relational and emergent strategy she calls "messy dependency" (130). Her methodology includes transforming the conventional focus group into a gathering that was "like a disability community hangout where support systems were forged and crip wisdom was shared" (33). The focus groups were composed of disabled people who received community- or home-based care via Medicaid. Nishida's account of the focus groups makes clear that the participants themselves played a major role in shaping each meeting as a kind of "disability community hangout"—for example, participants helped one another understand and fill out informed consent paperwork; exchanged tips on accessing and improving care through Medicaid; interpreted for one another across multiple languages; and moved furniture to ensure that all participants could inhabit the room together comfortably. Many factors were involved in creating these interdependent care spaces, including, as Nishida notes, the fact that all attendees "were seasoned experts in creating a warm, supportive, and affirmative space to welcome anyone and everyone regardless of our intellectual and/or physical disabilities" (34). Something that Nishida doesn't mention explicitly but that is evident from her close descriptions of the groups was that she didn't attempt to handle all care or access requests herself. In fact, at times she asked the group for help in understanding speakers or other needs. This act of holding space—not positioning herself as the single person in the space who would meet all needs—was a critical ingredient in enabling the groups to operate, for a short time, as care collectives. This move—or, perhaps, non-move is a better way to describe it, a kind of stillness or pausing—is part of what makes collectivity possible in academic space.<sup>2</sup> Rushing to meet all needs, holding oneself solely responsible for outcomes, and expecting oneself to be fully capacitated at all times is not only impossible; it blocks the open space or pause in time that lets the possibility of collectivity in.

The examples I share here all revolve around a common theme: gathering. Gathering may occur in person, virtually, or in hybrid spaces; it may be synchronous, asynchronous, or some of both; and, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic, its potential harms have become well known. The possibilities and harms of gathering, as well as the nature of gathering itself and its role in achieving a more transformative kind of access, are my focus in the next section.

## GATHERING

When bodies gather, it creates an impression.

—SARA AHMED, *On Being Included*

During the summer of 2020, academics were introduced to the remarkable spectacle of the “town hall” via Zoom webinar, a format that ensured participants could not see, hear, count, recognize, or communicate with one another.<sup>3</sup> In most of the “town halls” I attended, I appeared to be alone with several white administrators explaining why returning to school in person during the fall of 2020 was a good idea. All participants were “hidden,” and the chat was “disabled.” I could not submit questions except through a monitored queue, and in some cases I couldn’t read other participants’ questions unless one of the meeting organizers chose to read them aloud.

Much has been said—and more will be said—about the explosion of rhetorical strategies that characterized academic communication in 2020–21. Jonathan Beecher Field (2019, n.p.) describes the campus-based town hall meeting as a process that “disrupts the deliberative process, even as it seeks its aura.” These meetings, especially in the immediate wake of the initial COVID-19 lockdown, served at least two purposes: first, to give the *appearance* of gathering; and second, to ensure that some of the most important features of people gathering together (e.g., peer-to-peer communication) were systematically prevented. Priya Parker’s (2018, ix) book on gathering notes that “in countries descending into authoritarianism, one of the first things to go is the right to assemble. Why? Because of what can happen when people come together, exchange information, inspire one another, test out new ways of being together.” Parker’s argument neatly sums up both the potential of gathering as well as its dangerousness from an authoritarian point of view: it tends to foster collectivity.

Work in critical university studies often focuses on the idea of gathering as a means to build collective accountability. Even Fleming’s grimly titled *Dark Academia: How Universities Die* calls for “collective self-recovery” and emphasizes the importance of collectivity and accountability in areas such as curricular revisions, hiring, and budgeting. *Dark Academia*, like many works in critical university studies, draws on *The Undercommons* by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney (2013), particularly its vision of how to resist by using academe as a gathering place while also refusing to be fully “in” or “of” academe. The gathering imagined by Moten and Harney is not

only of literal bodyminds, but also of ideas, movements, and spaces into which possibilities might flow.

Maurice Stevens’s work on gathering builds on Moten and Harney’s concept of study and hanging out but adds a layer: recognizing that we can understand the social fabric *as* a fabric—woven, knitted, or growing together like plant roots. Drawing on tenets of Sufism, Stevens thinks through the metaphor of a weaving as the fabric that holds and expresses the wisdom of life. These ideas were shared with me, not coincidentally, during a hangout—a Friday morning when we met at the STEAM Factory at Ohio State for the weekly “coffee and coworking” time, which we spent talking, drawing, and writing. During that hangout, Stevens and I talked about our everyday lives, stuff we were working on, memories of trauma, food, upcoming family events, and gathering. Until that day, I’d been thinking of “gathering” as coming together (gathering plants, people gathering), but Stevens reminded me of another meaning of “gathering”: folding fabric. Gathered fabric is pulled together to form a pleated or ruffled shape around a sleeve or waist or along the top of an object such as a curtain. I was immediately captivated because of the spatial and temporal elements of gathered fabric:

- Gathers are both together and not together. Two points along a piece of fabric that ordinarily would be (say) two inches apart, when gathered, come together and touch. The gather may be sewn in place, or it might be attached to a flexible band.
- Gathers in fabric manifest abundance. You need “extra” fabric to make gathers. In fact, the presence of gathers and other abundant ways of using fabric have served as symbols of power, wealth, or resistance at various points in fashion history. (Dolan 1994, 22)<sup>4</sup>

Abundance is important whether you are gathering plants, gathering fabric, or thinking about the possibilities of bodyminds gathering. In the absence of abundance (of time, space, resources, relations), gathering becomes much more difficult. The “town hall” webinars weren’t really gatherings—at least as I experienced them—because their baseline was scarcity: time was limited; questions were controlled; and even participants’ ability to see, hear, or communicate with one another was blocked. Gathering is a powerful phenomenon, but it is also one that academe loves to fake.

Over the past four years, I’ve been listening to, watching, and reading my communities’ thoughts on gathering with great care. Because of

my particular disabilities, which include two autoimmune diseases, I'm privy to a lot of conversations about the hazards of gathering in person. Like many of my disabled comrades, I know viscerally what it's like to get sick when you're already chronically ill. You get pneumonia (again). You are hospitalized. You stay incapacitated for weeks or months. You lose all the ground you'd gained over those painful months and years of trying to strengthen your muscles, or thicken your brittle bones, or heal your fractured joints. In the worst-case scenario, you never come out of the hospital. You never come back.

For a long time, since I was fifteen years old, I've been acutely aware of the costs of gathering. I did things that others thought strange: I wore masks on airplanes; I didn't touch doorknobs or faucet handles; if someone near me announced they were sick, I quietly left the room. The calculus of which gatherings were "worth it" for me—and many were—remained a private calculus. Now, however, most of the world knows *of* that experience, even if they haven't undergone it themselves. One of the new names for it is "long COVID." It's what happens when an illness gathers in your body and won't go away, keeps accumulating symptoms, keeps piling up until it seems it will never unpile. And it's what happens when those experiencing those accumulated symptoms are able to gather, often virtually, to compare notes and commiserate and work in solidarity. Long COVID, as Felicity Callard and Elisa Perego (2021) argue, now exists as a recognized illness *because of* collectivity and the stubborn insistence on gathering.

Crips gather in all kinds of ways: we dance within Zoom squares, we talk asynchronously and without oral speech, we haunt one another's histories. Crip gathering is similar to Moten and Harney's (2013) vision of "hanging out" or "study," but a crip analysis places particular emphasis on *what it costs to arrive*. Hanging out is often not a casual proposition for crips. It's hard for us to get there. It's hard for us to stay.

So, then: what does accountable, sustainable gathering actually look like, day to day and in fine-grained and messy detail rather than as a broadly sketched imagining? It can look like almost anything, and as Piepzna-Samarasinha points out, a gathering driven by collective accountability may not be easily recognizable to those accustomed to more structured and hierarchical organizing. Piepzna-Samarasinha (2021) writes:

Like the hangouts I had with the same friend all through the first pandemic year, where I would pull up in the disabled parking spot in front of their building and they would roll out in their chair and we would have a

one to three hour long shouted conversation with masks on through my rolled-down window. We could both sit, and we could be in each other's non virtual company. We'd pass things—apples they'd gotten from the fruit guy, weed gummies, baked goods, an extra KN95 [mask]—through the window. I am not joking when I say those hangouts kept me alive.

Piepzna-Samarasinha notes that this kind of gathering avoids “that frenetic I'M HERE TO RESCUE YOU! captain save-a-crip way that is both stressful and eyeball rolling.” Crip creativity, as Piepzna-Samarasinha names it, tends to show up in gatherings of disabled people.

The Society for Disability Studies (SDS) dance figures in many stories of crip gathering as such a space—crip creativity, ingenuity, improvisation. At that annual dance (now discontinued), people danced with whatever parts they could move, but *dance* didn't just mean bodily movement. It also meant responding, adapting, and recognizing one another. Sami Schalk (2013, n.p.) writes about dancing with wheelchair artist Alice Sheppard: “She helped me learn to watch her . . . to follow her movements, spinning, sliding, touching hands, and shaking our hair.” These in-person spaces I'm describing are not utopias, and in the case of the SDS dance, they're marked by the same injustices of race, gender, and class that mark the organization itself. Gathering has always been constituted through harm. That's not a new truth since COVID-19. It's just newly evident.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the role of harm in gathering has become part of many mainstream conversations. Will a gathering be fully remote, hybrid, or fully in person? Will the option to “Zoom in” be made available in all information about the event, or will that option be added only if someone asks? Will masks be required, “encouraged,” or not mentioned? What attention will be paid to the type of venue, the length of the event, the potential for resting and taking breaks? These are questions of access—not only disability access, but *transformative access*, which centers questions of race, gender, class, and disability.<sup>5</sup> When the pandemic was widely declared to be over and universities eagerly returned to their “new normal,” we didn't return to pre-pandemic life. We returned instead to a spacetime in which the pandemic is simultaneously ongoing and over, and the friction of that simultaneity is painful. Figure C.1 is a picture I took of a sign at a café in Germany in May 2022. Its main text reads, “Wir geben weiterhin aufeinander acht,” followed by the English translation, “We take care of each other.” The sign shows two figures moving in the same direction, both wearing pink masks.





C.1 Sign showing masked figures. Photograph by Margaret Price. Full description in text.

When I saw the sign, I was touched by its declaration “We take care of each other.” Instead of using more typical signage language, which often “comes with instructions” (Ahmed 2019, 28), this sign used a present-tense declarative statement, thus offering an invocation and, perhaps, a hope. *We are* taking care of each other; we *shall* take care of each other. Less than a year later, though, I wrote to the café to ask whether they could send me a clearer image of the sign, which I had photographed quickly in a moment of impulsive happiness. They informed me that the mask policy is no longer in place and the signs have been thrown away.

Every gathering excludes. Every effort to welcome creates, as Ahmed (2012, 43) argues, someone who is “not at home.” Although collective accountability can be built through gathering of various kinds, we cannot ignore the fact that it occurs *through and because of* harm, not in spite of harm.

Gathering forces us to confront the dimensions of crip spacetime—space, time, cost, and accompaniment—and find a way to inhabit it together. Often this cohabitation is painful and messy. But the gathering

itself is a refusal to be separated and, thus, a commitment to collective access. Mingus (2010a) defines crip solidarity through the assertion, “Wherever you are is where I want to be.” This assertion, as Mingus clarifies, does not mean giving anything up, slowing down, or limiting oneself. Rather, it means treating collective presence as the only speed and set of needs there are—at least for that space, that time. In crip solidarity there is no meaning to a statement such as, “I’ll slow down *for you*” because “I” and “you” have become “we.” *We* are going at a particular pace, or paying attention to something together, or hoping to be somewhere together. The experience is not transactional; it is a form of collective accountability.

Gathering is how we affirm each other. How we recognize each other. It’s how we are able to imagine each other, even when we’re not together.