DEMANDING MORE

CURRERE AND DIS/ABILITY

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OUR BEGINNING

This article begins with three strangers gathering around a conference table along the northwest wall of the basement Hoelle conference room at Bergamo in 2015. Not knowing anything about one another except for names and paper titles in the program, we waited as about 20 other people gathered to hear us present individual papers about dis/Ability.[1] Thus began an almost decade-long friendship with joint scholarship and fellowship. Since that time, our personal experiences (of caring for children, of experiencing cancer treatments, of living with dis/Ability and chronic illnesses) have changed in ways we could not have anticipated. Our sharing of personal experiences and our theorizing of the systems impacting those experiences have affected each of our journeys. Sharing our experience in a place of care, love, and theory has been transformational.

After many years of engaging individually and together in *currere* as method, we turned our individual and collaborative work to specific intentionality using Pinar's (Pinar & Grumet, 2014) chapter to guide our writing for several years to engage our experiences with dis/Ability. We focused on how and whether dis/Ability justice is possible in the classroom. Our individual writing and reflection on our collective work complicate notions of justice in education. Dis/Abled people are oppressed psychologically, economically, educationally, and often placed at other social disadvantages (Hernandez-Saca & Cannon, 2016). We assert that in considering issues of justice, there must be inclusion and acknowledgment of intersectional dis/Ability justice and that by carefully engagement in autobiographical work and our own experiences with dis/Ability, we can illuminate theoretical and practical ways to further the cause of freedom in purposefully educational spaces, the public sphere, and other social spaces.

Sandra is dis/Abled and lives with a life-threatening chronic illness that has led to the physical and social silencing of her voice in public and private places. She is also the mother of a child who is diagnosed with a developmental dis/Abilities, and her experiences of parenting have brought new insights and inspiration for a more just future. Kelly is the mother of a child with a dis/Ability who has advocated for and with her child. While she identifies as non-disabled, she lives with chronic illnesses caused by cancer treatments. Finally, Jamie's experiences with her moderate, congenital hearing loss have led her to identify as dis/Abled. The nature of her dis/Ability prompts her to explore how disablement can be contextually dependent and how that should impact the ways we think about dis/Ability.

To understand and define a dis/Ability justice framework, we turn to the work of Berne (2017) and Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018), noting that dis/Ability justice is intersectional, centers leaders most impacted by disableism, is anti-capitalist, values coalition building across movements, recognizes the dignity and "wholeness" of dis/Abled people, is sustainable for individuals and bodies involved, is committed to cross-movement solidarity, values interdependence, ensures collective access, and is committed to collective liberation. With this in mind, we will explore possibilities for collective futurities by drawing on frameworks of dis/Ability justice, crip theory (McRuer, 2006), DisCrit (Annamma et al., 2016), and LatDisCrit (Padilla, 2022) to further our understanding of dis/Abled epistemology. As we have written in the past (Vaughan et al., 2019), this is an effort to radically name ourselves in the world around us, dream a more just world, and demand more than inclusion (Freire, 1968/2000).

For this article, we model the relational nature of our collective work. We began this intentional work several years ago by writing through the regressive and progressive, using Pinar's (Pinar & Grumet, 2014) chapter and guiding questions to "return to the past" (p. 71) and to embrace "the future as present" (p. 75). This led us to move to the analytical, revisiting this writing again and again over many months, as suggested by Pinar, so that we could begin and continue to make sense of the future, past, and present. Here, we welcome you into our ongoing iterative work through the four movements on our own and then a coming together in community to think and learn.

As we present understandings of what we have learned over time thematically, we engage our individual *currere* work and our interconnected sustained engagement as a collective with attention to threads of: despair and hope, reimagining dis/Ability, and theory and praxis. Our ongoing conversations within these themes come from this sustained fluidity from our individual contexts in three different geographies at different schools of education, our personal histories and experiences, *and* how we come back together regularly from our unique perspectives and thinking about our lived experiences, dis/Ability, care, curriculum, and praxis.

For me, Sandra, this began with initial writing through the *regressive*. I traced my life as an educator and activist from my experiences as a high school student all the way to my experiences today. With this writing, I moved into the *progressive* to dream of a world where children are able to develop into who they are with loving, supportive adults and ecologies that value difference. I dream of a world where schools would be spaces where a child like my son would be able to thrive and where there wouldn't be a need for interventions to help him fit into the ableist box required to be in the public school space.

This transitions me to the continued work of this back-and-forth movement in analyzing how I am making sense of my autobiographical material through writing, thinking, and being. For the past couple of years, I dove deeply into work on justice and ethics of care from a dis/Ability perspective, both critiquing and extending how scholars like Tronto (1994), Kittay (2001, 2011), and Engster (2007) bring care and justice together and critiquing feminist notions of ethics of care and reciprocity. I cannot separate this studying, writing, presenting, and the personal and intellectual work from what I am learning here as I work toward the bringing things together with greater awareness both in my careful individual tracing and my ongoing engagement with Kelly and Jamie.

It is important to note that this writing is not a linear process, and through years of preparing for collaborating with my coauthors and for conference presentations, I have moved fluidly between the movements and traced the ways I am writing at different times through different aspects of my autobiography focusing the *regressive*, on my personal and schooling experiences with dis/Ability, and my experiences as a teacher, professor, and mother. I found this practiced return to the *progressive* and back-and-forth quite difficult as I moved through and within the four movements to the *synthetical*. It is through this collective work, as you will see in the following sections, that we have nurtured individual and collective capacity for observing, analyzing, and moving to greater awareness of how our experiences, scholarship, and collective engagement teach us about the world in which we find ourselves.

I, Kelly, through my recent writing and thinking with my friends here, have utilized the *currere* method to reflect upon moments of disorientation to envision more just futures for myself, my children, my students, and our larger community. My work included a reflection published in 2023 in *the Currere Exchange Journal* in which I shared how theorizing with disability studies (Kafer, 2013; Parrey, 2016) and parenting a child with a dis/Ability provided me alternative narratives while I was healing from cancer. In my 2023 reflection, I shared how I reimagined systems where services were not linked to labels and dis/Ability justice had a place in every classroom. In the analysis phase, I attempted to re-orient myself by examining how theory can help us move from the past to the imagined future through concrete actions and the will to create more inclusive spaces. Finally, I reacted to my learning in the *synthetic* phase and committed to "question previous unexamined assumptions and dream differently" (Vaughan, 2023, p. 4). Within this framing, I sought to move from recounting past experiences to imagining a future created in a spirit of dis/Ability justice. Moving from analysis to synthesis, I recognized that disorientation could provide opportunities to learn from individual and collective *currere* processes to a focus on praxis.

Within this synthetical phase, I have been more focused lately on the concept of praxis—concrete ways theory impacts practices to create more just systems (Vaughan & Nunez, 2023). Praxis can help us move beyond critique and toward building practices (and *hopefully*, someday, institutions) that center on care, belonging, and justice. I recognize that small actions inside our classrooms and communities often feel too small to mention when discussing intersecting systems of ableism, racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression. Yet, when I see how Jamie impacts her students as an educational leader and Sandra builds community with young people, I find hope in acting (even on a limited scale) to move closer to those spaces we imagine.

I, Jamie, have often reflected that, on the way to death, most of us are likely to experience diminished capacities, or dis/Abilities, if you will. And so, in that sense, ableism is one manifestation of hegemony we all are likely to encounter, and dis/Ability is, in some ways, an easily misappropriated marker of identity. I also wonder to what extent ableism is actually our struggle with our own mortality warped into a twisted self-hatred. That our refusal to make space for different bodies and abilities is really an inability to accept with grace that we were always designed to falter, that normal is make-believe.

So, how do we reclaim the joy? Where do we locate hope? As I've written over these years and reflected on my own, with my friends here and in other academic spaces, I find a return to *love*. However, love is far from simple, and dis/Ability theorizing guides my developing understandings of this complex and hopeful part of who we are.

As each of us moves in and between the four movements of *currere*, we have collectively nurtured the *synthetical* moment as we gather our thoughts and look at who we are, what we have experienced, and how that teaches us in preparation for collaborative writing and conference activities. The following sections are a peek into our *synthetical* moments in this collective *currere*.

DESPAIR AND HOPE

In our coming together, whether as a check-in or to collaborate on a scholarly project, we always discuss the most pressing matters of our hearts. We are quick to text updates of joy and celebration, and we support one another through life's sorrows. With our experiences of dis/Ability as women and mothers, it is often out of these conversations of despair that our collective sense-making about our experiences turns to hope.

I, Sandra, have often written about and shared with my friends, both formally for our projects and informally in the in-between moments that lead us to our collective work, feelings of anxiety about the ableist systems in schools and related fields with which my son interacts. My friends support me, as a mother, in advocating for something different despite the demands of the systems. As I move to the *progressive* movement in my own work, I hope for a future of creativity and freedom for teachers, students, and communities where schools and the people in them are not constrained by structures and systems that discriminate. Where children can be— develop, be loved, learn, and grow. This will take a dreamed society that values people for their inherent worth and not their economic productivity. Moving to the *analytical*, there is a lot of despair in my writing as I see my hopes for the future in context of what I've experienced as a dis/Abled person who has been silenced in intergenerational decision-making in my family and through my experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic. There's a deep sorrow and hopelessness in a very dark present.

Hope comes in during the *synthetical* as theory and action open up space for me to breathe as I think about engagement in schools and communities, collaborating with people who will challenge and offer ways for me to think further "outside of the box," engagement with theory as a place of healing for myself and my family and hopefully healing beyond that. It is through friendship and support, conversations, recommendations, and collective work that I am able to come to the *synthetical*. As I collaborate with Kelly and Jamie, I am able to observe my experiences, consider what I believe can be possible, and reshape my consciousness, reentering the spaces I move in with a new, hopeful perspective.

I, Kelly, feel that, as a teacher educator, one of the ways I can help influence networks of care and inclusive practices in K12 spaces is to model care in my classroom community. I do this informally—by checking in with students, celebrating individual and collective successes, hosting poetry workshops and game nights during stressful weeks, intentionally building a sense of community and encouraging collaboration, meeting with students when they are free often on Zoom late in the evening or on weekend mornings—but also in more organized ways. I organize my classes to move beyond "special" pedagogical techniques and towards political, pedagogical, and curricular commitments to inclusive communities.

By changing what we read (and reading the work of dis/Abled scholars and teachers as opposed to only reading about dis/Ability within the context of services provided to students with dis/Ability), we can have different conversations about dis/Ability in schools. I also explicitly introduce words such as disableism, which includes "oppressive practices of contemporary society" that oppress those with disabilities (Goodley, 2014, p. xi), and ableism, similar in structure to heteronormativity or white supremacy, which positions non-disabled people as "normal" and disabled individuals as abnormal (Goodley, 2014, p. xii). And I can say that this is the best of days, co-creating spaces with students who are hopeful and committed to creating places of belonging. As I navigate other tensions in my professional life as a teacher-educator, my friends can attest that I often share feelings of sadness and anger, but not without hope. As I work with Sandra and

Jamie, we listen to each other with sympathy and empathy and the power of hope in our observations of one another's experiences. This allows me to reenter my classroom with an awareness of how we can bring the pain and joy of the past and new visions for the future as we think with dis/Ability frameworks and act in the present. They empower me to act with urgency in big and small ways.

I, Jamie, have experienced and witnessed ways people do not always love us in the ways we want them to. But sometimes, misdirected or misapplied love carries greater consequences. As women who have experienced dis/Ability across different professional and personal facets of our lives, we have witnessed love that limits, love that hinders, and love that underestimates potential. Love that maybe isn't received as love at all.

The trouble with these utterances, acts, or moments is the other messages they send or the underlying assumptions they reveal—assumptions about longevity, about dependence, about capacity; assumptions that underestimate us because of the perception that dis/Abilities must limit us; assumptions that, if met with action, have the potential to limit our agency; assumptions that can strip both parties of our humanity.

If people do not love us as we wish they would, the crux of dis/Ability justice (and perhaps many kinds of justice) (hooks, 2001) might reside in our answers to the question, "How would you like to be loved?" This is a sticky question. It resists essentialism. It defies a singular response. It takes Charlton's (1998), "*Nothing about us without us*," and insists instead, "Nothing about me without me," centering the voices and agency of those who experience dis/Ability in considering what justice looks like.

I am reminded that "love is in the details." As I engage with my friends, I am able to bring things together in a *synthetical* moment. And, while I am still struggling to see clearly how and where hope and joy will be reclaimed in the distant future, I know, in this moment, they are there in even the smallest acts of love and care we give each other. They are there when questions of "who is expendable and who is esteemed" are no longer entertained (Linton, 1998, p. 118). They are there as we find, claim, and create spaces where we are no longer inconveniences.

As we gather and often share our writing and daily experiences of despair, we are able to collectively move to the *synthetical* and point one another to hope. We intentionally engage relationally to allow space to express frustration and sorrow over ongoing injustices. And we think together with dis/Ability frameworks and what we learn from each other's experiences in the past and present and dreams for the future to continue to hold hope for a better future through radical imagination, our care community, and sustained action.

REIMAGINING DIS/ABILITY

In our work together, we turn to imagination and dreaming, often including joyful considerations of what it means to be dis/Abled, challenges to the normative, and gratitude for the ways thinking with dis/Ability opens up new possibilities.

I, Sandra, am learning, through these years of meandering yet purposeful writing, that the non-normative has to have the space to be—to develop, even if that's undesirable to some. With this, I have learned so much from Robert McRuer's (2006) *Crip Theory* in being able to write about what it means to not desire the normative and more fully embrace the value of the nonnormative. This collective *currere* cracks open the pain I see in the *analytical* movement, which can be quite dark. My work with Kelly and Jamie also leads me to think about the radical action it will take to dismantle ableism and how despair over our collective future and the planetary future takes radical thinking. To remake/redream school, to remake/redream our conceptions of connectedness to other living and nonliving beings, will require a radical shift and a digging into and embracing the difficult work/action.

I, Kelly, in continuing to think about my actions in the classroom, carefully think with my students to expand what they read as college students and what texts they will bring to their future classrooms. In a project with preservice teachers preparing to be both general and special education teachers, we analyze children's literature and begin to find examples of dis/Abled protagonists from a variety of identities and experiences that are humanizing and just (see Vaughan, 2024). In this way, we not only discuss ways ableism, sexism, and racism intersect to impact the lived experiences of my students and their (future) students but also begin to think about curriculum in ways that can disrupt those systems. These actions in my classroom are enabled because of collective thinking with dis/Ability frameworks.

I, Jamie, see that, by causing us to be worried about what is or isn't "right" or what is or isn't "normal," ableism steals our capacity for finding joy in what simply is. In asserting this, I do not mean to make light of the real pain that often accompanies living with dis/Ability, but rather to highlight how ableism's ideals distract us from enjoying the moment that is ours, either through cycles of comparison, worries for the future, and/or grief.

What are the possibilities and potentials of dis/Ability? In my experience, they are many of the things encapsulated in the principles of dis/Ability justice laid out by members of Sins Invalid (2019), namely in my experience, however, manifested through interdependence. The power to accept the full humanity of each individual exactly as they are and to see in that not a list of ableist or capitalist-driven shortcomings but to center how their presence influences and illuminates the current moment.

Bringing our insights to one another allows us to rethink and enter the spaces we occupy as we leave our collective work with ways to live our shared commitment to examining disablement. Our stories, how we are learning through viewing our past experiences, and our visions for radically new futures allow us to make sense of what we are learning together and go back to our everyday lives and teaching with a new sense of ourselves, our classrooms, and the world around us.

THEORY AND PRAXIS

It is in the bringing together of theoretical frameworks, specifically dis/Ability justice and *currere* as curriculum scholars, that we are able to move to praxis. We take up hooks' (1994) definition of praxis as "action and reflection upon the world in order to change it" (p. 14). Through our sustained reflections together, we can move to action as a group and in our individual lives.

I, Sandra, write about how dis/Abled people know the world through their bodies that may be viewed as broken and devalued, with minds that are invaluable. For me, that has always been something I understand both materially and that has pointed me to something mystical. I have come to a *synthetical* moment, with Kelly and Jamie's insights and encouragements, in my journey thinking about *wonder*. Garland-Thomson (2019) writes about colonial pre-contact communities, stating that we see examples of "understandings of human variations to historicize current concepts and reach for alternative versions of disability as a mark of distinction in the tradition of the marvelous, prodigious, or supernatural" (p. 16).

I think this notion of wonder, of the supernatural, connects to what I have been writing and saying for a long time about how we need to listen and turn to dis/Abled people and the dis/Abled community as we consider material conditions of suffering, large-scale problems we face societally and globally, and in how we can manage to be in a world where we see and face suffering. There cannot be justice without care, and we learn about caring justice from dis/Abled communities. We learn about the coalition building needed to dismantle oppressive systems and how to return home and rest. We will learn to slow down, to appreciate beauty and the not-so-beautiful in our experiences. We will learn to listen and share in ways that embrace our interconnectedness with each other and our planet.

I, Kelly, in my work as a scholar and a teacher, recognize that disability studies give us theoretical tools to imagine new ways of conceptualizing schooling. This is the work of curriculum studies scholars, and we hope that our community will take the value of disability studies seriously in the struggle to challenge systems of intersecting ableism, racism, and other forms of oppression. In my teacher preparation courses, my students and I read theory and apply it to practical situations. Drawing from the work of scholars like Federico Waitoller, Nirmala Erevelles, and Subini Annamma, I seek to empower preservice teachers to understand and oppose ableism (as it intersects with racism and other oppressive forces) and embrace notions of inclusive education. My ongoing engagement with care communities and dis/Ability frameworks inform how I reenter my classroom, pushing my students and myself to new ways of seeking justice.

I, Jamie, as I continue my work with Sandra and Kelly, find I am also struck by queries surrounding hierarchies. The ways in which our education system works to marginalize multiple populations are well-documented, and individuals with dis/Abilities are no exception, as Charlton (1998) deftly illustrates. As a teacher educator, I've come to question how barring those with disabilities from entering the classroom to teach layers these specific hierarchies such that representations of disability on the other side of the desk are silenced or rare. What results is a system that erases dis/Ability in its adults while highlighting it in its children, a system that practices a sort of figurative eugenics? One of many things we have learned from K12 classroom studies framed by critical race theory, queer theory, and feminism, among others, is that representation matters. Students benefit from seeing themselves in the adults who serve as their teachers as well as through the curriculum they experience. Thus, through the erasure of dis/Abled adults in schools, we face a new kind of disablement—one that creates specific barriers to illuminating the scope of what it means to live with dis/Ability and the possibilities and potential of dis/Ability. Thus, in my own practice, I seek ways to open opportunities for teacher candidates deemed dis/Abled or inadequate and work diligently to create course activities and policies that honor multiple ways of knowing and being.

This brings me back to thinking about the ways people attempt to show love and our desires for being loved. I think, "but this is what it means to love people as they are and as they want to be loved." And so, I come to some degree full circle—to reject disablement on both sides of the desk—teacher to student—we must learn to love people in the ways they seek to be loved and provide space where their genius is not only discovered or acknowledged but illuminated.

We see our ongoing, relational, collective *currere* as both enabled and informed by dis/Ability thinking. It is through our work together that we are able to understand our autobiographies in new ways as we nurture collective moves to the *synthetical*. We assert that this is one reason curriculum studies students and scholars should learn and think with dis/Ability frameworks. Thinking with dis/Ability enables our sustained relational work and the ways we are able to arrive at the *synthetical* movement.

As we continue to work together in writing, we ourselves come to and are continually energized to understand dis/Ability in new ways and to confront unjust systems that oppress nonnormative bodies and minds. As we care for one another through embracing one another's beautiful, complex, intersectional identities, we foster spaces of justice-seeking care and move our reflections and provocations to praxis—we demand more for dis/Abled people and communities in our work within and outside of the academy, and we know this form of caring justice because of the continuity of our relationships and work together and our collective commitments.

CONCLUSION

As we have purposefully allowed ourselves enough distance to observe our experiences through writing and reflection, through *currere,* we have been able to return to our ongoing conversation to learn together and to encourage each other's development as interconnected beings. We have learned together and taught each other how understanding dis/Abled ways of knowing through our bodies and lives can shape the way we interact as three dear friends, as educators, and community members who hold a concern for people and our planet.

In continuing to model our scholarly practice from the past many years, this concluding section comes from a process of relationship and conversation. We recognize *collective currere* as transformative praxis. The *currere* process invites scholars to "bracket the educational aspects of our taken-for-granted worlds" (Pinar, 1975, p. 406). The process has been transformative individually in that we have been able to examine our past experiences with dis/Ability while also envisioning a different, more just future. The spaces in between those past memories and future imaginings can help provide the impetus for action. Yet, we also recognize that our collective work of sharing our memories, helping to solve current challenges, celebrating successes, and dreaming collectively has resulted in generative, empowering, affirming work. We have struggled with what to call our relationship—maybe a professional affinity group (Adams & Peterson-Veatch, 2012) or a care community (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018)—but we want to acknowledge that this relationship has strengthened our individual work. While academic scholarship is often presented as individualistic, our work together has opened new possibilities.

In 2019, Erevelles et al. argued that "disability studies scholarship embodies an epistemic space that not only demonstrates its difference from the normative curriculum, it also exceeds its confining boundaries" (p. 357). In our conversations about the value that disability studies brings to curriculum studies, we focused on the iterative, generative nature of dis/Ability epistemology. Dis/Ability must be included in curriculum studies not just because the erasure causes harm but because dis/Ability theorizing, especially at intersections of race, class, and gender, adds to how we conceptualize ways of knowing and being in academic and classroom spaces. As many disability studies scholars have described, dis/Abled epistemology can inform other modes of thinking and ways we consider knowledge, which is valuable. Dis/Abled epistemology allows us to experience the world differently, and such experience is needed.

When we entered that session at Bergamo in 2015, we were strangers. Each of us presented our grappling with our experiences with dis/Ability, our theorizing with disability studies, our questions, and our anger about the silences within our beloved curriculum studies community. As we reflected upon that session, we noted that we were surprised by the synergy of our individual scholarship and energized by the presenters and the audience in that space– there was a possibility and a necessity to continue this work. There was something revelatory about that session, and we have viewed our work over the last decade as both provocation and invitation: a provocation to members of our field to re/consider understandings of dis/Ability and an invitation to engage with dis/Ability studies as a way to expand notions of education and justice (see appendix). Through our support of one another and relational engagement as we bring our individual observations of our pasts to conversation about our experiences, dream new futures together, and analyze how we might return to the world, we experience a lived synthetical movement, together.

NOTES

1. A note on punctuation throughout this article: Following in traditions that "resist deficit thinking and language" as written about by Gallagher et al. (2023) you will see that when referring to dis/Ability we punctuate with a slash and capital A. This calls attention to the socially constructed nature of dis/Ability and is a way to resist socio, political, historical disabling oppressions and to emphasize an embracing of dis/Ability as identity. We also do note punctuate words like disabling or disablement. Like Sami Schalk (2018), we use this (lack of) punctuation to refer to what Goodley (2014) describes as oppressing those with impairments (p. 9). Schalk reminds us that "it's important to linguistically differentiate" (p. 6) as we consider disablism as constituted within systems of power and oppression as apart from dis/Ability, which here is used as identity, construct, analytic, and a way of being and knowing. We also chose not to punctuate the term used for the field "disability studies," since it is often not punctuated in common literature. Changing the punctuation throughout a piece, as we do here, is well established in critical dis/Ability work, as in the seminal edited volume by Connor et al. (2016, p. 7).

APPENDIX

In the spirit of provocation and invitation, we end with a poem and a list of texts that invite you, the reader, to learn more about dis/Ability theorizing. This poem is from Ursula K. Le Guin's (2023) *Collected Poems*. Her verse "Votum" speaks to our feelings of interconnectedness:

Let it be clear, a clear day
from the eastern ridge to the sea.
Let the oak be dropping
its long fragile flowers
onto the ground under the branches.
Let no cloud gather in the sky,
no wind disturb the fall of the flowers.
Let the shadow lie under the branches
silent on the ground.
Let the oak outlive me
by a hundred flowerings.

We also encourage curriculum studies scholars and students to consider the ways that dis/Ability theorizing has the potential to further curriculum theorizing.

Book List for Curriculum Studies Scholars Interested in Engaging with Disability Studies:

- Connor, D. J., Ferri, B .A., & Annamma, S. A. (2016). *DisCrit: Disability studies and critical race theory in education.* Teachers College Press.
- Erevelles, N. (2011). *Disability and difference in global contexts: Enabling a transformative body politic.* Palgrave Press.
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- McRuer, Robert. (2006). *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability.* NYU Press.
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