MELT
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CON(FUSE)ING AND RE(FUSING) BARRIERS

Abstract

In *Con(fuse)ing and Re(fusing) Barriers*, we activate the practice of coalescing to discuss and propose trans* and neuroqueer ways of refusing access barriers and normative expectations. Drawing from trans* feminism, crip technoscience, embodied experiences and our arts-design practice as MELT, we attend to ritual making as a crip and trans* site of resistance. Rituals are activated throughout the text as practices that reduce access barriers, change habits, slow things down, or enact community rites of passage. We refuse (as in: fuse again) and confuse (as in: reconsider assumptions) separability, and trace how materials unfold in our arts-design experiments: concrete and errors become soft, rituals disorder normative space, and cosmic rays embrace neuroqueer understandings of computing. This text is an invitation to share and embrace rituals and refusal as interrelated modes that can make space for other worlds.

Introduction

This article discusses how trans* and crip ways of refusing access barriers can be conceptualized and practiced through coalescing or fusing again, strands of scholarship and arts-design praxis. By attending to ritual making as a crip[1] and trans*[2] site of resistance against access barriers, we understand rituals as practices that "create accessibility, mark important moments" (Critical Design Lab), slow things down, or enact community rites of passage with others who have had similar experiences (Lawliet).

We attend to practices of ritual making where they open up spaces for less oppressive worlds. Rituals exist within and outside of academia. To point to the form of this engagement, we will interject rituals that we have created as a way to introduce trans* and crip ritualistic world making into this academic article. Understanding academic practices such as lecturing, citing, and reviewing as ritualistic, we ask how they could be performed in ways that exclude less people. Exemplary is the term "double blind peer review" — a practice that this article went through, and which entails reading and feedback by two anonymous scholars. Critiquing the ways in which many metaphors assume nondisabled embodiments, Sami Schalk writes: "The assumption that we can presume the existence of a shared understanding and knowledge of bodily (including sensory and cognitive) experiences that will serve as the concrete concept through which we figuratively communicate abstract ideas (as metaphors of disability do) is, however, very problematic. By and large, such presumptions rely upon allegedly universal experiences of the body: everyone sees, speaks, hears, feels, and moves in the same (nondisabled) ways." Schalk challenges metaphors that assume compulsory ablebodied- and mindedness: in

the case of the "double blind peer review", the assumptions that nondisabled people make about blindness have defined this term and practice. This academic ritual, amidst others, carries with it ableist assumptions of who is (not) part of academic production.[3]

As trans* and disabled researchers, we push back against practices of exclusion and other access barriers, and show that coalescing trans* and crip knowing-making sets in motion transformative material-discursive processes. Coalescing as a practice of fusing politics and matters is part of our ongoing collaboration on the *Meltionary*, which is a growing experimental directory that investigates different materials, metaphors and modes of melting. The *Meltionary* is a word play on the term dictionary, and it consists of *Meltries*, melted entries. To pursue our research, we boil up insights from chemistry, crip technoscience and trans*feminism. We work to con(fuse) barriers not only as a praxis towards more accessible worlds but also as a way of understanding the links, fusings and frictional movements between the disciplines of trans* theory, critical disability studies, design and technoscience.

> *Ritual for bad listening: Take a piece of paper or your smartphone and for 5 minutes, write down every sound that you hear and/or sense (the humming of the heater, the chirping of a bird, the temperature in the room, the brightness of the light). Repeat this ritual in different settings if possible. When and where are you comfortable with listening/sensing? Do you listen/ sense deeper with time? Are any of the things you hear/sense an access barrier for you or for someone you know? You can use this ritual as a way of checking in with a new space. This ritual is based on a text by Jonathan Smilges.*

On Trans* and Crip coalitions

We write this text within the present of and the wish for a future wherein trans* people and disabled people maintain accountable, loving, radical coalition with each other. Recent perspectives for uniting the concerns of trans*gendered and disabled people have been brought up by scholars and activists such as Dean Spade, Alison Kafer, Lydia X. Z. Brown, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, Remi M. Yergeau, Niamh Timmons and Alexis Pauline Gumbs. As this section mentions Applied Behavioral Analysis, ABA and other harmful practices used against trans* and autistic people, we invite you to skip this section if you wish to.

As a shared site of struggle, both critical disability studies and trans* studies scholars have highlighted questions around legitimacy by critiquing the need to qualify as "really" trans* or disabled to medical or legal entities in order to gain rights or access to resources. In both strands of scholarship and activism, paradigms of pathologization have been rejected, however this has happened sometimes while still relying on ableist, white supremacist, chromonormative and/or cisnormative logics. On the difficult relations between trans* experience and disability Susan Stryker has traced that access to medical services for trans* people has often depended on the (self) pathologization or performance of trans*ness as a "sickness" in order to legitimize any support (medical, bureaucratic, social) that transgender people may want. Niamh Timmons has described this as creating "a distance in which many trans people want to divorce themselves not only from medicalization and pathologization but also disability broadly" (49). This tension is further specified by Alexandre Baril and Catriona Leblanc who point out that trans* studies tends to assume a nondisabled trans* identity whereas disability studies tends to assume a cis* disabled identity. A lack of intersectional thinking between race, disability and trans*gendered positions is a further concern here: as Chris Bell has shown for disability studies and Emily Skidmore for trans* studies, both strands of scholarship assume whiteness. To be clear: conceptualizing trans* and disabled experience from a non-intersectional standpoint must be refused.

Nothing can be gained by understanding trans* and disabled experiences as separate. As Lydia X. Z. Brown argues, the common refrain that being transgender is not a mental illness and that there is hence "nothing wrong" with trans* people causes exclusions for those who are trans* and/or mentally ill or disabled: no one should be "subject to coercive treatment, paternalistic care models, and social stigma" (Brown). In the following paragraph, we trace the history of dividing trans* and autistic struggles, and show how they are actively refused and fused again in autistic and trans* coalitions.

Following Remi M. Yergeau, autistic people's common noncompliance with gender rules has often been rendered as involuntary by researchers ("Authoring Autism" 70). In this damaging logic, trans*ness becomes just another so-called autistic trait, and may lead researchers to assume that "research toward a cure on autism might lead toward research that cures transness or intersexness." (ibid. 71) — while none of the aforementioned need curing! It is no coincidence that ABA, a widely used therapy model based on enforcing compliance and aiming at making autistic children appear nonautistic, was historically built upon the model of gay conversion therapy and until today includes "hours spent on social stories that reinforce stereotypical and cis/heteronormative behaviors." (ibid.

29) That these gender performance norms "require" practice and are commonly refused by autistic people shows that they are just that: specific values that privilege gender conforming and allistic (non-autistic) expression. Further, the fact that autisticness is weaponized by some medical professionals as a reason for not believing trans*ness, and that TERFs[4] claim to want to protect autistic people from gender "confusion" demonstrates that trans* and autistic people have nothing to win from understanding their struggles as unrelated. Trans* and queer autistic people have invented concepts such as neuroqueerness (Walker) that celebrate the entanglements of neurodivergence and queerness. Neuroqueerness re-fuses an understanding of neurodivergence and queerness as separate and exclusionary categories fusing these concepts anew.

Our research in the *Meltionary* follows sites of knowing-making and produces knowledge that crumbles barriers that systematically deny access for trans* and disabled (people of color, poor, migrant, undocumented, elderly) people. We follow Alison Kafer and question the "very categories of "disabled people" and "trans- people" to highlight opportunities for "queercrip alliances" (151). Legitimization through bureaucratic and medicalized frameworks is a logic that we refuse – instead we call for queercrip alliances towards practices that exceed binary gender and ableist normativities.

> ***Ritual for tending to the "not perceivable": From Undrowned by Alexis Pauline Gumbs, spend time with the question: "What becomes possible when we are immersed in the queerness of forms of life that dominant systems cannot chart, reward or even understand?"***

On Rituals as disability and Trans* liberatory practice

Rituals, understood and activated in trans* and disabled world-making invite a stepping away from whatever normativities and can allow emotional, technical and/or physical access into spaces that exclude. Practicing nearby the work of Tina Campt, we trace her words as she describes rituals as "practices that are pervasive and ever-present yet occluded by their seeming absence or erasure in representation, routine or internalization" and continues, these are "practice(s) honed by the dispossessed in the struggle to create possibility within the constraints of everyday life [... the] quiet and the quotidian are mobilized as everyday practices of refusal" (4). This can mean: caring for and talking about our feelings, noticing ableism in spaces we are in, letting go of bad feelings about deadnames, recognizing our embodiments, using different pronouns, questioning assumptions built into technologies, refusing to speed up even if that is the normalized tempo, refusing gender as binary and refusing compliance with racism.

Disabled people engage rituals and routines as everyday survival strategies and for pleasure, though as expressions of a lived disability experience they are often pathologized. For example in autistic people, a desire for routines, stimming, the repetition of movements such as rocking one's body, and echolalia, the repetition of sounds that one finds calming or joyful: *rituals, rituals, rituals*, are often interpreted as disordered. Ironically, these ritualistic practices are actually ordering for those of us who practice them, as for example stimming can help regulate sensory input. Similarly, the sometimes detailed preparation for conversations that autists engage in as well as our repetition of

quotes from books or movies is called scripting, but the ways in which allistic people go through scripted conversations in small talk is seldomly understood as such. Rituals for trans* and disabled people also exist beyond individual experience and are practiced within communities in the forms of access or pronoun rounds. These rounds create space for people to bring up how they wish to be addressed in naming practices, and to communicate how the group can reduce access barriers for them. This ritualistic way of checking in upholds that pronouns, names and access needs are not stable attributes, but are in flux and can unfold differently in various times, spaces and groups. As Alexis Pauline Gumbs writes, "all oppressed communities have been intentionally fragmented and could benefit from intergenerational rituals and story sharing" ("Black Feminist Calculus Meets Nothing to Prove" 310). Claiming ritual means questioning paradigms of pathologization and fragmentation and rendering rituals as sites for resistance that have the potential to disorder normative space.

> *Ritual for questioning institutions: Next time you are at an institution of any sort: academic, immigration, medical, juridical, transport, take note of who is present. Why are they there? What are they doing? Who isn't there? What would be different if those missing people were there too?*

On refusal

Refusal is a key force in trans* and disability organizing and theorizing, as is evident in the *Crip Technoscience Manifesto* by Aimi Hamraie and Kelly Fritsch. Crip Technoscience

describes "practices of critique, alteration, and reinvention of our material-discursive world" (2) as well as a "field of knowing" (2). With the term crip, Hamraie and Fritsch point to "the non-compliant, anti-assimilationist position that disability is a desirable part of the world" (2). Crip Technoscience is built upon what Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha has described as Crip Science: "the skills, wisdom, resources and hacks disabled people use for navigating and altering inaccessible worlds" (69). In the following sections we will introduce three material experiments that deal with moments of refusal as trans* and crip worldmaking practices.

> *Ritual for doors: You can perform this ritual when you are standing or sitting in a door frame. Trace the frame and dimensions of the door with your eyes or hands. Ask, depending on bravery, situation and voice, loudly or in your head: "Is this door open for" + "X". For X, choose or add: disabled people, wheelchair users, trans* people, Black people, neurodivergent people, poor people, people of color, queer people. If not, make a commitment to open it.*

Three acts of refusal from the Meltionary

Rituals Against Barriers
(http://meltionary.com/meltries/a.html)

In our *Meltry*, "A — Rituals Against Barriers": we refuse barriers as structural conditions or unreflected habits that prevent people from entering or being in a space. This can include stairs, fluorescent lights, or the often high

(energy and financial) costs associated with changing one's legal name. Barriers speak to critical disability scholar Garland-Thomson's concept of "misfitting", which describes the relations between the built world and those bodyminds for whom it does not account yet. Misfit experiences are epistemological and generative: forms of "knowing-making" (Hamraie) emerge from them. In this *Meltry* we developed and invited others to join rituals that: make soft hard systems (and structures), render barrier reducing work as processes that require repetition, make immediate or slow changes, and amplify changes that are already ongoing.

In order to literally drive wedges into structures that exclude, we set up material experiments that changed the openness of doors. A wedge is a triangular shape or cone that has a thick tapering to a thin edge and that can secure or separate objects such a door and a door frame. To question who and what fits through given doors, we made wedges out of different transformational materials such as ice and snow. To produce ice wedges, we shaped hollow wedge forms out of playdough and poured water into them and put the whole setup into the freezer overnight. The next morning, we removed the playdough and shoved the ice wedge underneath the crevice of our heavy metal studio door that usually rapidly swings shut. The ice wedges interrupted and slowed down the process of closing, instead they fore-closed the binary of the door being either open or shut. In some tests, the wedge kept the door in different degrees of openness, in others, it swung shut above the wedge. When we inserted the wedge into the frame itself, it was partly crushed by the weight of the shutting door while still holding the door open. The wedge was not always reliable: in one test it completely melted away. Often, it did not leave enough space for us to pass through the door even though the door was

technically "open". The melting process left behind water and playdough residue and stains, traces and water puddles leaked all over our floor. To create snow wedges, we formed snow into triangular shapes with our hands. Our touch condensed and slightly melted the snow, making it possible to fuse differently dense wedges while feeling the tingling that the cold material in our hands evoked.


Figure 1: An ice wedge is inserted underneath a metal doorframe on a grey floor. The wedge holds the door open.

These experiments melted barrier reducing work into processual, frictional and messy processes. Working on crip time (Samuels) we linked our office availability to the openness of the slowly melting wedge that gradually closed our door, we played with how not every wedge can create access through every door, or maybe can only do so until conditions change. In *Rituals Against Barriers*, wedges are difference making devices that can fuse access into the conditions of any space.

Ritual for slow time: We have set up a "world of text" — a browser environment in which one can write collaboratively and in a spatial, non-linear way. This ritual is an invitation for you to respond to these questions: When have you refused a timeline that was given to you? What happened when you did? Is there any current timeline that does not fit your needs? On https://www.yourworldoftext.com/Meltionary feel free to answer in as much detail as you like, wherever you like.

Refusal in Hacking Concrete

(http://meltionary.com/meltries/c.html)
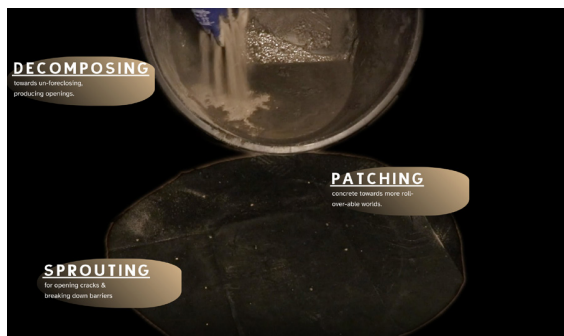
Figure 2: A screenshot from the online space shows a hand pouring concrete powder into a bucket that contains a brown mass of wet concrete. In the foreground, the banners of the website have the words "DECOMPOSING", "SPROUTING", and "PATCHING" written on them.

The next *Meltry* we share from our research is titled "C — Hacking Concrete". *Hacking Concrete* is an interactive online space that leads visitors through three storylines on patching, decomposing and sprouting with concrete. Concrete in its many states is visible, audible and readable in the footage that we display, and its materiality unfolds

in the forms of dust, mush, cracks and other soft and hardened structures. Tending to concrete's materiality, we experimented with refusing access barriers that are caused by hardened structures. In the forms of videos, images, sounds, and texts, the concrete in our work remains 'open' and un-fused as a material that is not yet 'set up' or cured or hardened. We both studied concrete as dust, powder, slush or goo, and as a metaphor in language when it is used to express that something is to be made solid or fixed. This work studies ways that concrete unforms and operates otherwise than it is colloquially considered to be: solid as rock.

To make something 'concrete' often means that it is rendered precise ("please be more concrete") and/or unchangeable ("let's make this date concrete"). Disability history refuses narratives of unchangeability. The design and construction of the built world has always been political for disabled and trans*gender people: who is on the sidewalk, who is out in public (Bates et al.)? In *Building Access, Universal Design and the Politics of Disability*, Aimi Hamraie tells the story of disabled people and their accomplices driving around in Berkeley, California in the 1970s to take sledgehammers to inaccessible streets in order to cut curbs, repour cement and physically make the streets more accessible (95). Reflecting on this history, Aimi Hamraie asks: "If we take a sledgehammer to the seemingly concretized sidewalks of disability rights history, what layered sedimentations of resistance do we find below?" (ibid. 103). Following these layers of resistance, Hacking Concrete plays with practices of slowing down solidifications in materials and in language to discover openings in structures initially rendered as unchangeable. We have concretized a time to smash the sidewalks apart: how's 19:00 tomorrow for you?
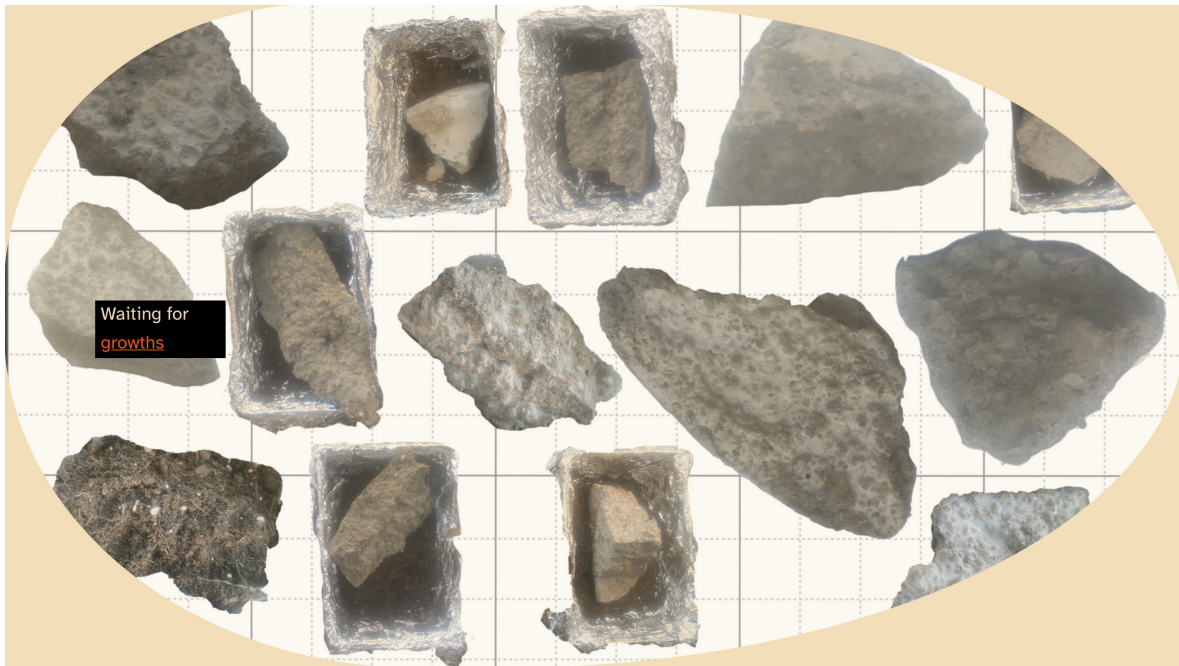
Waiting for
growths

Figure 3: Dried chunks of concrete are displayed on top of a grid. Some of the chunks are inside of rectangular boxes filled with dirt, like they have been planted.

Hacking in this project is a way of practicing crip and trans*feminist intervention towards worlds that are more accessible and joyful. Micha Cárdenas suggests hacking as a political project combining "technological creativity and imagination with activist campaigns and projects" (Tanczer). In line with Remi. M. Yergeau's emphasis that "Bodies are not for hacking. Bigotry is." ("Disability Hacktivism"), we hack bigotry by playfully refusing seemingly closed systems such as the hardened concrete structures of the built world. In *Hacking Concrete* we practice with modes of examining, remixing and studying (Empowermentors Collective) with the aim of refusing and subverting ableism.

Hacking Concrete hacks and remixes concrete towards finding instabilities that can inform pathways towards less oppressive worlds. Disproving concrete's assumed rigidity allowed us to find access and reworlding potentials in a material that surrounds many of us in cities and concurrently restricts access and movement for so many. Informed by the revolutionary work of our trans* and disabled ancestors, this work makes openings to create chances for reforming worlds and hacking concrete towards just presents. Refusing the consolidation (or curing and hardening) of worlds, pathways, lumps and other so called 'stable' things led to holes, gaps, patches and pockets of smell to figure what other propositions for 'making it concrete' might be possible.

Ritual for abolition: Make a list of ways to address harm and conflict in your everyday life that do not relate to punishment or incarceration.

Etching Towards Non-Binary Computing

(http://meltionary.com/meltries/p.html)

"P — Printed Circuit Boards: Etching Towards Non-Binary Computing" is a *Meltry* in which refusing binary logics lit a fuse on material experiments with computational objects.

Computation is often constructed as both binary and immaterial with zeros and ones presented as an undeniable, immaterial grounding basis of computation (Plant). To refuse binary logics and notions of immateriality (Blanchette) we experimented with the material processes that computation involves such as acid etching and soldering towards finding non binary paths for electrons to flow through. Working with printed circuit boards (PCBs), cosmic rays and some DIY etching we looked into slips, interruptions and softenings already evident in computational practice.

We found an accomplice for this work in cosmic rays. Cosmic rays cause trouble with electronics: as high energy (often hydrogen) atomic nuclei, they escape the solar systems of collapsing supernova stars and speed through space at the speed of light. Entering the atmosphere of Earth, cosmic rays interfere with the binary state of computational bits and mess with memory and processing. In processes called bitflipping, a zero is turned into a one and vice versa. Cosmic bitflips occurred in the 2003 elections in Brussels, Belgium (Adler) where 4,000 more votes were cast for the communist party, than there were people in that city district. This example leads us to the conclusion that the universe is not okay with binary logic; and thus we are joining the universe in pursuing non-binary ways towards post-binary computational futures. To do so, we pursued conducive etchings on printed circuit boards (PCBs) that follow waves of inquiry towards non-binary computing.
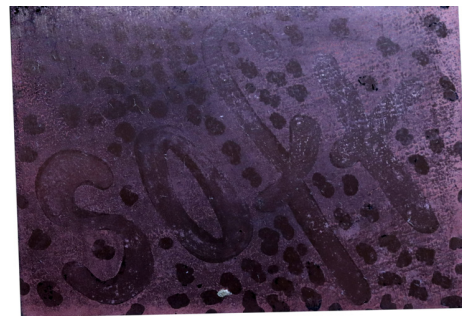
Figure 4: The word "SOFT" is lightly etched into a copper board.

A soft error is an error that doesn't imply that anything is wrong or unreliable about the system that the error occurs in. Soft errors are common, expected, and often caused by cosmic rays. As soft errors happen because of cosmic ways of refusing the binary, they are already working towards non-binary computing. In common computer systems, these interruptions are only possible to be understood as "soft" errors because there is no other legibility for them encoded into technical devices. We attend to these soft errors and wonder: what if problems were not registered as errors but rather as potentials for change? (Ahmed)

Figure 5: A cascading structure has been etched from a copper board and additionally been cut out in Photoshop so that just the tree shape appears as if surrounded by copper.

Figure 6: On a copper board photographed from an angle, multiple treelike structures, the non binary trees, have been etched away. They are more shiny than the rest of the copper.

Non binary trees draw their shapes from particle tracks of cosmic rays. Unlike computational binary trees, which usually split into twos or multiples of twos, the non binary tree has no definite shape. After traveling through space, cosmic rays meet the Earth in patterns that are called cascades or showers. At this point, cosmic rays split into electromagnetic, hadronic and masonic components (Heck) that have shifting, unstable and multiple fractures. We read these cosmic ray cascades as non binary trees that create figures for accounting towards unstable and multi-temporal realities in computing. Etching their shapes into copper boards, we created messy connections and short circuit currents.

In these etched experiments, we played with ways of sensing the spectrum of signals that cosmic rays and the universe are sending towards the Earth. By understanding the material queerness of the universe as expressed through cosmic rays, it became clear that non-binary perspectives in computing are already active.

Conclusion

Understanding coalescing as a practice that acknowledges difference and refuses separability (Da Silva), we suggest to invent and engage rituals that fuse struggles and that resist barriers. As we have pushed back against mechanisms of exclusion, materials have unfolded differently than expected in our experiments: concrete and errors became soft, rituals disordered normative space, and with cosmic rays, we embraced neuroqueer understandings of computing. In our practice refusing is not about pushing back only against certain paradigms but is also about invention with materials towards fusing present conditions otherwise. Refusal links the words re-fuse as resistance and also re-fuse as a bringing together and forming connections. Creating coalitions across difference makes for new connections as we have shown with the example of autistic and trans* work.

We are closing this paper and invite you to fuse with us again what has been separated, by practicing with us across time rituals that help make a future where the possibilities for all nonconforming ways of being flourish. As a final gesture we invite you to participate in one last ritual with us.

Ritual for nonconforming technoscience: Remember the last thing you read that had something to do with technology. Go back and notice its assumptions. Who is included? What world view does this further? How could it be different? What is different in your own approach?

Notes

[1] We are using the term crip to refer todisability as a political orientation and to demonstrate that we share the political vision of anti-assimilationist access that crip theory has formulated (see McRuer; Kafer; Fritsch). When referring to our own embodied experiences we also use vocabulary developed around neurodivergence (Brown; Hamraie; Yergeau; Walker).

[2] Trans* as in trans*gender studies (Stone; Koyama; Stryker), accounts for the fact that gender as it is experienced is more varied than can be accounted for by binary ideologies (Stryker). The asterisk is taken to signify an opening of trans*gender to a greater range of meanings (Tompkins).

[3] We attend to the ways in which ritual practices can be both a resource for the liberatory work of minority groups who push back against ritualized oppressions, and also a way in which oppression becomes normalized by dominant and oppressive culture. In *Dark Matters*, Simone Browne points to "the ritualized practices and trauma of white supremacy" (105) which our praxis specifically attends to and pushes back against.

[4] Transgender exclusionary radical feminists are so-called feminists who believe that gender is assigned at birth. To be clear we understand gender from a trans*feminist perspective that recognizes gender as constructed and self-, contextual- and community- determinate.

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