

# RADICAL TEACHER

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*Review*

## Crip Spacetime: Access, Failure, and Accountability in Academic Life

by Sarah E. Chinn



MARGARET PRICE, CRIP SPACETIME: ACCESS, FAILURE, AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN ACADEMIC LIFE

The passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990 promised a reworking of how disabled people navigated public and private spaces in the United States, how their disabilities would (or would not) be accommodated in the workplace, and how US society more generally would create an environment better prepared to make space for people with a variety of experiences of disability. And while the ADA was rightly celebrated as a long-awaited recognition of how disabled people were structurally excluded from buildings, jobs, opportunities for social and economic mobility, and meaningful accommodation, it was hardly a cure-all for the pervasive ableism that generated those exclusions in the first place.

For many activists and scholars, the ADA's focus on "reasonable accommodation" was as much an obstacle as it was a doorway into equal access. Whose responsibility was it to define "reasonable," for example? What was the limit or extent of the kinds of accommodations available? And—of course—where was the money going to come from to widen doors and hallways, install elevators, and provide ASL interpreters or captioners, let alone offer manageable work environments for people disabled by panic attacks, seizure conditions, chronic fatigue, and other invisible disabilities?

In *Crip Spacetime: Access, Failure, and Accountability in Academic Life*, Ohio State English professor Margaret Price reports on and analyzes the experiences of a number of disabled academics to spotlight how discourses of accommodation have been seamlessly integrated into the neoliberal mechanisms of higher education. *Crip Spacetime* expands the purview of Price's 2011 book *Mad at School*, which explored how students, faculty, and staff with mental disabilities (including herself) have to contend with expectations about learning, teaching, "collegiality," and other academic norms. The result of a multiyear project in which Price interviewed more than three hundred disabled academic workers (primarily but not exclusively faculty), *Crip Spacetime* challenges the routines of accommodation and access that, she argues, "as practiced in contemporary US colleges and universities, increases inequity rather than mitigates it. In other words, the current approach to access isn't just ineffective, it's actively making things worse" (7).

While this claim might seem counterintuitive, Price uses the analytical tools of Critical Disability Studies (CDS), which "regards disability as part of a larger system that labels some bodies deviant, broken, or subhuman" due to intersecting structures of race, gender, sexuality, class, (dis)ability, and other modes of marginalization, to demonstrate that what academic institutions provide is often woefully far from what actual disabled people need. As she demonstrates throughout, needs for "accommodation" and "access" are measured against the priorities of institutions. While disabled people (especially

those of color) are routinely trotted out in recruitment materials to show how progressive a college or university is, those same institutions evince little meaningful understanding of what actual access requires.

By dividing the book into sections—space, time, cost, and accompaniment—Price works through the complex of obstacles faced by disabled people in academia. Her underlying argument is that academic spaces are built on a foundation of colonialism, racism, misogyny, and ableism: few if any were founded with an expectation that anyone but white, able-bodied, cisgender, owning-class men would be entering their gates. The architecture itself makes clear who is and who is not welcome (as a personal aside, I don't remember seeing a single person in a wheelchair during my undergraduate days in a campus with endless stairs and few elevators. By contrast, every building in my college workplace today is equipped with elevators, and wheelchair users are far more common—although given the routine breakdown of elevators and escalators, there are certainly fewer than there might be).

Disabled academics must, perforce, be hyperaware of the spaces they occupy and those they encounter. For example, interactions at conferences that are routine for able-bodied academics—approaching new people at conferences, reading nametags, listening to presentations, asking a question, moving from one room to another—pose a variety of challenges for people with disabilities, who are often required to provide their own accommodation or deal with whatever the conference organizers expect or can afford.

Likewise, time is interwoven with academic life. Is the time between classes or conference sessions or meetings adequate for neurodivergent people to reset for the next activity? Or for a person in a wheelchair to navigate the twisting alternate routes they might have to take from one building to the next? Is a teacher or presenter speaking slowly enough for an ASL interpreter to effectively communicate? Price's interviewees are eloquent in narrating their struggles with the strictures of time, either the "unwanted slowness" that accompanies securing the right accommodations, dealing with bureaucracy, or filing for medical leave; or the "unwanted quickness" of deadlines, turnaround times, and transitioning between spaces (the campus visit for job prospects is the paragon of unwanted quickness, with candidates being whisked from job talks to teaching demos to meetings with students, faculty, and administrators, to meals, and almost always lots of walking in between).

Price's culminating argument is not about logistics or institutional failures (although there's certainly plenty of that). Rather, it is that structures of accommodation and access themselves are inadequate for the lived experiences of disabled academics. *Crip Spacetime* asks us "to question notions of consistency, individuality, functionality, and coherence when they are applied as evaluative tests for who and what should be valued, and in what ways" (158). It is very difficult to write specific accommodations into policy because for many disabled people, each day might be different; that is, each day

brings with it varying levels of energy and/or mental function, varying levels of mobility and/or sensory acuity, varying levels of ability to engage with others and/or with work. Chronic migraines, for example, fluctuate in severity. Multiple sclerosis symptoms wax and wane. Different weather conditions affect how quickly someone in a wheelchair or using a cane can move across space.

These shifting circumstances require a distinct and malleable set of expectations, which the neoliberal university is poorly equipped to address. Price calls for “shared accountability” towards each other around diverse vectors of ontological embodiment. But this is ambitious, to say the least. As she points out, how might this be imagined, let alone achieved in “a workplace as competitive, as driven by scarcity politics, as focused on individual merit as academe?” (168). There is no specific answer to this, even as Price offers up examples—few and far between—of academic institutions in which collaboration and shared accountability are practiced. But for most of us, this seems virtually impossible.

*Crip Spacetime* makes important arguments and creates a valuable archive for thinking about how disabled people in academia have to wrestle with the contradictions of what passes for access. Occasionally she overstates her case, though. For example, she cites the “violence and harm” that are visited upon disabled people in academic institutions. “Violence” is a serious charge, and I would have liked to have seen Price define what “violence” means in this context. Is harm the same as violence? Certainly, the kind of gaslighting and questioning of the validity of someone’s experience and needs is insulting, harmful, and undermining. But if Price wants to equate those phenomena with violence, I think it would be helpful if she was more specific about how they are encountered by her interviewees, and how they qualify as violence as she defines it.

At the same time, there were moments in which she could have pushed harder towards the work of scholars in Critical University Studies, which has launched a multifaceted critique of neoliberalism and regimes of austerity in higher education (although, and this undergirds Price’s larger argument, they rarely index disabled people as especially disadvantaged by the reigning regime of doing more with less). One of the crucial insights of current critiques of hierarchy that has emerged is that an equitable world benefits both the historically marginalized and those at the top of the ladder. Price gestures towards this, particularly towards the end of the book, and I would have liked to have seen her make a more robust connection between interrogating the logic behind current decision making in higher education and how the struggles that people with disabilities endure represent the crystallization of those administrative and legislative trends.

Nonetheless, *Crip Spacetime* makes a valuable contribution to Critical Disability Studies. By framing a thorough sociological project with a sophisticated theoretical apparatus, Price deftly toggles between the personal and the structural, showing how those two modes are inextricable for people whose disabilities would be

better served by operating in crip spacetime rather than the timetable of contemporary academia. And for those readers who are less familiar with work in CDS, *Crip Spacetime* serves as an accessible (no pun intended) guide to the crucial and clear-eyed contributions CDS makes to a radical analysis of academic life.

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