

Interdependency as an Ethic for Accessible Intellectual Publics

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An accessible society,” crip theorist Robert McRuer argues, “is not one simply with ramps and Braille signs on ‘public’ buildings, but one in which our ways of relating to, and depending on, each other have been reconfigured” (94). Using McRuer’s definition as a starting point, in this article I seek to work toward creating a more accessible society of teacher-scholars by exploring interdependency as an ethic for intellectual work.¹ Toward this end, I will first argue that creating such a public requires a reconceptualization of the term “pedagogy,” one that moves beyond the boundaries of the classroom such that learning emerges as a dynamic process of recognition and interrelation. I will then review the concepts of independence, dependence, and interdependence as they have been taken up in disability studies and conclude by using these meanings to map out how interrelations on multiple levels make our intellectual work possible.

In *Democracies to Come: Rhetorical Action, Neoliberalism, and Communities of Resistance*, Rachel Riedner and Kevin Mahoney argue that pedagogy understood as that which occurs only within classroom spaces is problematic because it represents pedagogy as a closed system and thus fails to recognize how classroom practices are part of a larger network of bodies, emotions, and economies. To counter such an understanding, they redefine pedagogy as “a praxis of learning strategies for intervening, reassembling, and inventing sustainable relationships of solidarity, networks of affinity, that hold out the possibility of countering” hegemonic ideologies (3). In this sense, then, pedagogy, as they understand it, is explicitly political, for it necessarily involves practices for “making, reproducing, and remaking social relations, identities, and intervening in relations of dominance and exploitation” (xiv). For Riedner and Mahoney, this work of re/making and intervening in democratic publics necessitates that teachers *move into* them: by participating in actions of social protest with students and community members beyond the institutional space of the classroom, teachers *remake* existing social relations by making and sustaining *new* relations of solidarity.

Riedner and Mahoney’s conceptualization of pedagogy, when put into conversation with McRuer’s theory of accessible societies, gestures toward the value of understanding pedagogy as practices designed to reconfigure existing social relations through the unlearning of traditional ways of relating. In disability studies scholarship, as I will explain below, this important pedagogical work translates into the need to challenge the normalizing status of independence, specifically, its status as the originary position from which publics are both freely chosen and forged. It is only by recognizing interdependency as the norm, these scholars argue, that can we begin to take up our ethical obligation to help sustain relations that in turn help to sustain us.

As an interdisciplinary field of inquiry, disability studies is well positioned to forge a reconsideration of pedagogy as involving the unlearning of hegemonic forms of relating because of its trenchant critiques of what it means to be “normal,” who gets to define these meanings, and what these meanings do. Key to these critiques is a direct confrontation with ableism, an ideology by which able-bodiedness is constructed as the norm and disability is assumed to

be “abject, invisible, disposable, less than human” (Dolmage 22). Disability studies scholars contest these constructions by framing disability as “a political and cultural identity,” thereby “challeng[ing] the idea that disability is a deficit or defect that should be cured or remedied” (Dolmage 19, 20). It is through such a framework that ableist concepts can be identified and critiqued, and one such concept is *independence*. Indeed, scholars in disability studies have long critiqued independence as an ableist fiction borne from Enlightenment, colonial, and masculinist ideologies that privilege it as the primary signifier of citizenship, adulthood, and human achievement. Tobin Siebers, for example, explains that within the tradition of liberalism, citizens are constructed as “autonomous, rational beings” whose existence is marked by an “essential freedom and independence” (182). Likewise challenging a liberal construction of citizenship, McRuer argues that the “bourgeois public sphere, as it has been most famously theorized by Jurgen Habermas, is founded on principles of independence and ability” (81). These principles are constitutive of what Jay Dolmage terms the “normal position”: “able-bodied, rational-minded, autonomous, polite and proprietary” (21).

The effects of unproblematic independence rhetorics are multiple and overlapping. Margaret Price explains that the valorization of independence legitimates the fallacy that its “counterpart . . . must be de-pendence, and that all dependence is disabling” (227). Normalizing discourses of independence thus render dependency aberrant, which can not only be used as a reason to exclude people from participating as citizens in the public sphere, but also lead rhetoricians to assume such rhetors’ communicative acts are ineffectual *because* they come from nonnormative bodies (an assumption proven wrong, by the way, by works such as Peter Wayne Moe’s analysis of Michael J. Fox’s address to Congress, as well as Dolmage’s rereading of the rhetorical embodiment of the Greek God Hephaestus).

The privileging of independence and the concomitant assumption that independence is inherently good, also elide the ways in which independence can stand in for isolation. Price, in collaboration with Leah [Phinnia] Meredith, Cal Montgomery, and Tynan Power, for example, links the status of independent scholars who work outside of academic institutions to issues of accessibility, arguing that some

scholars' independence is yoked to a kind of isolation marked by limited access to "conventional academic arenas" (199). As a synonym for self-reliance, independence also forecloses possibilities enabled by the making of new connections. This is why McRuer regards most versions of identity politics as "isolated" and "dislocated" (71): they perform identity as whole, complete, and, therefore, self-reliant. To counter these performances, McRuer combines disability studies scholarship with research in cultural geography and political economy in order to "locate disabled bodies in larger spatial networks" (70) that enable new alliances and sites of inquiry to emerge. Taken together, Price, her research colleagues, and McRuer call on us to theorize independence in relation to material and intellectual processes of inaccessibility.

To disrupt an independence/dependence binary that sustains normalizing discourses of independence, disability studies scholars point to the ontological fact of human *interdependency*. According to Siebers, disability is "a critical concept that reveals the structure of dependence inherent to all human societies. As finite beings who live under conditions of scarcity, we depend on other human beings not only at those times when our capacities are diminished but each and every day" (182-83). We are, as he puts, a "community of dependent frail bodies that rely on others for survival" (182), leading him to conclude that we ought to conceive of dependence not as an "individual character trait," but "as a structural component of human society" (183). Sieber's route to a meaning of interdependence founded on the essential vulnerability of existence echoes feminist philosopher Eva Feder Kittay's claim that "interdependence begins with dependence" (xii). For Kittay, this meaning of interdependence is "featured both literally and metaphorically in the aphorism that we are all some mother's child" (50). Cautioning against a romanticizing of dependency, however, Susan Wendell observes that

dependence on others to meet some of the basic physical needs is humiliating in a society that so clearly prizes independence from that particular kind of help. Moreover, the help is too often provided on the condition that those providing it control the lives of those who receive it. Small wonder that many people with disabilities who see the possibility of living as independently as

any non-disabled person, or who achieved that goal after a long struggle, value their independence very highly. (146)

So, we must recognize the contextual complexities that render independence rhetorics both necessary and effective even as we realize, as Wendell does, that social attitudes “must change in the direction of acknowledging the realities of our interdependence and the value of depending on others and being depended upon” (151).

What is this value? The inherent imperfection of bodies and acts of human communication makes them both vulnerable, which is to say: both are in *need* of others. What Dolmage describes as “the generative potential of imperfection” (117) is at the heart of disability studies understood as an epistemology: it assumes “that meaning actually springs forth from gaps and flaws and mistakes” (243). The generative potential of imperfection is also a guiding principle in Price’s interdependent qualitative research paradigm, which considers “site[s] of . . . [empirical] ‘taint’—where data that don’t conform to the requirements of the research design emerge—as spaces of meaning making, places “where questions arise, where researchers and participants must communicate, where compromises take place and participants’ decisions will guide and even redirect the course of a study” (205). Acknowledging the realities of interdependency also works toward recognizing the labor of care: the fact that some people provide care to others, and that these caretakers are in need of care themselves. Such a model of social cooperation is rooted in an ethic that, as feminist philosopher Susan Sherwin explains, “reject[s] a picture . . . of a world organized around purely self-interested [autonomous] agents” (qtd. in Wendell 162).

Importantly, for the concept of interdependence to do this work on social, structural levels, it can’t be understood only in terms of two independent individuals voluntarily agreeing to reciprocate. Such a meaning reproduces the norm of independence and, further, it suggests that interdependency is a choice—we can *choose* to depend on one another, or not—a belief rooted in a kind of privilege that allows one to ignore how interdependency is the condition of possibility for existence itself. Instead, given my purposes, interdependency can be more productively understood as Kittay defines it: as “a nested set of

reciprocal relations and obligations” (68). Developing this definition further, Kittay explains:

Just as we have required care to survive and thrive, so we need to provide conditions that allow others—including those who do the work of caring—to receive the care they need to survive and thrive . . . [S]hifting . . . to a public conception of care, we [can] think of the circles of reciprocity moving outward toward the larger social structures of which we are a part and upon which we depend. (133).

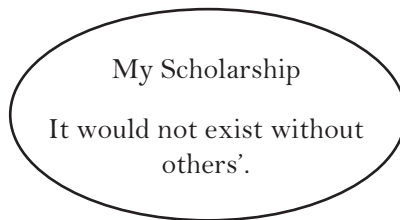
When pedagogy is defined as practices that help “sustain relationships of solidarity that hold out the possibility of countering” hegemonic ideologies (Riedner and Mahoney 3), Kittay’s theory posits an understanding of pedagogy as a “*politics* of interdependency” (Lewiecki-Wilson and Cellio 6; emphasis added). Such a politics calls on us to recognize how our pedagogical assumptions and classroom practices—some of which we should work to sustain, others we are obligated to contest—function *relationally*. From a disability studies perspective, this politics obligates us to interrogate normative classroom practices that emerge from ableist assumptions and thus reinscribe independence as the norm. As Patricia A. Dunn explains: “A rhetoric that values interdependency and interconnectedness can enlighten models of teaching based on outmoded commonplaces regarding ‘independence’ and ‘autonomy’: that it is desirable to be ‘an independent learner’ or that written texts are conceived of and produced by struggling solitary writers” (742-43). A politics of interdependency thus forces recognition of the ways in which learning practices not only emerge from that which takes place outside the classroom—in this example, the circulation of ableist ideologies that define independence as the norm—but also, if left uncontested, help sustain the hegemony of normalcy in culture writ large.²

The above discussion posits that recognitions of interdependency are necessary both to sustain “relations of flourishing” (Lewiecki-Wilson 91) and undo relations premised on the fiction of independence. In the remainder of this article, I want to think through how we might access this recognition by imagining how our intellectual work—defined broadly as teaching, research, and service—emerges

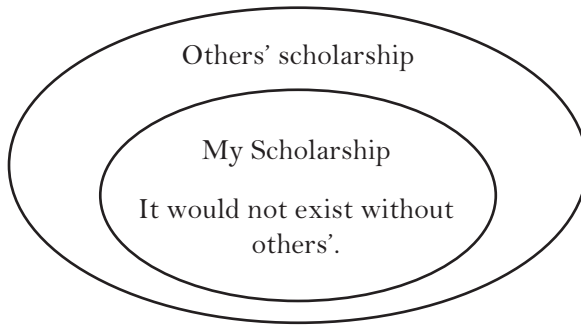
and survives *interdependently*. Doing so is especially important in the context of the scholarship I have reviewed here, since an understanding of imperfection and vulnerability as essential qualities of human existence can make political action seem unnecessary: in other words, if interdependency is a fact of my being, then I might persuade myself to believe I'm helping to build and sustain systems of ethical relation just by *being*. This fundamental passivity of rhetorical agency, while theoretically interesting, doesn't suffice when it comes to political projects, because politics isn't passive.

What follows, then, are some mappings of nested relations that make our intellectual work possible and from which emerge questions that point to how we might intervene on different levels to become a more accessible society of teachers and scholars. At each level I pose questions about how we might reconfigure ways of relating. In discussing these mappings, I'm not trying to occupy some moral high ground; indeed, in making them I found that I needed to call myself out more than once. And that's okay. That's actually the point. I also recognize that these mappings are contingent selections that could have been drawn otherwise and that the questions emerging from them are incomplete. Thankfully, I'm not alone.

***First circle:** This is an image of a big circle with the words "My Scholarship" inside, followed by the sentence: "It would not exist without others'."*²³



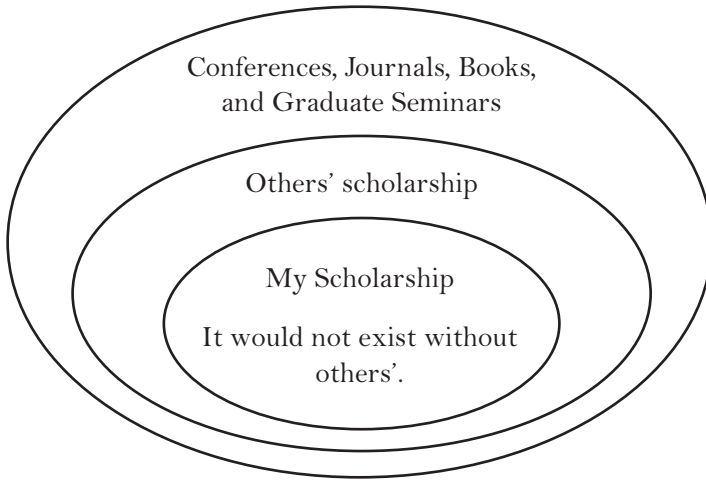
Second circle: This image shows my circle of scholarship nested inside a circle with the words “Others’ Scholarship” on top.



So, typically we understand this one pretty easily. The reality of interdependency is observable in citations and acknowledgments. Yet while these demonstrations are important, they can work to sustain an interdependency-as-choice model. If someone doesn't credit me with an idea I gave her, it's because she chose not to, for which I can then blame her for being an unappreciative jerk, and so forth.

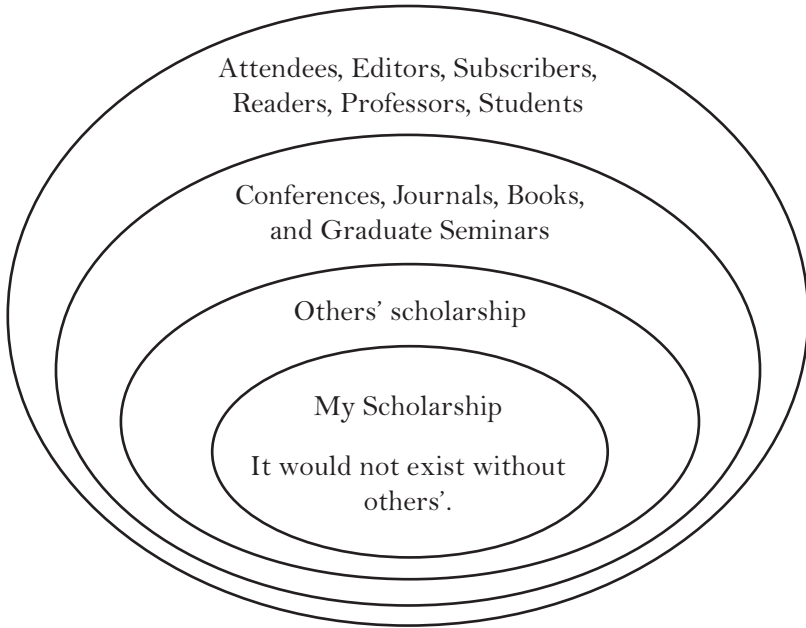
What happens, though, if I move to another level and see that the existence of my scholarship depends on venues that make others' scholarship accessible to me?

Third circle: This image nests the first two circles inside a circle with the words “Conferences, Journals, Books, and Graduate Seminars” on top.⁴



New questions emerge. How, for example, might our work as peer reviewers for journals change if we saw the writing of review letters as not only providing care for authors but also caring for and thus helping to sustain a journal that helps make our own work possible? Searing letters that rip authors to shreds, or dismissive, hastily written letters that don't thoughtfully engage an author's argument, not only harm vulnerable writers; they also harm vulnerable journals, since those writers—and the colleagues to whom those writers complain—are less likely to submit to that journal again, and journals need submissions in order to survive.

Fourth Circle: This image shows the other circles nested inside a circle with the words “Attendees, Editors, Subscribers, Readers, Professors, and Students” at the top. (I’ve left off NTT faculty and graduate teaching assistants, inclusions already taken up in research that connects the capacity to produce intellectual work to uneven distributions of labor [see, for example, Bousquet; Jung; Schell].)



What are the conditions of possibility that enable conferences, journals, books, and graduate seminars to survive? They need attendees, editors, subscribers, readers, professors, and graduate students. So, we help care for conferences by attending when we are able, even when—perhaps especially when—our proposals get rejected, because that’s exactly when a conference needs us most. We also care for it when we concern ourselves with making conferences more accessible, materially and intellectually, as the CCCC Standing Group on Disability Studies does. See how this flips the script? It’s not only that a conference cares for its attendees by paying attention to issues of access; it’s also that attendees care for the conference by being able and willing to attend.

Consider too Price’s point that asking someone, “*What do you need* is an important part of the micro-practice of accessibility” (134). What

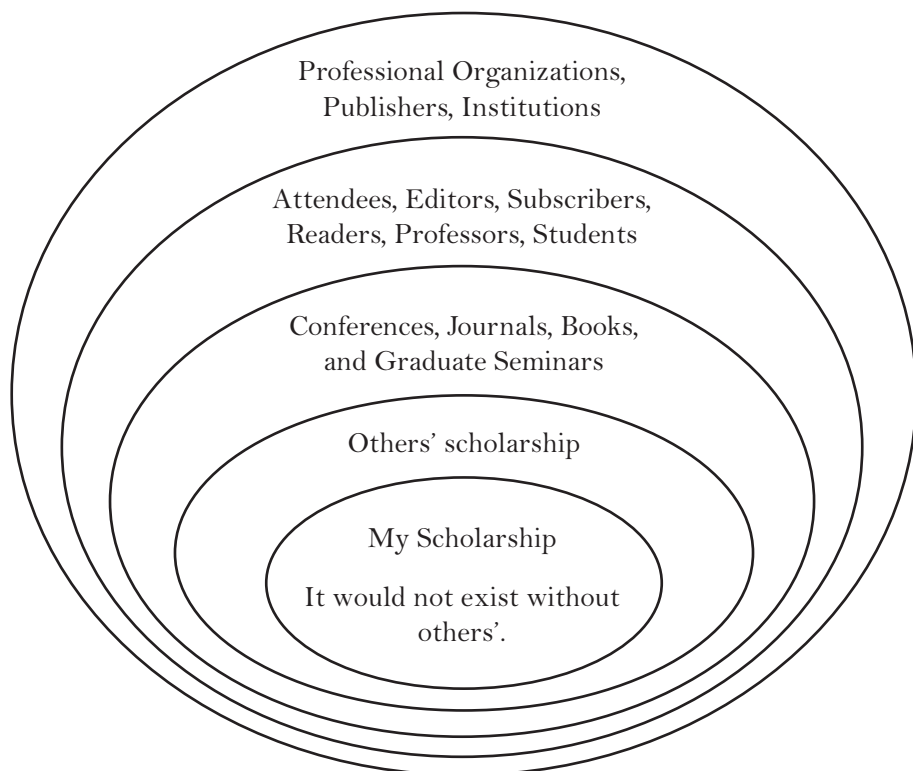
actions become possible when we think about journal editors as intellectual caregivers in need of care themselves? We begin to think about how we can care for them by minimizing their labor, most of which is donated. This means we need to fact-check our manuscripts before we submit them, get quotations and citations right, and write well so as to cut down on the labor of copyediting. We need to be patient, to realize the lives of journal editors are as complicated as our own: the death of a loved one, illness, a flooded basement or failing relationship, departmental bs, jerky colleagues, etc. None of these things goes away when one becomes an editor. Some of them actually multiply. And we might also thank editors when they put out an issue that helps our own intellectual work to thrive.

I hope asking what graduate students need is a fairly common question, but what happens when we think about graduate seminars as venues that makes others' intellectual work accessible to us, and graduate students, not just professors, as their caregivers? Here an embarrassing story might prove useful. For a long time, I picked books for graduate seminars based on my own interests and my own sense of what I needed to better understand (which, of course, would then also help the graduate students with whom I worked; this is the typical model of mentor/mentee relationship: my knowledge trickles down to them). On one of these occasions, about eight or so years ago, I was preparing to teach a class in contemporary rhetorical theory, which I used as an opportunity to better understand theories of performativity. A few years later, when I asked a graduate student with whom I was working what she wanted to focus on in her specialization comprehensive exam, I was surprised when she said: rhetoric and theories of performativity. Why in the world, I wondered, would anyone choose to study that, out of all of the things there are to study? Then it dawned on me. She had been in that class. Shockingly, I didn't realize until then that the books and theories I taught in graduate seminars would travel beyond them and affect the intellectual direction of the field. I gave no thought—none—to how what happened in my class had effects beyond that class, which meant, among other things, that I wasn't helping to sustain the field's nested relations of reciprocity in any conscious or committed way. I was just flailing about, picking this book because it struck me as interesting, that one because it was a classic I hadn't yet read, that one because

everyone was talking about it. When I recognize the nested relations that afford me the ability to do the intellectual work that I do, however, then choices about course themes, assignments, and required texts become more invested with the care they require. These decisions become imbued with the desire to help seminar participants produce intellectual work in a venue that is more intentionally informed by an understanding of where the field is as a whole and where it needs to go.

In the above examples, I'm not asking us to choose *to be* interdependent (and like I said before, being able to conceive of this *as* a choice can be a marker of privilege, but it can also signify a belief in one's own insignificance: if I believe nothing I do matters, then I'm also likely to believe no one would choose to depend on me). Instead, I'm asking those of us who don't already do so to *choose to recognize* the interdependencies that enable our intellectual work, and though this act of recognition identify unmet needs, invent possibilities for meeting them, and honor and then join those who are already doing both.

***Fifth Circle:** This image nests the prior circles inside a big circle with the words “Professional Organizations, Publishers, and Institutions” on top.*



Moving up one level, we can see many of the actions that some members of the field have already taken—developing and working to sustain scholarships and mentoring programs; writing position statements related to diversity and accessibility; serving as conference officers and proposal reviewers and making decisions about themes, featured speakers, and panels, etc. All of these actions and more emerge as ways of caring for conference attendees whose attendance in turn helps care for the conference.

Consider another example of intervening on the institutional level: last year my colleague Angela Haas petitioned our graduate director to pay for a group of graduate students to attend the National Conference of Faculty Women of Color, which was taking place at a

nearby university. Here, then, we see an example of someone not only mentoring graduate students on an individual level (by informing them about this conference, attending it with them, etc.); we also see someone recognizing her department's obligation to help sustain relations of reciprocity and taking action that calls on it to fulfill that obligation. Colleagues who do this kind of work aren't simply providing a service to the profession: they are making structural interventions that help build and sustain a system of reciprocity that is the condition of possibility for our intellectual work.

While there is much I haven't touched on this article, I hope I have at least begun to model how a politics of interdependency informed by disability studies' concept of interdependence can be understood as both a pedagogy and an ethic for creating more accessible intellectual publics. I have also tried to model how a broader definition of pedagogy—understood as a complex open system constituted by nested relations of reciprocity—can help us identify elements on multiple, sometimes seemingly disconnected, levels for purposes of sustaining those relations we deem ethical and intervening in those we do not. In the specific space of the classroom, this means we need to recognize how the micro practices of teaching and learning are shaped by and help sustain that which exceeds the classroom space in ways we can never fully predict but that we are nevertheless obligated to consider. From such an ethical stance, we might examine, to take one example, the ways in which practices of student peer review can reproduce the dual fictions of interdependency as a choice and independence as the norm. Understood as relations of collaboration that foster productive revision, student peer review can be thought of as interdependency-in-action. Yet this understanding is complicated by pedagogies that *require* students to engage in such relations as part of their grade. In other words, the bureaucratic demand that grades be assigned to individual students can sponsor assignments that represent interdependency as something in which students are strongly encouraged to participate (it's their choice). That they will be graded on whether and how they "choose" to practice this interdependency likewise shores up beliefs that what really matters, what really has value, is work the independent writer/reviewer can claim as her own.

Does this mean we should stop requiring students to practice peer review? No. But it does mean that we need to think carefully about how we talk about and ask our students to engage in peer review such that we don't unintentionally reproduce ableist assumptions. With this very challenge in mind, I designed an assignment for students in my current cultural theory class that I call "Interdependencies: A Recognition," which I explain in the course syllabus as follows:

To be submitted with your course project, this assignment (approximately 2-3 pages, single-spaced) asks you to recognize the interdependencies that made your project possible as well as those that your project helps sustain. Specifically, you will identify the "nested set of reciprocal relations and obligations" that enabled you to complete your project (Kittay 68). Who took care of you so that you could do this work, and how? Who took care of them so that they could take care of you so that you could do this work? You can, of course, think here in terms of personal relationships, but I also invite you to think of intellectual work as a kind of care. On whose scholarship does yours depend, and how? Think here not only in terms of the scholarship you reference and build upon, *but also the scholarship you exclude*, for such exclusions function as boundaries that carve out intellectual spaces in which your work can occur. What organizations, institutions, etc. care for the scholarship on which yours depends? How does your project care for others? What kinds of ethical relations does it help sustain? In what kinds of unethical relations does it intervene?

Is this assignment required? Yes. Am I assigning individual students credit for completing it? Yes. Those bureaucratic demands I cannot escape. But I can consciously and intentionally develop assignments that make apparent how nothing for which we receive individual credit is possible without the help and care of others. That we in the field need to engage in such recognitions ourselves and, further, that we must take concrete action in response to them—that doing so is, in fact, our ethical obligation—is the argument I have been trying to make here, and I have been doing so within a nested set of relations that is this article's condition of possibility.⁵

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NOTES

1. Throughout this article, I have tried to be consistent with my use of the terms “interdependence” and “interdependency.” I use the former to signify definitions of the concept and the latter to signify the ontological fact of human existence (although, of course, “interdependency” is also a concept). My use of the suffix –cy parallels Lennard J. Davis’ reasons for using the term normalcy, where the –cy highlights the term’s political valence as well as its ability to confer a sense of permanency (106).
2. Drawing on work by scholars such as Lennard J. Davis and Rosemarie Garland-Thomason, Dolmage defines normalcy as a social construct “used to control bodies. . . . Normalcy in the ‘modern world’ is a useful fiction that marks out unwanted elements while reinforcing the hegemony of the dominant group” (9–10). Employing a “logic of negation,” normalcy defines normal by what it is not: that which it marks as abnormal (29).
3. In keeping with the goal of working toward creating a more accessible society of teachers and scholars, I include both visual images to represent nested relations as well as describe those representations discursively (see Kerschbaum).
4. Obviously, I’ve left off different kinds of venues, such as blogs, Twitter, webpages, etc. Again, these mappings are incomplete and are meant to be suggestive, not comprehensive.
5. A partial list of these relations recognizes the intellectual work done by this issue’s editors, Allison Hitt and Bre Garrett; the scholars listed in my works cited page; the organizers of 4Cs 2014, where I presented an earlier version of this argument, as well as conference attendees who talked with me about my project; the students in my fall 2014 cultural theory course; the graduate students and NTT faculty in my department whose teaching labor affords me time to research and write; and colleagues Angela M. Haas, Chris Mays, Hilary Selznick, Kellie Sharp-Hoskins, and Kirstin Hotelling Zona. This project was

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