Epilogue

Disorientations

In the preceding chapters of this book, I have forwarded a framework of signs of disability that coalesces around four conceptual terms—“dis-attending,” “disclosing,” “disabling,” and “dispersing”—that can help us learn to attend to the signs of disability all around us. This framework has emerged through a methodology and data set centered on stories and storying that reveal signs of disability as dynamic, engaged, and lived practices in all kinds of everyday scenes. But signs of disability, as this book has tried to show, are also highly disorienting. Dis-attention is, as I note in chapter 1, a purposefully polyvalent neologism intended to trip us up, slow us down, and twist us around as we try to learn what it means to notice a world made up of and with disability. As the material world becomes sensory input that intra-acts with our perceptual apparatuses, dominant practices of dis-attention work to make disability available for noticing only in highly constrained or narrowly authorized ways, and often act in the service of coopting or sanitizing disability.

To resist such ways of perceiving disability requires us to learn to attend differently to the world’s disclosures. It requires us to do the hard work of intentionally reshaping our perceptual apparatuses. One way to move, then, is to learn from perceptual apparatuses shaped by experiences of disability amidst complex lives and environments. It also means disabling—in the sense I suggest for this word in chapter 3—practices of dis-attention by building and sustaining meaningful relationships and entanglements among disabled onto-epistemologies. The final core term of this book, “dispersing,” takes up questions of how disability is made available for noticing as texts take shape and move. Writers’ bodies matter in many different ways to how a text materializes into being, and intra-actions of all kinds over the course of composing participate in texts’ emergence as well as in the ways that a text comes to circulate. As
texts come to readers, their materiality intra-acts with readers’ perceptual apparatuses to shape possibilities for disability and its coming into being.

In this epilogue, I twist some threads of this book together to invite you to practice disabling and dis-attending, to consider anew the world’s disclosures and their dispersal in your everyday experiences. Remember, how and whether the sensory input that we process in any given moment materializes disability are shaped by the diffractions among disabled and dominant dis-attentions circulating around us as well as our own practices of dis-attending. Disability’s emergence is likewise shaped by our attention to constructions and experiences of race, gender, queerness, and socioeconomic status; it is shaped by the cultural behaviors and practices embedded in the environments we navigate; it is shaped by our own histories and by how others around us collectively attend; and it is shaped by particular times and places and by particular configurations and material arrangements. The stories we tell are active participants in how disability comes to presence and how we come to perceive disability. These perceptions are themselves shaped by how stories come to us as well as their materiality.

I will share two stories below—one taken from an interview with a disabled faculty member and another published in an academic essay. As you read, consider how they have come to you and maybe how they came to be included in this epilogue. Notice what signs of disability I and their tellers include and what their tellers, or I, might be eliding or dis-attending. You, my readers, will perceive different details in these scenes than I do. What are they?

“I’m Getting Old”

This story comes as Nicola, a white contingent faculty member with a chronic illness, describes various masking strategies she uses to ensure that her disability is not recognized by her students or colleagues. She tells this story during a spoken interview with a research interviewer who openly identifies as disabled. Nicola explains to the interviewer that one way she masks her disability is to use her material environment. For instance, she makes sure that she is always close to a desk or a wall while teaching so that if she experiences weakness in her legs, she can casually lean against them to support herself. She also adopts particular
behaviors to distract attention from manifestations of her disability. For instance, when she loses her grip and whatever she is holding slips from her hands (e.g., a piece of chalk), she will just wave it off as if she cannot be bothered. As she shared these examples, she included a detailed account of how she—on the first day of class—prepares her students to notice various signs of disability:

So (0.7), at the beginning of the semester, uh ((smiles)) (1.3), I usually just tell them, you know listen (0.5), I’m getting old, and they love that because they always think I (mean) you know I look young, I’m young and I look even younger than I am, so listen guys, listen, I’m getting old (1.0), so, I need you to bear with me cause it’s gonna take me a few weeks to learn your names, but ((adjusts glasses)) (1.0), I want you to know that, this is not because I don’t care about you, I very much want to learn your names (1.0), it’s just that, you know, you start getting old ((chuckles)).

In this story, there is no immediately obvious, yellow diamond-shaped sign loudly announcing “Disabled Person in Area,” but Nicola does make some incongruous juxtapositions. One such juxtaposition comes as she tells her students, “I’m getting old,” a line she repeats three times in the quotation above. She directly connects “I’m getting old” with telling her students that it will take her time to learn their names. She goes on to stress to her students that “this is not because I don’t care about you, I very much want to learn your names (1.0) it’s just that, you know, you start getting old ((chuckles)).” When Nicola confesses that she won’t learn her students’ names quickly, she cues in to information that she assumes her students are likely to perceive or learn from her as the term proceeds, and she works to deflect a potential interpretation they might make—that her not knowing their names is a sign of disinterest or lack of care.

A second juxtaposition emerges in the discrepancy between Nicola’s physical appearance and her claims about aging. In an aside to the interviewer, Nicola explains that her students “love that because they always think I (mean) you know I look young, I’m young and I look even younger than I am.” So another sign of disability here is that gap, that space between “I’m getting old” and Nicola’s youthful appearance. For many this incongruity may be resolved as being a joke and is likely
why her students “love that”: it taps into humor as a way of getting the class to go along with the fact that their teacher is not going to know their names right away. Recall here Friedman’s work showing that inconsistent or ambiguous information tends to get filtered out of active perception rather than being resolved or incorporated into a new understanding. For many perceivers, it is easier to ignore these contradictions and go along with Nicola’s cheerful assertion of aging and age-related decline than to materialize disability.

It is important to note how differently Nicola talks about these signs of disability with the interviewer than with her students. As Nicola narrates her chronic illness during her interview, she uses her stories to contextualize accounts of what happens in her classroom. For instance, she narrates for the interviewer the nature and disabling effects of her chronic illness (e.g., “I have, my short term memory is, is, quite poor”; “I have a very big lesion, in my frontal lobe”), and she attaches value and meaning to her disability and how it matters to her self-presentation in the classroom, explaining that not being able to learn her students’ names quickly “kind of upsets me (0.8), because (1.0), I (0.5), take, I’ve always taken pride in the fact that I, care about my students, like it’s something that’s, in my statement of teaching philosophy, is that, one of the things that I do, is that I make an effort to, connect with my students (0.5), and (0.5), help them understand, that I truly care about them, that I’m really committed to their success and this is part, of my pedagogy is that I connect with my students as human, beings.” 4 In her storying, Nicola uses these strategies to cue her listeners—the disabled researcher participating in the interview scene as well as me writing this epilogue and you reading it—to notice the signs of disability in her story and to dis-attend to them by moving them into active awareness rather than letting them be backgrounded or elided by other frames.

“I Need an Accessible Classroom”

Let me turn now to a second example, this one composed for publication in an academic essay collection. In “Risking Experience: Disability, Precarity, and Disclosure,” Kate Kaul, a middle-aged, white contingent faculty member, relates an exchange with a university administrator as she requests a room change due to an inaccessible classroom. The
administrator insists on a disclosure from someone in the class before being willing to schedule an accessible classroom. Kaul finally gives in:

“Ok,” I say. “I need an accessible classroom. I need it for me. I need it because I have a disability that makes it hard for me to go up and down stairs. And I need to be able to reach the AV equipment.” That may have seemed irrelevant but in another new disability studies course that year, for another new department, I had been surprised to find the AV console was welded to the wall, halfway up a flight of steep concrete steps. It hadn’t occurred to me that I couldn’t operate an AV console positioned at shoulder height, with my feet on different steps, until I gave it a try.

There’s another pause. I’m confused; I thought I had given the administrator what she needed. But she tells me, “I’m going to need a thing.”

“A thing?”

“A . . . thing.”

“What kind of thing?”

“A letter from a doctor?”

An image flashes through my mind of the kind of letter my family doctor—a good sport in so many ways—might write that would set out the reasons why the disability studies course in the summer session of a mostly-newly built university should be held in a room the students and the instructor can be expected to get into. It’s long and angry and it looks a bit like a paper I once wrote. I put it down for now.

“I can get one,” I concede. “But I also have this thing.” I hoist my foot up on to the arm of the chair I’ve been standing next to, peel up the leg of my—cropped—trousers (it is, after all, the summer term), and point out the plastic brace. I can’t believe she hasn’t seen it before. She sees it now.

“Oh, of course,” she says. “If they ask . . .”

“I’ll get the thing,” I finish.

But they don’t.

At home, my girlfriend laughs: “Good thing you wore your splints today!”

Kaul’s story highlights the absurdity around what is readily recognized as disability and the dominant dis-attentions that lead the administrator to filter out her splint until called to notice it in the context of a disability accommodation request. Kaul’s analysis calls out some of the
dominant dis-attendments circulating in this scene: that disability is visible; that even “invisible disability” can be legibly disclosed and made perceptible; and “that an unfortunate individual (because those AFOs are very uncomfortable, especially the right one) brings disability to a classroom that was fine until she turned up.” Yet, at the same time, Kaul argues, “showing someone a brace, an AFO, is not really disclosing, is it? In some ways, it’s misdirection.” Drawing on Tanya Titchkosky in The Question of Access, Kaul notes that an accessible classroom “is not just a space. It is a matter of timing, of priority (and hierarchy), of communication, of legibility, recognition, imagination. . . . In an accessible room, by which I mean, one where I can use all of the things that I need in order to teach, I may not have to disclose my disability to my students.”

Kaul’s desire for an environment that does not compel disclosure is an important one. Classroom disclosures occur amidst academic hierarchies that almost always give first consideration to tenured faculty in terms of course assignments, schedules, and classrooms and least consideration to those contingent faculty most likely to be experiencing disability and academic precarity. Too, such disclosures are often compelled within bureaucratic negotiations infused with asymmetries of power and control that mandate how and when disability—or any claims to identity or experience for that matter—must be made legible.

In Counterstory, Aja Martinez relates an episode involving a human resources clerk and a form that she needed to fill out before starting a new faculty position. Preparing to go in and fill out the form, Martinez writes, “Returning to the emphasis on the concept of being human, in this body that is societally raced, gendered, and aged, among other things, and when thinking about access for this body in university spaces with buildings that, for all intents and purposes, look like Hogwarts, I believed—and my use of the past tense here is intentional—I believed that on the days I want to be treated like the PhD and professor that I am, I needed to ‘dress the part.’”

So the next day, she puts on professional attire, drives an hour to her campus to complete this form, and is relieved when she arrives and overhears another person, a white man, apparently there for the same reason she is. However, when she gets to the desk, instead of a smooth interaction, the HR employee questions Martinez skeptically: “Are you employed here?” When Martinez finally asks, “Do I need to produce my
school ID?” the administrator gives Martinez a dismissive hand gesture and indicates she should fill out the form in a nearby waiting area. When Martinez returns with the completed form, the administrator questions her again: “Is this your school ID number?” This bureaucratic skepticism when juxtaposed with Kaul's pointing out her splints highlights the complex intersections of embodied legibility that shape how disability is disclosed and made available for perception.

Making Bodies Available for Perception

The two stories shared above and the various forms of textual mobility that have enabled them to arrive here, in front of you right now, highlight several tensions and juxtapositions around disability's materialization in everyday textual encounters. For instance, both Nicola’s and Kaul’s accounts demonstrate the impact that contingent employment in academia can have on embodied perception and perceptibility. They each highlight risks associated with making one's body available for others to fully perceive. The degree to which Nicola can highlight to the interviewer how she works to ensure that others will filter out signs pointing to disability is shaped by the material conditions and environment of the interview. Both Kaul and Nicola highlight different intersections of embodied privilege, particularly when juxtaposed against other accounts, such as Martinez’s, that ask questions about who can assume and in what contexts that others will take their disclosures seriously as raced, gendered, and classed disorientations intra-act. These accounts also emphasize the changing dynamics of access, moving at different times, speeds, places, spaces, environments, and intra-actions.

They also consider questions about how stories come to move and take shape within particular contexts. Nicola’s accounts, like Tonia’s in chapter 3, were recorded as part of a research interview. In the course of listening to and engaging these accounts, I have decontextualized these stories from their original emergence and recontextualized them here in this book. Kaul’s and Martinez’s accounts first emerged in texts written for publication and are being recirculated within this book. Each of the texts’ original material forms mattered for how they came to existence and how they came to me. Their emergence in this book is shaped by this text’s material forms as well as my own authorial body and the
intra-actions that have led me to compose in this place, at this time. Your engagement with these accounts and how they matter to your own practices of dis-attention and disabling is the culmination of a life lived to this point and the possibilities that open up (and close off) through this engagement. What I have shared here are not the only—or even necessarily the most important—disorientations for continuing to meander among and engage with signs of disability, and one of my hopes for this book is for it to motivate (or unmotivate) other intra-acting possibilities.

Some Disabling Prompts

- What are the signs of disability that you notice in the stories that come to you? In the stories that you tell?
- What forms of dominant and disabled dis-attentions enable and/or elide the materialization of disability? How do they intra-act with one another, creating different diffraction patterns?
- How does the world’s materiality disclose to you? What are these disclosures and what can you learn from them?
- Where and how do you make efforts to participate in processes of disabling? Where and how do you notice disabling around you? Where and how do disabled dis-attentions intra-act?
- Where and how do dominant and disabled dis-attentions, disclosures, and practices of disabling circulate, get amplified, gain resonance, and participate in the ongoing dynamics of intra-action?

I hope that you will take these questions and help us all learn new practices of attention that center disability’s intra-acting emergence and open up possibilities for radical inclusion and entanglement among disabled dis-attentions.