Introduction

Signs of Disability

As I have lived a life as a deaf person, I have moved from ignoring disability as much as possible to framing disability as something that only mattered in special circumstances to recognizing disability as mattering everywhere and everywhen. Signs of disability are all around us, even if we don't always know how to pay attention to them. Take deafness as an example. Even though deafness is sometimes referred to as an invisible disability, ubiquitous signs disclose deafness: behind-the-ear hearing aids emitting high-pitched feedback; hands moving in air producing sign language; the close physical proximity and connection required by pro-tactile ASL; the multisensory environments created by “Deaf Space” architectural design; the habit of making sure someone has turned their gaze in your direction before speaking; yellow diamond-shaped “Deaf Person in Area” road signs. All of these signs have appeared to me in different ways and at different times. I write now as a white, middle-aged, deaf woman and academic who has been immersed in disability studies for almost fifteen years and who has built relationships with a range of deaf and disabled people, experiences that have taught me how to notice deafness. While I was born deaf, I was not born noticing deafness. My attention to deafness has been shaped over time as I have moved through the world as part of an ongoing and dynamic process that Karen Barad describes as coming to know the world even as “we are of the world.”¹ Deafness is not a material thing I can point to, but it emerges materially through how I perceive particular objects and cues and behaviors, as well as how others respond to and engage with me.

My attention to disability and deafness shifts, sometimes dramatically, in different contexts and settings and at different times and places. When I attended new-student orientation before the start of my first year of college at Ohio State, I tried to convince the office for disability
services that I did not need sign language interpreting or captioning for my classes. After pressure from OSU’s interpreting coordinator and from my parents, I agreed to “just try it.” And even when I grudgingly acknowledged how much of a difference interpreting and captioning made for me, I still felt that my disability did not matter that much and if it did matter, it was only under very specific circumstances. It was not until after I had finished graduate school and started an academic career that I really confronted the mattering of disability in my life and work. I was in my late twenties and writing my first book under the pressure of the tenure clock. Feeling intense anxiety about my professional future, I knew I needed to publish. In what I might characterize as desperation, I finally caved and followed advice I had received from multiple colleagues: I wrote about my deafness in an article. I had resisted these suggestions for a long time because I wanted to believe my disability had nothing to do with the research I was doing. However, once I did this work, nearly every reader commented on how powerful my discussion of disability was and how helpful they found it to my theorizing. While I was heartened by this praise, it nevertheless made me feel uneasy. I was accustomed to not wanting my disability to be the center of attention, of not wanting it to matter, and this praise made me worry about what it meant that it seemed to matter so much to everyone else.

Now, of course I knew my disability mattered. My undergraduate experiences with accommodations led me to immediately request captioning and interpreting when I started graduate school. When I went on the academic job market for the first time, I made interpreting requests for every interview because I did not want to risk being in the awkward and possibly job-offer-threatening situation of having someone I could not understand ask me a question. Various tensions I felt around whether and how to disclose my deafness were inflected by the normativity of my other readily apparent identifications as a white, cisgender woman in a heterosexual partnership. When I received a job offer, I made clear that I would need regular access to sign language interpreting, and over time, I integrated accommodations into more and more arenas of my academic life. And yet, throughout all this change, I did not want my deafness to matter. I was deeply invested in maintaining my sense that at least in my writing, in my scholarship, in many areas of my life, it did not matter that much.
I was wrong.

And I came to this realization only gradually, over time, and as the direct outcome of the material circumstances of my professional life. My tenure-track years were dominated by conference experiences with uneven interpreting services that largely provided just a veneer of accessibility. One way I responded to conferences’ inaccessibility involved significant behind-the-scenes labor in which I created detailed schedules for each session at a conference, searched for the email addresses for all the panelists, and sent carefully crafted, rhetorically invitational, gratitude-laden, and (I hoped) persuasive requests for them to bring extra copies of their scripts that I could read from during their presentation. The time, energy, and organization this work required of me meant I could not do it for every conference. And even when I did, I could never fully predict whether those I contacted would be willing to provide a script, remember to bring one, or even respond to my email. This led me to disability studies sessions because their panelists frequently built accessibility into their talks. I learned to make predictions about which panels would be most likely to have speakers share access copies and planned my attendance accordingly.

Having access copies meant that I would still be able to participate in some capacity at a conference even if I did not laboriously contact everyone ahead of time, and even if the interpreting was subpar. Problems with the provision of sign language interpreting were common situations for me and for many other deaf academics, not only because relatively few people, groups, or organizations factored access and accommodation costs into their event budgets but because, as Teresa Blankmeyer Burke explains in “Choosing Accommodations,” there is a wide continuum of sign language, from ASL to Signed English, and interpreters have “variable levels of skill and proficiency” that most event organizers are not poised to effectively assess or evaluate. The frequent resistance I experienced around the cost of accommodations led me to collaborate with others to create additional forms of access as well as to seek out low-cost or cost-neutral options. In this way, because of the mattering of how I process sound and visual input, I was repeatedly connected to disability studies scholarship and other disabled scholars even though I did not—for a long time—understand their work as directly relevant to my own academic and professional interests.
These ongoing efforts around conference accessibility involved many forms of collaboration and coalition and, along with my experiences of smoother paths of access to disability studies, were part of a process of building an attentional and perceptual apparatus for disability: a way of looking for and perceiving disability as well as for theorizing my own lived experiences. The account I have shared here shows disability taking on different valences and significances over the course of moving in and through particular environments with different people at different times. It is also an account in which I am working to make disability available to you—readers of this book—in textual form, drawing on various means and resources for doing so. These efforts undergird the questions motivating this book: How does disability, through embodied, material interactions of all kinds, become available for perception and meaning? How does disability emerge as something to which we can attend? How does disability matter?

One site for exploring the mattering of disability is interpersonal interaction, encounters during which people engage in a process that I have elsewhere theorized as “marking difference.” In marking difference, people display and interpret markers of difference in both conscious and nonconscious ways as they position themselves against and alongside others. Markers of difference are emergent, dynamic, and relational rhetorical cues that include forms of embodied and enminded presence, material accoutrements, linguistic and paralinguistic utterances, behaviors, practices, and more. In the stories I have shared about myself thus far, numerous cues have conveyed information to you about who I am and how this text might be interpreted or understood. This book’s materialization, whether you are perusing a screen or a manuscript page, listening to a screen reader, holding a bound book, feeling a Braille interface, listening to the book be read aloud by another, or engaging with the text through a wide range of other means, is also part of how readers come to understand me and this text vis-à-vis deafness, disability, and difference.

While it can be tempting to imagine disability as a narrower classification of difference, and then again to think of deafness as a narrower classification of disability, these categories actually do not work this way. Deafness is as infinite as disability is as infinite as difference. All are dynamic, emergent, and relational capacities for moving and being
that interact and materially and discursively constitute reality and everyday lived experience. Rather than situating these categories as sets and subsets of one another, it is more useful to think of them as ever-expanding capacities for sociomaterial emergence. Any attempt to define deafness, which most often happens textually through reference to a big-D, little-d distinction that distinguishes between deafness as a cultural identification and the impairment of being unable to hear sounds, ultimately fails. While this distinction in some contexts does important and useful work, it is inadequate for describing many deaf people’s experiences, and it can presume a totality and coherence that have not been reflected in any grouping of deaf people I have encountered. Once we start trying to define deafness or disability or difference, they slip out of our grasp and elude definition or determination. They commingle and associate and entangle with the intricacies of lived experience, of changing worlds and bodies and technologies and relations, ultimately becoming what Ellen Samuels has termed “fantasies of identification” that exceed and conflict with existing ontologies.

Notions of deafness and disability—my own and those reflected back to me by others—were consequential for just about every choice I made early in my career, not just those involving access and accommodation. In my work studying markers of difference and as I have developed the concept of signs of disability, I have noticed that both involve investments in certain kinds of selves. For instance, as I listened to students interacting in a writing classroom, I came to understand that their willingness to participate in an interaction was constituted through their display and uptake of markers of difference. When students recognized the self that others showed back to them interactionally, they were willing to respond and engage. Similar investments are apparent in my early-career resistance to writing about myself in my scholarship. Somehow, it felt different—scarier, more threatening—to make such disclosures in writing than to navigate them in everyday interpersonal space. This is perhaps related to the fact that I have developed strategies for making people comfortable as they interact with me in person, including using humor and smiling a lot, which are behaviors also inflected by my whiteness and gender. In an interpersonal encounter, I experience possibilities for change and relationship building in ways that written texts can foreclose. In addition, given the number of encounters I have had
with people who have discredited my authority, when I did not know who might read a written text, those disclosures felt threatening. This threat took on salience for me because of how much my work involves listening to aural conversations using my residual hearing, extremely strong hearing aid amplification, written transcripts, and collaboration. During my pretenure period, I worried intensely about how my deafness might matter to those in positions to evaluate or respond to my work.

While fears around disqualification have subsided somewhat with the publication and critical reception of my first book, they have not left me entirely, and indeed, they continue to shift and morph in ways that I am always coming to know. For instance, early in the process of working on this book, I conducted a research interview with a blind faculty member who requested the phone as an interview modality. Because I cannot understand spoken conversation without a visual complement, I registered with an online relay service that would caption the call and used a video camera to record myself conducting the interview. However, only after questioning from others did I wrestle with a significant omission in the analytic scene: I did not record in real time how I actually accessed this conversation. I had been entirely focused on the audio coming through the phone as the most important way to access the interviewee’s words. Consequently, I barely considered that the words scrolling on my laptop through the relay interface were just as essential as the phone’s audio to the unfolding interaction.\(^\text{12}\)

If I am really honest with myself—and it has taken me years to even acknowledge this to myself, much less share it publicly in this book—the truth is that even if I had thought prior to the interview about recording the internet relay captioning in real time, I would have had strong resistance to it, might not have been willing to do it, or might only have done it extremely reluctantly and with great trepidation. Internet relay captions are rarely as accurate as I desire, and transcript infelicities are common. Having the differences between the aural and visual modes of this interview be front and center in the research process would have made apparent some of the gaps in my access to the scene, gaps that have only very recently come to be theorized as potentially productive and generative sites of meaning making rather than as deficits or problems.\(^\text{13}\)

My own focus on deafness and disability (and to a lesser extent gender) as a threat to my professional identity also underscores the role
that whiteness has played in my life: my energy for access labor in my career has been supported and sustained by the ease with which I navigate predominantly white professional settings. That race can be backgrounded in my conscious awareness has meant that it has not always been an aspect of my identity around which I have been vigilant. Over my life and career, I have had to work to make race—and my whiteness in particular—central to my everyday noticing. The mattering of deafness and disability, then, is always taking shape and changing as I come into (different) awareness of my embodied materiality through various personal and professional encounters. This mattering changes as I experience the boundaries and borders of deafness and disability as an ever-shifting terrain that I can never fully understand or map out. In thinking about how deafness and disability matter, I refer both to their material substance and presence and to how that mattering and presence take on meaning, weight, and significance.

To materialize signs of disability is a never-ending inquiry into who and what is (un)recognized and in what configurations. No two experiences of deafness are the same, and even my own deafness is different across time and space. I have found myself wanting to tear and rip and crush into pulp the distinctions, lines, barriers, boundaries that delineate deafness and disability and then I want to make that pulp into paper again and then I want to tear it up again and remake it again and on and on. Those acts of tearing, cutting, crushing, and then remaking and reshaping? They are the everyday mattering of disability. This everyday mattering suggests an approach to disability as a continual, protracted, effort-laden, and “frictioned” process of seeking both recognition and moments of unrecognizability. These explorations ask how complex relations—entanglements—among beings, environments, materials, and meaning enable the emergence and perceptibility of disability. They ask what it means for disability to appear, to be perceptible or imperceptible, to emerge as what Julie Avril Minich has suggested as a critical methodology or what Tobin Siebers has called a body of knowledge, and they ask how boundaries around social encounters and environments point to disability. These are all questions about the mattering of disability.

My response is to theorize signs of disability as perceptual cues that point to the presence or emergence of disability, a definition that recalls
and extends my earlier work on marking difference. In my book *Toward a New Rhetoric of Difference*, I defined markers of difference as “contextually embedded rhetorical cues that signal the presence of difference between one or more interlocutors.” This definition emphasizes marking as happening in situated performances involving real-time synchronous interaction, approaching difference as interactionally emergent, changing over the course of an interaction, and in relation with others. However, for reasons I will explain in more detail below, markers of difference largely focus attention on discursive forms of marking that can make it difficult to account for material objects and artifacts that also participate in these interactional scenes. Extending markers of difference, then, signs of disability emphasize the entanglement of sensory input, everyday reality, and interpretive relations that lead to the emergence of phenomena. This framework does not constrain the signaling of disability to readily recognized communicative forms, and it takes seriously the agency of all matter.

I have learned to understand material agency through multiple academic threads stitching together stories of human and material interconnections that have helped me think through relations among perceivers and what is perceived. A key thread comes from Indigenous theorist Robin Wall Kimmerer, whose work centers story while refusing typical disciplinary divides in scientific inquiry that separate lived experience and knowledge building. In “Asters and Goldenrod,” Kimmerer describes fields and meadows “embroidered with drifts of golden yellow and pools of deeper purple, a masterpiece.” Painting a portrait of these flowers in words, Kimmerer says, “Alone, each is a botanical superlative. Together, the visual effect is stunning: Purple and gold, the heraldic colors of the king and queen of the meadow, a regal procession in complementary colors. I just wanted to know why.” But a botany adviser tells her that question is not science: “He told me that science was not about beauty, not about the embrace between plants and humans.” When Kimmerer headed to college and studied plant biology, the scientific approach her professors taught her insisted on “separating the observer from the observed, and the observed from the observer,” which relegated questions about why two plants were beautiful together to a realm of subjectivity. However, Kimmerer shows that there are explanations for this beauty that can only be understood through the connections
between the scientific knowledge from her professional training and the traditional knowledges she grew up with: “Why are they beautiful together? It is a phenomenon simultaneously material and spiritual, for which we need all wavelengths, for which we need depth perception. When I stare too long at the world with science eyes, I see an afterimage of traditional knowledge. Might science and traditional knowledge be purple and yellow to one another? Might they be goldenrod and asters? We see the world more fully when we use both.”

The complementarity between science and traditional knowledges that Kimmerer urges us to recognize can be woven with Karen Barad’s account of agential realism in Meeting the Universe Halfway. Barad’s theory, as does Kimmerer’s story, stresses the imbrication of observer and observed. Unlike Kimmerer, Barad does so with a vocabulary taken not from plant biology and Indigenous teaching but from quantum physics.

Barad’s account of agential realism imbricates ethics, ontology, and epistemology to stress a responsibility to take seriously the world’s materiality as beings of all kinds move in and around and through it. “Intra-action” is a neologism Barad uses to describe “the mutual constitution of entangled agencies.” This mutual constitution means that they do not exist as distinct entities that come together (entangle) but rather emerge through intra-action. Matter is not “a fixed substance” but “a stabilizing and destabilizing process of iterative intra-activity” in which phenomena emerge through intra-actions between apparatuses of observation and the world’s materiality. These phenomena do not themselves constitute reality: they are the outcome of the intra-actions between observer and observed. Observational apparatuses enact what Barad calls “agential cuts” that make determinate some properties of the phenomenon while leaving others indeterminate.

Stories (or narratives—I use these terms somewhat interchangeably in this book) can then be understood as outcomes of agential cuts enacted by perceptual apparatuses intra-acting with reality. As such, they offer instances where “matter and meaning meet in a very literal sense” as the world is given an account. In Barad’s theory, intra-acting agencies point to the “agential” in agential realism, while “realism” refers to the responsibility of “providing accurate descriptions of that reality of which we are a part and with which we intra-act.” As a performative account, agential realism takes “thinking, observing, and theorizing as
practices of engagement with and as part of, the world in which we have our being.” Not all of our practices of engagement, however, as both Barad and Kimmerer would argue, are equally valuable or useful. As Barad puts it, “Explanations of various phenomena and events that do not take account of material, as well as discursive, constraints will fail to provide empirically adequate accounts (not any story will do).”

Storying is an important means of building theory and engaging with the world, as Kimmerer teaches. Alongside Kimmerer, I have learned from a wide range of story-theorists, many in my field of writing studies, including Christina Cedillo, V. Jo Hsu, Lisa King, Rose Gubele, and Joyce Rain Anderson, Aja Martinez, Katherine McKittrick, Malea Powell, Andrea Riley-Mukavetz, Tanya Titchkosky, Victor Villanueva, and Remi Yergeau. These theorists draw on a range of minoritized story-traditions to resist dominant accounts that elide much of the world’s materiality. In a critique of the way posthumanist and “new” materialist thinking often universalizes ontology, Chad Shomura suggests instead Jane Bennett’s concept of an “onto-story” as one means by which materialist scholarship might engage “the difficult labor of navigating multiple ontologies, amplifying minor connections across racial, gender, species, and material lines in order to challenge the powers that be while offering positive visions of other worlds.” What I hear as I tangle my fingers through all of these threads is the importance of listening to the world, ensuring that our stories are accountable to the world around us and to the world always coming-into-existence as we move in relation with others. To tell a story is a means of enacting an observation, of making an agential cut that draws boundaries around a phenomenon. Narratives, in other words, materialize disability.

Materializing disability is a boundary-making process that is never complete. Disability is always shifting, contingent on circumstances, contexts, and particular experiences, relationships, and bodily arrangements. Its meanings are not attached to particular words or configurations—even as I repeatedly use the word “disability” throughout this book, it operates as what Barad calls “an ongoing performance of the world in its differential dance of intelligibility and unintelligibility.” In this dance, this concert, this riotous cacophony, “part of the world becomes determinately bounded and propertied in its emergent intelligibility to another part of the world, while lively matterings, possibilities,
and impossibilities are reconfigured.”31 My thinking about signs of disability is likewise capacious, interested in the ways that they materialize in complex and dynamic processes of mattering and coming-to-matter.

This dynamism and complex mattering might be illustrated with the sign for disability in American Sign Language (the only sign language I am conversant in). To communicate disability in ASL involves finger-spelling the letters “D” and “A” with the dominant signing hand.32 This sign for disability takes influence from relatively arbitrary features of the English word (its first letter, for instance) but is otherwise an abstract signifier that does little to engage with disability as a concept. In contrast, ASL signs that name specific disabilities are more physically referential. The sign for deaf in ASL is an outstretched index finger moving either from mouth to ear or from ear to mouth;33 the sign for blind involves a claw-shaped V handshape moving toward the eyes;34 the sign for a wheelchair user is to use both hands to imitate the movement of self-propelling a wheelchair.35 Even signs for less directly embodied concepts such as neurodivergence point to and reference signers’ bodyminds36 in much more direct ways than does this sign for disability. An early reviewer of this manuscript wondered whether this move to abstraction might be a euphemistic one. While I can only speculate on this point, I understand the abstraction embedded in fingerspelling D-A as a response to the challenge of encompassing a wide range of different experiences and bodyminds, and that a similar abstraction might even be more desirable in some cases to offset the tight links sometimes suggested by more embodied-referential signs that might seem to link some disability experiences—such as “neurodivergence” and “autism”—with particular locations on the body. I am here grateful to Margaret Price’s thinking on the imbrication of body and mind for challenging easy links between mental disability and the brain,37 which could usefully inform the development of new ASL signs that might do different conceptual work. However, while I want to recognize the dynamic potential sometimes available in abstraction, the decision to abstract the ASL sign for disability by pointing to English letters does little to convey anything about what disability might mean, be, or do in the world beyond its relationship to the English word. Its meaning is shaped through agential cuts enacted by perceivers—by the stories that emerge around it and with it and through it.
Perceptibility is central to my account of signs of disability, as I have thought about how disability makes itself and is made perceptible with all kinds of cues. While “in/visible disability” and, to a lesser extent, “nonvisible disability” remain perhaps the most common terms for indicating differences between those disabilities that are assumed to be readily interpreted on the basis of material presences and those that are not so readily available for perception, these terms have been critiqued for overemphasizing visual perception and thus eliding many ways that disability might materialize through other kinds of sensory input. I hope the broader term “perceptibility” will also support attention to the ways that different forms of embodied and enminded presence, including race and ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, matter to disability’s emergence. Through “perceptibility” I acknowledge the work that observational apparatuses—what I will call in this book perceptual apparatuses—do in intra-acting with the world to produce material phenomena. In so doing, “perceptibility” can resist the idea that there is a world out there waiting to be found when that world is actually always in the process of intra-actively becoming.

Throughout this book I turn often to story to enact my responsibility to tell better accounts of the world. As material-discursive practices that enact agential cuts and delineate boundaries between self and other, between interior and exterior, narrative is a methodological practice for realizing the imbrication of epistemology, ontology, and ethics—of our relationships with all of the world’s materiality. Put another way, story is a way to take materiality seriously. Stories work on and through us. They move us. They are everyday and mundane—as are practices of being raced, gendered, sexed, and disabled, which also/often happen through story. They are central to processes of being (mis)recognized and dis-identified as well as to what Remi Yergeau has called “resonance,” “an interbodily knowing, a betweenness that pervades.” Repeated, recurrent encounters with stories that enact agential cuts between “self” and “other” and create and break down different boundaries have consequences; they matter. These intra-actions effect change in us and in our world. One particularly obdurate iterative story circulates around cure, which has been taken up in several recent disability studies texts: Eli Clare’s Brilliant Imperfection, Alison Kafer’s Feminist, Queer, Crip, Eun-jung Kim’s Curative Violence, and Jaipreet Virdi’s Hearing Happiness.
Each of these books traces the effects and outcomes of repeated, persistent, insistent encounters with stories fixated on cure, on erasing disability, on imagining futures without disability. The curative story, which of course is not just one story but many stories, layered and entangled and thickening and solidifying and loosening and chipping and repeating, is a continually morphing phenomenon with different resonances and acoustics at different times and places and with different audiences. It is through these intra-actions—with reality and with story—that we access the disclosures made by, in, and through the world.

Essential to the work of story and to the framework of signs of disability is the point that stories are material, and their materiality is significant to their emergence, circulation, and consequence. therí Pickens’s literary-phenomenological discussion of Suheir Hammad’s poetry emphasizes this materiality, acknowledging Hammad’s embodiment, the fragility of breathing, its entanglement with her lived experience as Palestinian and Black and female and finally, how that embodied knowledge emerges in Hammad’s poetic structure and arrangement. Pickens’s analysis touches on the lyric arrangement, the breathing patterns required to say the poem’s words, and the representation of text on the page.40 The materiality of story becomes especially apparent when we attend to composing practices that cannot be separated from the body, such as hands spinning and twisting and bending in space and time, as Rebecca Sanchez argues. In working through what she calls “interdimensional translation,” or “the new modes of being together that emerge when semantic content cannot be separated from a human body signifying,” Sanchez highlights the materiality of language and of the everyday disclosures enacted by and through material texts and objects.41

Not only are narratives produced by moving and mattering material bodies, but they are also material artifacts, whether recorded onto cassette tapes, saved as digital files on a hard drive, handwritten in journals, typed on sheets of paper, flickering pixels on an e-reader, tucked into a filing cabinet, buried in the recesses of an archive, or bound into a physical book. This production of narrative and its movement in and out of different material forms always occurs within various social configurations and at particular temporal junctures. Consequently, narratives are highly situated and contextualized, as a long history of scholarship in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology has documented.42 The
distinct traditions of storying and approaches to narrative that I have
drawn upon at different points in my career and in this introduction
all entangle in the definitions of “narrative” and “story” that inform
this book. I will toggle between these two terms somewhat intentionally
because I have been influenced by a wide range of interdisciplinary
approaches for making the world’s materiality and lived experiences
available to others. For me, narratives and stories are emergent intra-
actions shaped by myriad factors, including the conditions of their pro-
duction, authorial presence and bodyminds made available for noticing
in various ways, social interactions, and material-discursive surrounds.
These intra-actions lead to narrative possibilities at particular moments,
and they consequentially influence how narratives appear and circulate
as well as what agential cuts the narratives enact as they intra-act with
various perceptual apparatuses.

I use this understanding of narrative and story to deepen an under-
standing of signs of disability and their agential practices. Four core
concepts each animate a chapter of this book. In chapter 1, I consider
how perceptual apparatuses are built, taking up dominant and disabled
practices of attention—what I theorize through *dis*-attention, an inten-
tionally awkward neologism—that materialize disability through intra-
actions as perceptual apparatuses entangle with the world's materiality.
*Dis*- attentions of all kinds shape everyday experiences of navigating
spaces, times, and encounters, but individual and collective perceptions
are not the only factors that influence how and what we notice. Signs of
disability are always disclosing, that is, playing an active role in the mak-
ing of meaning. The world's materiality, including of bodyminds and of
the processes by which bodyminds observe and describe the world, is an
active, intra-acting participant in disability's materialization.

In chapter 2, I consider how the world discloses to us and what this
might mean as we learn to attend to the world’s materiality. This chapter
shows the need for better stories of disability through the accumulation
of stories about a yellow, diamond-shaped “Deaf Person in Area” sign
that appeared in my neighborhood, and that has stuck with and changed
me as I have written this book. Over the course of many encounters
with this sign, it disclosed in different ways. The collective stories shared
about this sign emphasize that its disclosures are themselves shaped by
both dominant and disabled *dis*- attentions enacted by observers and
their perceptual practices learned over lifetimes of moving in the world. This imbrication between ethics, ontology, and epistemology—what Barad terms an “ethico-onto-epistem-ology”—extends figurations of disability that do not go far enough in considering disability’s various ontologies.

To consider an ethico-onto-epistemology is to stress the links between materiality and meaning. In like fashion, attention to storying across a wide range of encounters reinforces their specificity and materiality: stories are always told at specific times within particular arrangements, and their materiality is an active participant in processes of meaning making and interpretation. The stories I have found myself saying aloud, writing down, returning to, and revising as I have moved this book into existence have led me to understand the importance of what, in chapter 3, I discuss as a process of disabling. “Disabling” in its everyday use can refer both to the process of breaking something so that it no longer functions and to the experience of becoming disabled or identifying as disabled. This latter definition has been used by scholars across an interdisciplinary range to highlight growing recognition of disability in a variety of ways. I build on this work to suggest disabling as a means whereby disabled forms of dis-attention intra-act and work toward better accounts of disability.

In addition to telling better stories of disability through processes of disabling, it is also important to understand dispersal, or how stories come to circulate, which is the focus of chapter 4. In most mainstream contexts, disability is (still) most readily available for perception through dominant dis-attentions that take up and circulate some accounts and some signs of disability more than others. Dispersing shows that an account of signs of disability and their functions must also integrate an understanding of how they move. Joining the other core concepts of this book—disabled and dominant dis-attentions, the world’s material disclosures, and processes of disabling—dispersing supports a robust account of how narratives emerge and take shape.

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This book is an intervention in practices of knowledge production. The process of identifying a research question and developing a project is not separable from the end result that comes to circulate and that you
are now reading. When I was writing my first book and developing the concept of marking difference, I was analyzing data generated in a classroom study. During that project, I recorded detailed field notes in which I described students’ presences in class and noted, for instance, aspects of their physical appearance, such as skin color and how they dressed and wore their hair. I also listed material artifacts they brought to class, such as coffee mugs, notebooks, backpacks, essay drafts, skateboards, and planners, because I noticed these things as mattering to the interactional scenes I was observing. As I worked with the recordings of students’ classroom conversations, however, I very early on realized that I had to be exceptionally careful in making connections between the observations recorded in my field notes and what students themselves might be apprehending or orienting to. One way to make such links was to notice when students commented on or indexed them in talk. Given the depth of what is potentially available for perception and the shallowness of what is consciously attended (which I discuss in chapter 1), such explicit commentary entails only a fragment of what is influencing or motivating students’ interactional behaviors and classroom utterances. This presented an important analytic challenge. While I was certain that clothing and other material accoutrements played active roles in students’ identity performances and social negotiations, both my emphasis on marking difference through talk and interaction and the time frame of the data generation (one semester) constrained what questions I could answer about students’ perceptions of their own and others’ presences, the environmental surround, and material artifacts.

After completing *Toward a New Rhetoric of Difference*, I continued to wrestle with what still felt undone or unsettled in this work. To do this, I spent time thinking about difference as it worked in my own life, which meant considering race and gender but also disability and, significantly later, deafness, as particularly important differences for attention and study. I reflected on my own choice making around clothing, hair, physical appearance, and whiteness. I noticed my reactions to various physical and virtual environments. I attended to shifts in ongoing relationships in my workplace and in my personal life. I paid special attention to how whiteness operated in my actions and perceptions as well as how racism, misogyny, and gender-based discrimination functioned in my interactions with others. These reflections influenced my turn to questions
about disability disclosure in academic scholarship and about how writing scholars accounted for disability in classroom anecdotes. I was interested in not only how disability materialized as I interacted with other people but also how experiences of disability influenced interventional choices and rhetorical practices. To do this work, I needed to be able to account for the materiality of the world and of bodyminds moving in shared interactional space. Consequently, this book is a different kind of exploration than the one I performed in Toward.

In making a turn to disability as a line of inquiry, the methodology that I have taken centers on narrative. I have sought out all kinds of stories that people tell about experiences of disability. Through lived experiences, we build our perceptual practices, and these practices are differently attuned to disability. These different perceptual apparatuses are also differently attuned to disability’s imbrication and co-constitution within interlocking systems of oppression. In this way, the stories we tell of disability are shaped by every aspect of our embodied materiality that comes to be perceived and made available for noticing within systems of power and valuation. These commitments have helped me cultivate an orientation to disability in my daily movements and interactions, and they have motivated several forms of narrative data generation. I have collected images of signs that called disability to my attention. In this collecting, I have kept track of the stories that I and others have told about these signs. I have also assembled written accounts that might point to disability, even and perhaps especially when those texts might not be identified from the outset as being about disability. Additional stories emerged through a collaborative interview study that generated thirty-three narrative-based interviews with disabled faculty members. During these interviews, interviewees shared accounts of their experiences disclosing (or not disclosing) their disability in professional contexts. Alongside this narrative data set, I have been telling and writing and revising my own stories as I continue to shape my perceptual apparatus and practices of materializing disability. This book is an exploration of the everyday mattering and emergence of disability as well as disability’s constitution in textual forms as a consequence of this mattering. The life I have lived is as much a component of this book as is my academic thinking and professional labor, and there is so much more yet to be explored.