

Power, Suspicion, and Oppression: An Exploration into the Connection Between Whiteness and Disability

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Many ordinary people happen to be extraordinary scholars. What makes these scholars so extraordinary is how they are able to use their writing to encourage and motivate readers, these otherwise ordinary people, to do extraordinary things in their own lives. The task might seem overwhelming, as we in society often give these extraordinary individuals elevated placement. But extraordinary scholars are also ordinary, imperfect people, and that fact makes the task of doing extraordinary things seem more manageable, though it is by no means easy.

John T. Warren's works on power and whiteness are profound, far-reaching, and unsettling. This work wasn't meant to make white people feel guilty for the pigments in their skin. The cultural construction of whiteness is more complex. "Whiteness, while a systemic historical process that is diffuse and abstract, is also located through embodiment—through a repetition of mundane and extraordinary acts that continually make and remake whiteness, all while eluding scrutiny and detection" (Warren "Doing Whiteness" 92). Warren marks himself as one of many scholars, including the likes of Freire, hooks, and Butler, who work to illuminate the intersectionality of power, oppression, sex, gender, color, culture, and education. And these scholars never told us to stop there.

This article is a collaborative project to call attention to the often overlooked relationship between power (both overt and covert) and disability (with intentional emphasis on non-visible disability). The authors bring different perspectives into this research, but their shared goal is to use research and embodied action to demonstrate the ways in which ability and power intersect in everyday actions.

Power

Several researchers have established the connection between power and whiteness (Alexander and Warren; Freire; hooks; Warren "Doing Whiteness", "Performing Whiteness Differently", "The Social Drama of a 'Rice Burner'"). With little exception,

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scholarship has left the connections between disability and power insufficiently explored (Fassett and Morella). Connections within systems of power can be complex, and the connections between whiteness and disability are no exception. To investigate power and disability requires looking at the nature of both overt and covert power.

Overt

Freire's notion of false charity is a particularly troublesome idea to overcome. False charity is intrinsically connected with overt power, because were it not for the systems of overt power that lead to the oppression of the less privileged, the need for such charity, false or not, would not exist. It is tempting to read particular notions or theories on oppression, suffering, or one-sided power struggles and immediately whisper to ourselves "Well I just don't/won't engage in _____ behavior!" thereby making the world a better place and perhaps absolving some of the guilt associated with our respective privileges. For Freire, the notion of false generosity is much more difficult to simply "not engage in." America's systems of values and ethics provide an appropriate venue for studying the complexity of power and generosity. American culture contains several values and messages, many of which coexist even in their sense of conflict. Anyone paying attention to the political climate in the United States knows the focus Americans have on independence, personal accountability, and diligence as the means for the major goal of individual (financial) success. Many Americans and hopeful future Americans still believe in the American dream that equates hard work with matching rewards. However, especially in the last fifty years, a somewhat conflicting message emerged in conjunction with a more spiritual side (notably Judeo-Christian, among other dominant institutional discourses) of America: the emphasis on generosity and helping our fellow man, especially when the latter is poor or at least has less advantage. This sense of obligation can take the form of using our finances to aid suffering countries, but this also occurs on an individual, face-to-face level. Indeed, it's difficult to argue that there aren't poor, disadvantaged people within our immediate vicinity, and that requires personal action (or inaction) on our part. So when we are munching on some McDonalds fries at a stoplight and turn our heads to see the panhandler at our driver's side window, the sensation of guilt that pulses through us dictates that we help this poor (literally and figuratively) person staring at us, eyeball to eyeball. The spare change, and if our panhandler friend is lucky a few loose dollar bills, levitates out of our cup holder or pockets effortlessly, and with one simple motion our guilt is partially and temporarily absolved, long enough to enjoy the rest of our greasy snack.

Freire tells us that no one is better prepared to understand the terrible significance of an oppressive society than the oppressed themselves. Yet the oppressed must be aware that they are in fact oppressed in order to rise up and demand better for their lives. The panhandler might tell you that some cash might alleviate his/her situation. Perhaps we could even offer a job. Yet even if we were able to employ this panhan-

Would that truly break his or her oppression? Would this person get paid enough to completely leave his or her panhandling ways behind? Has he or she succeeded in some other venue? Would he or she know what employers expect of him or her? Would this person understand how to succeed? Would he or she be able to move up and get promoted? Who would take care of him or her if illness were to strike them or a family member?

Moreover, how would our friend, or his/her would-be ally, know to ask these kinds of questions? Indeed it seems that the oppressed must be educated enough to understand their own oppression. So whose fault is this? Is it the fault of the oppressed? Of the oppressors? Of the public school system? The oppression these people experience here in the new millennium in America is much more nuanced. These nuances create covert power structures within the larger more overt framework of power. It is these nuances that complicate the fight for justice and equality in those who are oppressed or who willingly accept the power imbalances Freire calls us to set right. Yet before we pull out our Ricky-Rescue bags to save the oppressed who may or may not know it, we first must examine the more overt issues of power in relation to disability and how they have become common-place.



When I decided to embark on grad school, my choices were limited, as many graduate programs either did not have a disability services department, or it was common knowledge that disabilities were *persona non-grata* on campus. Once I finally found one where grad students could get access to disabled services, I jumped at the opportunity, thinking it a lucky break. What I got was a lesson in power structures and gate keeping.

Enrolling in disabled services through this university was like enrolling in the university twice. Not only did I have to re-submit my transcripts; I had to hand over any and all documentation remotely associated with my disability. This included medical records. Since my disability is non-visible rather than “physical” as they would say, I had to get another form that asked for permission to omit medical documentation. I’m not really sure what to say to my general practitioner. I’m suffering from a bout of dyslexia?

Once I was part of the university, the waiting game started. I had to wait for the “privilege” of the title of official “disabled student.” This is the first time I have heard anyone use privilege in such a way that it alienates me from my peers. Why am I privileged in this context? Because the law provides for me, and my disability, does this mean I get something others do not? Is the proverbial playing field more level or slanted in my favor? If the field is slanted in my favor, how much does it matter if I cannot see the ball nor the angle of the ground?

After weeks of compiling any and all documentation that speaks to the legitimacy of my disability (I called it my dossier) and painful waiting, I got a call from my new disability counselor, April.

Congratulations, we accept the premise of your identity.

She made it quite clear that I was very lucky to be considered for the services her department provided. She quickly explained that the only reason I was able to qualify as disabled is because I had enrolled within one year of receiving my master's degree. They honored my disability, only because another institution of higher learning honored my disability, which was, in fact, diagnosed by a third college. I was diagnosed by a learning disability specialist at a local community college over 10 years prior. The only reason I did not have to be re-tested, at my own expense, was because I had never taken more than one calendar year off from my studies.

If I am an electrical socket, my validation is a daisy chained series of extension cords, connected end-to-end, for the past decade.



Just as my non-disabled peers submitted to the overt power structure of the university, I submitted both to the university and to disability services. To make matters more complicated, this daisy chain is just as non-visible as my disability. Our friend the panhandler is quite visible to us in our cars, and we can attempt to extrapolate issues of power he or she faces. How do we extrapolate such matters when we cannot see them?

My cord became longer and more tangled very quickly. I found out I had not one but many gatekeepers. These gatekeepers, including April, might be experiencing guilt around this situation. This guilt could be the lack of their own disability or the notion that they have to uphold the overt power structures that oppress those students with non-visible disabilities. The experience of submitting literally indicates power structures at play. The task of submitting paperwork has become so mundane that we rarely stop to think about it in our daily lives. At first glance this may seem a covert action, but it is overt because it is deliberate, and it directly names and discerns the bodies who have privilege from those who do not. These actions define my otherness in deliberate, direct, and decisive actions. They separate me from any notion of power I may have over my own education plan and the services to which I am entitled.

Covert

As Warren (“Doing Whiteness: On the Performative Dimensions of Race in the Classroom”) suggests, covert power includes the influence the privileged have over those with less privilege. In postsecondary education this includes power distances, policies, and most of all, practices. Post secondary practices are those interactions, rituals, and customs that authorities in higher education (such as administration) do

not formally prescribe, but rather, they are so commonplace that no one bothers to write them down. Practices become particularly problematic as they are less formal and more cultural. Practices can be conscious or subconscious, but those practices that are harmful to students with disabilities, particularly to students with non-visible disabilities, are harder to change as we are not re-writing policies but trying to change opinions.



It's been two months since I've enrolled in both the university and disability services. I quickly realize that though my Disability Counselor, April, is supposed to be my primary contact, she actually does none of the work towards my accommodations. She directs my calls to tech support, library liaisons, and some man named Mike. I'm not at all sure what he does or how he fits into this already cryptic organizational flow chart. I do not use these services, unless I need to, mostly because I find the process inefficient and frustrating. When I have no choice but to engage the services supposedly offered to me, it involves a series of people. To save time, I try calling many of these people directly, but as one tech support agent told me, "We cannot do anything without April's approval." This means I have to make phone calls in order to get permission to make phone calls. April is my gatekeeper, and she has my accommodations on lock-down. This might not be so bad, but she has no idea what it means to be disabled or what I need to succeed.

Before any of my classes start, I need to get my reading materials in a readable format. This usually means a PDF, but without the Optical Character Recognition (OCR) process, the PDF only produces a picture of text, and not actual text, which will not work with my screen reader, or any screen reader. Screen readers literally search for text to vocalize to the user; computers cannot vocalize pictures, at least not with the technology available at this time.

Mike calls me and explains that he and the curriculum department (which is a department I have never heard of) are working on my books. Mike tells me he will be out of the office all next week and, later that night, he sends me an email with a link to the Recordings for the Blind and Dyslexic (RFBDA) website, asking me if I can get the books from them instead. I'm sure he thought this was a simple solution, but it is just the practice of passing the buck, which has become so common an experience for me.

I have been an RFBDA member for over 4 years, and I already know they do not have the books I need. I try explaining this to him, but he reminds me it is my due diligence to try. Once I confirm what I already know, I send an email to Mike, who never replies. So I go back to my gatekeeper, because the flow-chart that I seem to get from everyone is that all roads lead through her.

About two weeks pass. April finally calls me back. My class has already started; I have less than two weeks to complete the readings from all three books on which she

(or someone waiting for her command) is supposed to be working. She clearly has not read any of my emails or listened to my voicemails because I have to remind her of who I am, which disabilities I have, and the circumstances of my situation with accommodations. Then with a gasp, she tells me that she has a quick and easy solution to the problem:

“I will simply email you the PDFs! Duh!”

I can hear the relief in her voice; she can't believe she has not thought of this before! My heart sinks. She has no idea what she is talking about, and I'm so tired of reminding her about how my disability works that my body begins to ache. I try to calmly explain—again—why her solution does not work, but there is no peace in my voice...only frustration, bordering on rage.

My despair is beyond anything I have known. Her unprofessionalism is the beginning of a laundry list of transgressions against me, my identity, and my legal status in her university. Hot and fast tears pool in my eyes and eventually scald my cheeks as they begin to fall. Why? Her one comment, about emailing the existing PDFs, is a death sentence. She has negated me and all my hard work, all my efforts at self-advocacy, with one phrase. This communicates volumes to me; her apathy for me, her active ignorance about my disability, and I know she is devoid of the empathy or compassion, or professionalism I need now.

April's voice is more muffled now. “Well... I will try to save this as a Word document and get back to you. Don't worry; your pleas have not fallen on deaf ears.” I know she is lying, and her use of such a colloquialism is a cruel irony.

I don't hear back from her for three weeks, and my success in the class is jeopardized.



Clearly there is a felt need and place for services such as centers that work with students who have disabilities. The function of such institutions is not to do the work for these students; indeed, these students are as capable as any other group. These students will work hard in order to succeed. A serious danger emerges when those who do not have disabilities lack the understanding for what students with disabilities need. These students don't need the work done for them; they want the instructions and related materials to be in an accessible format so that they can do their own work. By this point, many of these students have encountered a series of failures in accommodations and know what will and won't work. Students with disabilities are in a position to help the institutions that provide such accommodations, if the employees at these institutions are willing to accept the idea that students with disabilities are also valuable resources for the effectiveness of their institutions.

Sometimes people confuse disability with complete inability. This is by no means a malicious or intentional act. Perhaps it has something to do with the nature of disabilities: if someone cannot read a book, what other everyday procedures might he or she

be unable to do? Sometimes we forget that people without disabilities make mistakes. Sometimes, when a person with disabilities points out an inconsistency, it is not because he or she is lazy or blaming the disability so someone else can do the work.



April calls me at an unreasonably early hour on a Friday. “Oh, I have good news! Tech support has set up a number just for disabled students. So you just call them and they will tell you how to make the document work for you. What screen reader are you using, again?”

I mentally count the issues with the previous phrase. What a way to start a Friday. Talking with April creates such anxiety within me. It’s been 18 months, a year and a half, since I first explained to her why un-OCR’d PDFs are not compatible with any screen reader. According to the journal I have been keeping, I have explained this to her in three other previous conversations.

“April, I’ve asked you to write down what screen reader I use. It’s been the same every time. It’s called ReadPlease.”

“OK, well, tech support can tell you why it’s not working.”

Actually, my screen reader works just fine; it’s the documents she is in charge of fixing that do not work, but I remind myself it is useless to try to get her to understand this. “Give me the number.” I sigh heavily into the phone.

I’ve learned by now that the only way she listens to what *I* have to say is if *someone else* says it. The ritual is to contact tech support and get it in writing that the document is not OCR’d and therefore is not accessible. It is a ritual I know well; it is necessary, frequent, and humiliating.

I dial the number. I get a message telling me that number is not in service. I check it and try again with the same result.

“April, this number isn’t good. It says it’s disconnected.”

“Try it again, honey.” I hate when she calls me that. I know it’s a term of endearment, but she means it to reinforce the power distance, like I’m selling her Girl Scout cookies.

“I tried it twice April. Here, let me read to you the number I have.”

“That’s the right number. So, hang up and try again. You must be misdialing.” I notice there is no *honey* now.

She has a tone in her voice that indicates this is as far as she will let me go without blind compliance with her instructions. I try the number again, this time three times with the same not-in-service message.

“April, I’ve tried and tried and the number isn’t good!”

“No.”

“What do you mean, ‘no?’” My tone is growing increasingly irritated. I can’t control it. This nameless feeling arises inside me. Part rage, part sorrow, part grief for the legitimacy of my identity she has denied me, and part indignant for the professional-

ism she lacks. She has exceeded all of my efforts to be patient. Why can't she believe me? Am I so illegitimate? Is she actually accusing me of being unfit to operate a telephone? Is there no common ground for us?

"I mean someone from the disabled tech support line called me this morning so I know it works."

"Did you try dialing the number yourself, April?"

"Nooo, I know it works." Now she's irritated. This is it, the power play. Without directly telling me, she wants me to know that she, April, is the only one who is allowed to question anything, especially abilities. And yes...she clearly doubts my ability to operate a telephone.

"Listen, my husband is right here. He watched me dial and double checked the number. Would you like to talk to him?"

"Well, maybe it doesn't work then."

Unbelievable! All of my emotions melt into outrage. She is so suspicious of my capabilities. I have to have external references for every piece of minutia, including my ability to dial a phone. What I didn't tell her is that my husband is dyslexic, too, and between both of our disabilities, I am the one more likely to get the number right. This is why I don't out myself as disabled in most situations. Being treated like an idiot, or worse, a child, just gets so old so fast. It exhausts me and somewhere in my soul, I can feel this experience shaving minutes off the end of my life.

I found out later that the number to disabled tech services would not be operational until the following week. April was supposed to have received an email instructing her to inform me of that.

The Culture of Suspicion and the Oppressed

The burden of proof falls upon the oppressed. Unlike Freire's notion of the oppressed, Warren ("Doing Whiteness"), Fassett and Warren, and Fraser indicate that the covert power structures are more nuanced. In our society, the oppressed may not be found in large groups of downtrodden individuals, but rather they are oppressed in their daily lives by others who, regardless of power, have more privilege than they do.



"Uh, yeah. You spelled my name wrong... *professor!*"

I turn to face the board. Indeed, I have spelled this young man's name wrong. The same young man who corrected me earlier when I used the wrong "their" when I should have used "there." Not only is his name wrong, but the entire list for the students who are speaking today is askew, gently sloping down towards the chalk tray. Damn.

When I outed myself to the class as disabled, we came to an agreement that if I misspelled something on the board, all they had to do was politely tell me and I would

correct it. This student is subversive, for reasons I cannot say, in his efforts to let me know my mistake.

What he doesn't know is that I make an extra effort to memorize my students' names and faces early in the semester. His name gave me particular trouble. It was a name I had never heard nor seen before; I discover later that he was born and named in an eastern European country. The amount of "h"s and "d"s so close together and not in phonetical order is so difficult for my dyslexic eyes. Despite my guilt, I want him to know that he doesn't need to go to this extent to correct me.

I dutifully return to the board to correct his name. I click clack the heels of my favorite boots on the floor as though it would remind him that I am in charge here. Heels, not sneakers, rule here.

I scurry to the back of the room to begin student speeches. I glance at him. I catch an eye roll to his friend sitting next to him. He is disappointed. I have spelled his name correctly before and now, after 5 whole weeks in session I had the nerve to be so careless with his name. For a split second I feel terrible. For a split second, sneakers are in charge, not clicky boots.

I am certainly not the first professor to misspell a word or a name on the chalkboard, but I think I am the first to feel so ashamed about it. I was too ashamed to remind him of my dyslexia. I never made my case to tell him that every time I came across his name I lingered a few extra minutes just to commit the spelling and pronunciation to my flawed memory banks. I hovered over his name longer than any other student. Ever.



So who is the oppressed here? The student certainly doesn't have the upper hand here as his rudeness isn't going to help his situation. He is a first generation American. Though fluent in English, it is not his first language. One could assume that he left his country of origin due to some other form of more overt oppression.

Am I the oppressed? I certainly have been in the past. Grad school was a series of hell-raising crises that somehow resulted in a master's degree. But now that I'm *official*, does that negate the ways in which society tells me I'm unfit?

Perhaps neither of us is oppressed. We are both well-fed and clothed and participating in a university classroom. How bad could our lives be? Though it's true our situations are not life-threatening, we are dealing with oppression nonetheless. We oppress each other. Neither of us has privilege over the other now and we are both in our own way, unable to be calm about it. Calmness comes from a place of privilege (Woodhouse). Just because someone is not in the middle of a public melt-down does not mean she or he is calm. And neither of us is calm. Neither of us is willing to work towards an ideal symbiotic classroom relationship. I have given my students plenty of sanctioned ways in which to push back on the power that I have. I have fielded complaints in class and via email about the readings or tests. They have conducted surveys

without me in the room. They even write me letters for extra credit about what they think I should change for the next term. This student has chosen an act of rebellion, an unsanctioned form of expression. Perhaps malicious in intent, perhaps born of pure frustration, but to me, now, it doesn't matter.



The incidents with which we have chosen to fill this article are not especially unique, and they aren't without complications. Who is right and who is wrong in the previous passage? Was it all a simple misunderstanding? Surely it doesn't feel that way with either of the parties involved. Students continue to expect that teachers will give fair grades, remember each face and the associated name and a few other details, answer all questions succinctly, and know any related textbooks cover to cover. Does occasionally misspelling students' names on the board mean someone is not performing teacher correctly? If disabilities did not exist, this would not be an issue. But they do, and if we don't interact with disabilities every day of our lives, it is easy for us to forget that there are people who have to work with their disabilities nearly every moment of every day. It means we have to change part of our communication and our ways of interacting if we want to be respectful and inclusive and successful in our communication and interactions. But there is still the message: why change something if it already works for the able, silent, overt majority of people (the people who matter)?

The people who matter are difficult to distinguish from the ones who don't. In fact, the people who aren't in the majority look quite ordinary and often pass as being in the majority. It may not occur to you that the student in front of you has difficulty reading long passages quickly or can't make sense of badly copied handouts. They don't always wear overt symbols of a disability, though perhaps we occasionally wish they would so that we would recognize otherness.

The people who matter don't have to worry about whether or not a professor will post the syllabus and all class materials electronically, or whether there are accessible versions of their textbooks. They don't have to worry about outing themselves to professors (and potentially classmates) in order to get the accommodations they need to succeed. Prior to the Columbine High School shootings, they didn't have to worry about violence in our schools or in their everyday lives, and to a certain extent, I think they still don't worry (Warren "Absence for Whom?"). They don't have to worry about racism or sexism, because neither will affect them negatively. They might even be in a position to question whether either of these concepts still exists. People who matter have a distinct privilege, and as sometimes happens with systems of privilege, the people who matter don't even know there is a system in the first place. They don't have to know, because the system in which they participate also works in their favor.

Systemic issues

Systems are systems because they work. So why are systems problematic? They work best for those who have the most privilege. To separate people into groups of privileged and not privileged is to oversimplify a very complex situation. Even people who are the least privileged may glean some benefit from the system that works against them. Individual people consist of several dimensions and layers of culture and power, and it might be hard to discern an overall mark of collective privilege. Those who have no privilege in any given situation might not take these layers into account. Those who live in the shadow of suspicion experience negative outcomes, the least of which can include becoming jaded and distrustful of those in positions of power. Those who are suspicious of the identity of individuals with disabilities who are not marked on the body have created a culture of suspicion (Fraser). Regardless of the naming, whether those with non-visible disabilities or those who live within the culture of suspicion receive the damage, the outcomes are harmful to all who labor in the field of education.



Though I am an agreeable neighbor, friend, coworker, teacher, and spouse, I am hell on wheels as a student. Indeed, I am no fun to be around when it is me in the seat and someone else is at the front of the room, and heaven help anyone who has the nerve to tell me that the education system has *not* failed me. Teachers and administrators knew my name from kindergarten to grad school. The system was failing me, and I was determined to point it out at every opportunity. The problem is, like with April, the enmeshment with personal face and systemic issues mean that my protests against the system were an affront to the very people who believed, wholeheartedly, that they were helping me, when they were actually holding me back. They saw my protests as antics and their job was to save me from myself. As a result, my antics over the years grew bolder and more desperate. They became less causeless rebellion and more purposeful. My internal mantra became *advocacy or death*. I knew I had to make some noise to stay in school or let my education die.

What is the role of the teacher if not to help those who are oppressed create better lives for themselves? As large as the teacher's role is in the life of a student with disabilities, the role of administration is much larger and much less visible. Administration has the power to make and change rules, and they are bound by others, just as the teacher is bound by the rules of administration. Well-meaning administrators set forth these rules because they make some part of the university better, more efficient, or more effective. In other words, they work on some level...for some people.



Not all disabled stories match my own. Many students with disabilities just try to survive in college. I have personally met more students with disabilities who adopt the

position that C's get degrees, rather than advocacy at any cost. The oppressed, regardless of their position, must find a way to cope. But what is the cost of such coping strategies?

The truth is, no one can say. Yet, semester after semester, I have students with disabilities come to my office for unofficial counseling and advice, but mostly for support. They know about my status as an instructor, but then they learn of my concurrent status as a student with disabilities. This is what seems to fascinate them. What fascinates and concerns me is that these students are not in any of my classes. They find me through friends of friends, my former students, and just general asking around. They are unique students, with unique problems, unique disabilities, and unique circumstances. What remains the same is their oppression. They ask me if they should drop out of college, who is safe to talk to about their disability, and what to do when the disability service center will not help them.

I feel good when I am able to help them, guide them, or just support them in their endeavors in postsecondary education. But for every student that makes her or his way to me, how many do not? This keeps me up at night. I'm just another disabled student (who happens to be at a different place in the postsecondary education system). I am like them, but they see me as a mentor, perhaps even an expert. I try to share good advice with them, but the harsh reality is that I can most greatly attribute what educational success I can claim to my sheer, unapologetic anger. So what happens to those students who don't get angry? For every student with disabilities who is able to succeed, how many drop out, are emotionally scarred, or resort to harmful coping methods? I dare not estimate.



I've seen Kate talk with students who have disabilities and heard the advice and support she gives them. I have not yet taught students who have disabilities who come to me for accommodations. But I know it's a difficult topic, and when the possibility arose of working to make those resources more available to faculty members within my college in 2009-2010 academic year, I took that opportunity. I hoped that I could indirectly help students achieve success.

Part of my position was to offer workshops to faculties within the college. So there I was, in front of my faculty on my own (a mere master's student and graduate teaching associate in front of lecturers, my own professors, and other tenure-track and tenured faculty). I stared at my "lesson plan" and felt comforted at the acronym I'd written on the board. LIST. Links, Images, Styles, Tables. Concentrating on these four steps would instantly make your Word document accessible. That's what I'd learned through my position.

But Kate stood up at the back of the room and, with a level but mildly exasperated tone, pointed out that some screen readers couldn't make sense of those tables. I winced. I think she'd mentioned that to me (and probably several others) before. I

was providing bad information. At first I felt embarrassed. Not only was I providing bad information in front of senior faculty, but I was also forcing her to, once again, out herself in front of senior faculty. It was only later that I wondered what it was like for her to sit there while I delivered this misinformation. How long she debated saying something.

In my first project for this new job, I looked over some legal documents for another department. No one before me had OCRed the PDFs, and when I did, the text came out broken. Legal abbreviations and symbols and numbers made no sense. I brought this information to the attention of the professor, and she brushed me aside. No student had ever needed accommodations before, so there weren't any problems. And the legal community was going to continue to use these abbreviations and symbols and numbers in their proceedings, so what was the point of making these documents accessible to students now when they wouldn't have accessible documents outside the classroom? At first I found this answer lazy and unacceptable. I still consider it unacceptable, but I think that's so because the professor has a point. She was looking outside of the classroom, and for perhaps the first time, I looked beyond the classroom as well or viewed the classroom in the greater context of everyday life. Accessibility for all is a power problem that necessarily involves but also exists beyond the walls of classrooms.



If there is one thing that we have learned from the scholarship of John T. Warren and so many others, it's that there is a relationship between "normal" and privilege. As members of society, we carry a set of assumptions about the people around us. We assume that the person sitting next to us does not have a learning disability. We might assume that the person next to us believes in the same God or, based on some other quality, we might also assume that person doesn't believe in the same God as us. If a person says he is in a romantic relationship, we assume his partner is a woman. We might question a person's qualifications or intelligence based on how old or young he or she appears to be, on the color of his or her skin, or on how masculine or feminine he or she appears to be. There is a distressing degree of Otherness to deal with when a person deviates from what we as a society accept as the norm. We comfort ourselves by saying that the majority of people in society fit within the norm, so there is no need to redefine or even acknowledge what, to us, does not seem broken or inadequate.

This system of perceived normalcy and privilege disempowers people in very real and harmful ways. We continue to Other people, to remind them that they are not up to the task of being normal participants in society, as if they needed the painful reminder that they are in some way inadequate to meet the lofty and otherwise invisible standards.

When John T. Warren wrote about power and whiteness, he used his own experiences to address the bigger picture and illuminate the mechanics that make and re-make systems of oppression. But it's difficult to identify any of those systems if they don't have a negative impact for us. This idea goes back to the idea of systems and who they privilege, and that those who do have privilege don't see the system that benefits them and their lives. "No, I am meant not to see them because I am part of a social system that we all, every one of us, participates in maintaining" (Warren "Doing Whiteness" 38). We celebrate John T. Warren and other scholars who seek to raise awareness and call for change, respect, and equality. They have challenged us to look into our own everyday lives to see how we benefit and suffer from privilege. It is never easy to acknowledge that we benefit from a system that disempowers others. We say we didn't do anything wrong, or we feel guilty and say there's nothing we can do to change society. As a result of this guilt, we might look for temporary solutions, like handing our spare change to the panhandler who stands next to the car. We may not be able to end poverty on our own, but do we deserve the relief of feeling like we made a difference as we zoom away when we know that poverty (and, immediately, the panhandler's financial poverty) is still going strong? How can we take this guilt and make significant changes?

We have taken a step by writing this journal article. With the inspiration of John T. Warren, we sought to examine the relationship between privilege and disability through our reflections and experiences. In doing so, we encourage our colleagues to join us in accepting responsibility for our roles in this system. We must see our practices, habits, and rituals in the greater context of a culture that encourages and teaches these practices, habits, and rituals. We must recognize how our role normalizes some and creates Otherness. In acknowledging our role, we can also change our own practices and habits. As instructors, it takes the form of making all teaching materials electronically available and accessible for all students. Many schools have laws about compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act. We as instructors should have conversations with our colleagues and students about supporting people with disabilities. Having these conversations in our classrooms and in our departments is an important way to call attention to disability as a societal issue and not solely a topic concerning a select few within academia. In recognizing that we, our colleagues, and our students have and will have roles in other communities, we emphasize the need to have honest conversations about accessibility for all people in our schools, in our legal system, and in our world. We engage in otherness in all aspects of our lives and in all other dimensions of our identity, but we have suggested ways to address the power relationship within academia and in the classroom as instructors.



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