Access from Afar:
Cultivating Inclusive, Flexible Classrooms
after COVID-19

By **Travis Chi Wing Lau**, Kenyon College

<1>As a way of opening this brief piece on how my approach to accessible teaching has changed in response to the pandemic, I want to reflect on what it has meant for me to publicly identify as a disabled scholar studying disability in the Victorian period. At a roundtable for "Alternative Foundations for Victorian Studies," convened for the most recent virtual conference of the Modern Language Association, panelists were asked to speculate about how their respective methodological and interdisciplinary approaches might restructure the "foundations" of the field in its uncertain future. I think the predictable move is to say that disability or any other field focused on a marginalized identity category is not "alternative" but *central* to how scholars should be thinking about the field. In the spirit of Amy R. Wong, Ronjaunee Chatterjee, and Alicia Mireles Christoff's timely "Undisciplining Victorian Studies" (2020) essay, I want to frame my pedagogical strategies in terms of how disability studies raises urgent questions about the ableist norms in Victorian studies and the academy more broadly.(1) After all, disability studies (DS) is a field that emerged out of rights-based activism invested in challenging ableism in its many structural forms, and that always includes pedagogies and epistemologies that decenter ablebodyminded subjects.(2)

<2>The pandemic has forced many of those teaching in higher education to engage in what I continue to call "emergency remote teaching" because faculty and students remain in crisis conditions even as countries globally begin their vaccine rollout. I am fully aware that many faculty are having to triage their classrooms with many lacking crucial resources to do this work, which is already disproportionately displaced onto contingent and adjunct laborers. However, such structural conditions do not preclude me from thinking seriously about accessibility as that which can make the classroom that has historically been inaccessible to many disabled students more equitable and just. The pandemic offers an opportunity to consider how accessibility can be fostered in even the smallest of ways toward the collective benefit of a classroom community whose members are interdependent. To that end, I have long embraced Tanya Titchkosky's definition of access as an "interpretive relation between bodies" (3). The classroom, then, is where such interpretive relations are formed and remade. Rather than positing access as a series of compliances linked to a set of accommodations, it is a constantly changing facet of the

classroom that adapts to the needs of specific bodyminds that share that space. In that sense, access is never truly arrived at perfectly or permanently but rather aspired toward in each discussion, assignment, or form of feedback. In what follows, I offer strategies toward building and maintaining a more accessible classroom community that I hope will persist after the pandemic crisis.

Disability and Ableism in Victorian Studies

<3>I frequently return to Mel Y. Chen's essay on brain fog, where they describe disability as the still-"unthinkable" in academia as its cultures, institutions, and practices systematically produce what Chen aptly calls "disciplined cognators" (178). Having encountered their essay during my final year of graduate school while on the job market, it has left me with an unsettling, lingering question: *How has my disabled bodymind failed to perform disciplined cognition or refused such expectations at all?* To broaden this to my field of study, how has Victorian studies perpetuated, maintained, or intensified these forms of ableist discipline and to what ends for the field? Does the current reckoning with the traditional foundations of Victorian studies also mean reckoning with the field's ableism and the ableism of the academy? I ask all of this with the knowledge that still less than one percent of faculty identify publicly as disabled. As one colleague has suggested, the ongoing portrait of the Victorian period seems to suggest that disability was in fact everywhere, but among scholars, those with disabilities are few and far between. I want to be clear that such disclosures are fraught precisely because disability remains stigmatized in the academy; it remains a risk to disclose because of its potential consequences professionally in which disabled faculty are framed as both liabilities to the institution and needy drains on limited resources.

<4>Julia Miele Rodas observed in 2006 that "for Victorianists . . . many scholars doing disability-related work are not writing specifically from a DS perspective" (380). The reluctance on the part of scholars working on disability topics to identify with disability studies' activist approaches misses the opportunity to enact precisely what Rodas argues is essential to such writing: "the point of DS is disability first" (382-83). For Rodas, the way forward is "when the voice of disability, or the voices that interrogate the constructs of disability, are mingled with and heard by a larger set of discourses" (383). I think, since then, the field has done just that: from Martha Stoddard Holmes's *Fictions of Affliction* (2009) to Jennifer Esmail's *Reading Victorian Deafness* (2013) to the more recent works of Victorian crip formalisms—Karen Bourrier's *The Measure of Manliness* (2015), Kylee-Ann Hingston's *Articulating Bodies* (2019), and Clare Walker Gore's *Plotting Disability in the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (2020)—it is clear that disability studies has provided new methods and vocabularies for talking about the very mainstays of Victorian studies like the novel form, realism, and empire. For some Victorianists, this centering of disability still feels mired in identity politics or in anachronistic projections onto the nineteenth-century past.(3) The reductive nature of these reservations aside, I want to speculate on what an explicitly "disability first" approach might mean for the field before shifting into some practical approaches to accessible pedagogy.

<5>To give an example of what centering disability looks like in scholarship, I often think of Talia Schaffer's work on care, particularly her reading of Charlotte Brontë's fiction wherein "disability is an omnipresent condition of life" throughout a "set of fictional worlds in which

disability is so much the norm that it need not be announced as such, and it is the very matter-of-fact, understated nature of her works' depiction of disability that makes them so radical for modern readers" (268). In a period in which the concept of the statistical norm itself comes into being as a result of disability's proliferation through the rise of industrial capitalism and public health, these "fictional worlds" that Brontë and countless other Victorian writers imagine are, in fact, realist ones. It is this quotidian quality of disability—neither spectacular nor tragic—that I am invested in. A crip approach is not just recovering and reclaiming canonical authors as themselves disabled but taking seriously disability's omnipresence in the period. (4) This means attending to disabled lived experience as much as in its representation. It means looking beyond the sensational to the everyday—to the flourishing or thriving of disabled life that today's reader might not have been trained to expect. Such reading practices also mean attending to what disability scholars have called *cripistemologies* or ways of knowing that are shaped by the ways disabled people inhabit a world not made for them. (5) What might it mean to theorize something like "crip realism" when so much of the discourse about realism presupposes able bodies and minds? Is there a way to think about crip aesthetics without invoking disability for its transgressive, symbolic value—what Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell have called "narrative prosthesis" (6)—but instead engaging with disability on its own terms? These kinds of questions underpin the work I want to do and the work I want to see in the field—a crip hope for more inclusive, accessible futures for Victorian studies.

Inclusive Strategies to Center Access

<6>In terms of accessible course design for remote or hybrid teaching, *flexibility is key*. This includes not just being willing to change on the fly parts of the course based on shifting needs and circumstances, but also providing multiple avenues for students to access the course material. I have found that adopting a hybrid synchronous and asynchronous approach to my classes helped to cater to both students who liked the structure and regularity of regular class meetings and those who may have limited resources in terms of time, technology, and safe spaces to learn. Asynchronous classes may take the form of short writing assignments like discussion posts or reading responses accompanied by recorded lectures. I have often had asynchronous students respond after watching the recorded lecture of our synchronous sessions so that there is continuity between these two groups even if there is a time gap. Managing these two different groups can be demanding, but this blended model, as Titchkosky reminds readers, enables more "interpretive relations" between students and the material (3). The actual materials, too, should be accessible in form: captioned lecture videos and videoconferencing, and PDF documents with optical character recognition (OCR) that allows them to be read with screen readers and that are more affordable than having students purchase full monographs.

<7>Given that many students may be working in different time zones and in different living conditions, accessible teaching in remote settings operate on *crip time*, which recognizes that not all bodyminds work at the same pace.(7) To quote Alison Kafer, "rather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds" (27). Crip time in the academy most commonly means later start times for events or more time given an exam, but this also means reconceptualizing the course's design to avoid time-sensitive assignments and assessments that tend to favor neurotypical students able to perform under pressure and time constraints or more privileged students with stable internet and work

environments. I often explain this in terms of how scholars work in the field: *How often do scholars write in timed conditions and to what ends are they assessing their students in this way? When teachers give students a pop quiz or a two-hour in-class essay exam, are they asking students to show their thinking or their ability to perform a certain kind of cognition that is assumed to be universal across all students?* The point here is that the culture of higher education thrives on speed and productivity, and unsurprisingly, it presumes all bodyminds work at the same pace and in the same ways even in the midst of a pandemic. Asynchronous discussion boards, reflective journals assignments that are cumulative over the semester, take-home exams with prompts given weeks in advance, scaffolded essay assignments that have small incremental parts that allow me to offer feedback early to students, and projects with adjustable deadlines all give students room to breathe and to plan ahead if their courses overlap significantly with assignments. Being deliberate about the learning objectives and purpose of each assessment in relation to the course overall and specific student needs is absolutely an access issue.

<8>To help guide students through what accessibility looks like in my classroom community, especially for students who have been conditioned to resist such approaches, I include an explicit accessibility statement in my syllabus (see Appendix 2). I felt it was particularly important that the statement does not merely replicate the institutional language of accommodation but rather explains how access shapes my pedagogical approach. I often get a sense of my students' needs through short surveys taken before the semester begins or at the midterm (see Appendix 3), remembering that student needs *can and will change*. These surveys offer valuable opportunities to learn about students' needs even before the course begins so there is ample time to make changes based on students' specific feedback. Such surveys also provide students opportunities to share their accommodations questions without having to approach their instructors or having to prove that their disabilities are worthy of addressing, especially if such disabilities are not readily visible and thus easier for administrative systems to ignore.

<9>In most institutions, accommodations are worked out entirely through disability services, but I have found that the processes for student accommodations are often opaque or not accessible themselves to students, which causes immense anxiety for students already marked out by the institution as "needy" or "problematic." Additionally, accommodations are delimited to specific "reasonable" accommodations (consider the ableism built into that qualifier) and require what Ellen Samuels has called "biocertification" or verifiable "proof" of one's disability (i.e., a doctor's referral or test results) and the degree to which it needs accommodation. (8) In my own attempt to access faculty accommodations (if there are any even offered to faculty), I have had to provide letters of verification by spine specialists, chiropractors, physical therapists, and sometimes images of my x-rays or MRIs in order to prove that, in fact, I do need an ergonomic office space. While the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) has created legal protections for disabled people, I would like to remind readers that many institutions continue to have non-ADA compliant buildings and to circumvent the law. Often, the scarcity of resources is used to defend such practices, but ultimately, the expectation that people justify their disabilities rests on the assumptions that (1) students and faculty are untrustworthy and will likely exploit these resources if not gatekept, (2) disabled people have access to healthcare resources that can produce such forms of biocertification, and (3) they must disclose their conditions in order to receive accommodations. In effect, this penalizes disabled people for non-compliance with

presumed ablebodymindedness as a universal standard through a tax that further obligates disabled people to expend energy and labor to have their needs met. If accessibility is central to pedagogy, there should not be barriers to entry for accommodations to be made. They should be ongoing relationships of care and trust between instructors and their students that see education as the work of collaboration and partnership.

<10>This collaborative approach has been crucial to what disability activists and scholars have called "transformative access." Higher education has gotten fairly comfortable talking about the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), but as Elizabeth Brewer, Melanie Yergeau, and Cynthia Selfe have rightly pointed out, "there is a profound difference between consumptive access and transformative access. The former allows people to enter a space or access a text. The latter questions and re-thinks the very construct of allowing" (152). Here, transformative access understands learning spaces as always in process, being co-constructed by the members of the learning community in a way that disrupts the hierarchies intrinsic to academic cultures. For me, this has meant a transparency about why and how I've designed my class in specific ways. It also means inviting my students to offer their feedback and even change those design choices. I try to normalize talking vulnerably about learning as an accretive process—how it is particularly difficult in these conditions and that it creates access barriers not just for them but for me, as well, as a disabled faculty member. Not only does this collective vulnerability prompt students to inhabit a pedagogical role and to think pedagogically about their own education, but this also recognizes them as active participants in the process of learning that is itself composed of specific strategies, techniques, goals, and outcomes. One of the great effects of centering access explicitly is this cultivation of self-reflexivity among students who are thinking not just about content but about how and why students learn.

The Future of Accessible Classrooms After COVID

<11>I would like to end with what sometimes feels like wishful thinking. The pandemic has made possible what many disabled people have demanded for decades: remote working options, accessible virtual platforms, and recalibration of expectations of work and productivity. Yet, as some of my colleagues have rightly asked, how quickly will academia abandon this accessibility conversation the moment that work returns to "normal"? Does access only feel real when a majority of ablebodied or ableminded people see it as a necessity? If COVID-19 has created significant new populations of people with chronic illnesses and disabilities, how does the field continue the access conversation when the vaccine makes the pandemic "no longer a problem"? I ask of you as my fellow educators, administrators, advisors, and committee members in higher education to center access even when the pandemic crisis comes to an end. This work is long overdue, and we owe it to students and to ourselves to imagine more accessible, inclusive futures for the academy.

Notes

(1)See Chatterjee et al.(^)

(2)I draw the term "bodymind" from Margaret Price who joins other scholars of neurodiversity and cognitive difference to insist upon how disability troubles the presumed distinction between

body and mind. In my own experience, my scoliosis-related chronic pain manifests alongside brain fog and generalized anxiety. For more on this term, see Price, "The Body Mind" and *Mad at School*.(^)

(3)See Freedgood and Sanders' response to the V21 Collective's concept of "strategic presentism."(^)

(4)For an introduction to crip methodology and its relationship to queer studies, see McRuer.(^)

(5)See Johnson and McRuer.(^)

(4)For an introduction to crip methodology and its relationship to queer studies, see McRuer.(^)

(6)See Narrative Prosthesis, particularly Chapter 2: "Narrative Prosthesis and the Materiality of Metaphor."(^)

(7)For theorizations of crip time, see Kafer; Samuels, "Six Ways"; and Price, *Mad at School*.(^)

(8)See Samuels' chapters on biocertification in *Fantasies of Identification*: "Proving Disability" and "Realms of Biocertifcation."(^)

Appendix 1: Additional Resources

Anti-Ableist Composition Collective. https://antiableistcomposition.wordpress.com/. Accessed 22 Mar. 22, 2021. A collective of interdependent scholars, teachers, and activists committed to anti-ableist praxis in composition, rhetoric and writing pedagogy and studies.

Dolmage, Jay Timothy. *Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education*. University of Michigan Press, 2017. Alongside Margaret Price's *Mad at School*, Dolmage's work outlines how ableism underpins academic cultures and the structures of higher education.

—. "Universal Design: Places to Start." *Disability Studies Quarterly*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2015, https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/4632/3946. Accessed 18 Mar. 2021. Dolmage's supplement to Academic Ableism introduces Universal Design in the classroom and strategies for implementation.

Hamraie, Aimi. "Accessible Teaching in the Time of COVID-19." *Critical Design Lab*, 10 Mar. 2020, https://www.mapping-access.com/blog-1/2020/3/10/accessible-teaching-in-the-time-of-covid-19 . Accessed 18 March 2021. A guide to accessible teaching in the pandemic put together by Dr. Aimi Hamraie as part of the *Mapping Access* project at Vanderbilt University.

Womack, Anne-Marie et al. *Accessible Syllabus*, 2021. https://www.accessiblesyllabus.com/. Accessed 18 Mar. 2021. A step-by-step guide and checklist for constructing an accessible syllabus organized by Annie-Marie Womack, Annelise Blanchard, Cassie Wang, and Mary Catherine Jessee.

Appendix 2: Sample Accessibility Statement from 2021 Spring Course

PDF | **DOC**

To cite this material, please use:

Lau, Travis Chi Wing. "Appendix 2: Sample Accessibility Statement from 2021 Spring Course." *"Teaching to Transgress" in the Emergency Remote Classroom*, special issue of *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, edited by Kimberly Cox, Shannon Draucker, and Doreen Thierauf, vol. 17, no. 1, 2021. Accessed [date here]. Adapted [date here].(^)

Appendix 3: Sample Questions for Class Survey (via Google Forms and short answer questions)

PDF | **DOC**

To cite this material, please use:

Lau, Travis Chi Wing. "Appendix 3: Sample Questions for Class Survey (via Google Forms and short answer questions)." *"Teaching to Transgress" in the Emergency Remote Classroom*, special issue of *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, edited by Kimberly Cox, Shannon Draucker, and Doreen Thierauf, vol. 17, no. 1, 2021. Accessed [date here]. Adapted [date here].(^)

Works Cited

Brewer, Elizabeth, Cynthia L. Selfe, and Remi Yergeau. "Creating a Culture of Access in Composition Studies." *Composition Studies*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2014, pp. 151-54.

Chatterjee, Ronjaunee, Alicia Mireles Christoff, and Amy R. Wong. "Introduction: Undisciplining Victorian Studies." *Victorian Studies*, vol. 62, no. 3, 2020, pp. 369-91.

Chen, Mel Y. "Brain Fog: The Race for Cripistemology." *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2014, pp. 171-84.

Freedgood, Elaine, and Michael Sanders. "Response: Strategic Presentism or Partisan Knowledges?" *Victorian Studies*, vol. 59, no. 1, 2016, pp. 117-21.

Johnson, Merri Lisa, and Robert McRuer. "Cripistemologies: Introduction." *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2014, pp. 127-47.

Kafer, Alison. *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. Indiana University Press, 2013.

McRuer, Robert. *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*. New York University Press, 2006.

Price, Margaret. "The Body Mind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain." *Hypatia*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2015, pp. 268-84.

—. *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life*. University of Michigan Press, 2011.

Rodas, Julia Miele. "Mainstreaming Disability Studies?" *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 34, 2006, pp. 371-84.

Samuels, Ellen. *Fantasies of Identification*. New York University Press, 2014.

—. "Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time." *Disability Studies Quarterly*, vol. 37, no. 3, 2017.

Schaffer, Talia. "Charlotte Brontë and Disability Studies." *Victorian Review,* vol. 42, no. 2, 2016, pp. 265-69.

Snyder, Sharon and David Mitchell. *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. University of Michigan Press, 2001.

Titchkosky, Tanya. *The Question of Access: Disability, Space, Meaning*. University of Toronto Press, 2011.