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Studenting and Teaching with Chronic Pain: Accessibility at the Intersection of Contingency and Disability

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Academic Labor: *Research & Artistry*

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Studenting and Teaching with Chronic Pain: Accessibility at the Intersection of Contingency and Disability

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Abstract

While much attention is given to undergraduate students with disabilities, far less is devoted to graduate students, particularly those who also act as faculty: Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs). This article discusses issues of accessibility encountered by these contingent faculty members, specifically GTAs who have invisible disabilities, and how approaching discussions of contingency and disability with an ethos of transparent vulnerability—a level of transparency that necessarily leads to vulnerability—can help combat the stigma that continues to surround contingency and disability in higher education.

Graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) hold a special place in academia. We are both students and faculty, a dual identity that can be difficult to navigate, particularly when other identities, such as being a person with a disability, converge to create an intersectional reality that highlights the marginality of both contingency and disability (see Breslin et al. for a discussion of intersectionality). In line with this special issue's themes of intersectionality, social justice, and academic labor, this piece focuses on a practice called transparent vulnerability that can help confront issues of accessibility faced by GTAs, particularly those with disabilities, and what we as an academic community can do to improve the situation.

Since I'm discussing accessibility as it applies to two issues—contingency and disability—I think it's important to discuss this concept

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not as I often see it in higher broadly and not as I often see it in higher education research: as a concept linked directly to disability and/or to race and/or to class that is widely discussed as an issue to be aware of when working with undergraduate students and that generally focuses on technological accessibility. So, for this article, I've created a definition of accessibility that extends characterizations of accessibility in disability studies scholarship (such as inaccessible texts and spaces; see Brewer et al. and/or Damiani and Harbour for such characterizations) as well as adapts the traditional dictionary definition of accessibility to encompass both disability and contingency: something or someplace is accessible when someone is able to reach it with minimal impediments. In reverse, this means that the object or space one needs to have or should have access to is unavailable to them. To be clear, the issue here lies with the object or space, not with the individual; however, it becomes the burden of individuals who experience issues with accessibility to make these issues hypervisible and to be advocates for more and better accessibility in higher education. While this may be unfair, it is also an opportunity, one that GTAs who can "pass" as able-bodied, thanks to their invisible disabilities, are in a unique position to take up.

GTAs who live at the intersection of contingency and disability are well situated to combat the stigma that continues to surround both identities in higher education by tackling issues of accessibility. Specifically, we can do this by approaching discussions of contingency and disability with what I call "transparent vulnerability"—a practice that involves self-disclosing at a level of transparency that necessarily leads to vulnerability, a practice similar to the one described by Angelica Paz Ortiz et al. in "Positionality in Teaching: Implications for Advancing Social Justice." In this article, I define transparent vulnerability and describe my experiences as a GTA with a disability, including how I began to practice transparent vulnerability, before discussing GTAs in three ways: as contingent labor, as faculty members with disabilities, and the accessibility issues we face. I then explain how we all can practice transparent vulnerability, including what it can look like and how this approach could effect change, starting with conversations among GTAs.

Before beginning, I want to make it clear that I am not arguing for a mass disclosure of contingent status and/or disability from all GTAs. That would be highly unethical. What I am doing is inviting those who are comfortable and willing to share their experiences in order to make issues of accessibility so visible that they can't continue to be ignored. Then we can work towards creating a truly open and welcoming environment in our academic institutions together.

Transparent Vulnerability

GTAs, both those with disabilities and our able-bodied peers, face issues of access in our current academic climate. In an effort to work towards better spaces in academia, I argue that GTAs who can "pass" as able-

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bodied are in a unique position to address misconceptions about contingency and disability and to tackle issues of accessibility. We can do this by being transparent and, therefore, vulnerable. In a nutshell, transparent vulnerability involves a level of transparency that necessarily leads to vulnerability. This doesn't mean entering a space and immediately disclosing every single thing about faculty status and/or disability, but it does mean practicing a minimum amount of self-disclosure. This practice can be described as a form of positionality born out of intersectionality. In other words, GTAs with disabilities can use the unique positions granted to us by our dual status as both student and faculty member to raise awareness about the intersectional issues we face.

Throughout this article, I will provide examples of transparent vulnerability in practice. This includes examples of how I've embraced this practice, how other GTAs could utilize this practice in specific situations, and how transparent vulnerability can highlight and confront the issues GTAs face in higher education. Finally, I will detail specific approaches to practicing transparent vulnerability in the last section of this article.

Author Positionality

As I write this article, I am in my third year as a Ph.D. student in the Communication, Rhetoric, and Digital Media program at North Carolina State University. Upon entering the program, I received a teaching assistantship as an instructor of record in the first-year writing (FYW) program where I taught ENG 101: Academic Writing and Research for three semesters and am now serving as the Graduate Assistant Director. Teaching FYW as a GTA wasn't new to me as I began as a GTA in another FYW program teaching ENG 1101: Writing and Inquiry in Academic Contexts I and ENG 1102: Writing and Inquiry in Academic Contexts II during the second and final year of my Master of Arts (M.A.) in English program at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. My position as a second-time GTA is also informed by the positions I held during the two years I "took off" between graduate programs, meaning that I have worked at five different institutions teaching FYW and advanced composition throughout the past six years, always as a contingent faculty member of one type or another.

After graduating with my M.A., I found work as a part-time faculty member at Central Piedmont Community College, South Piedmont Community College, UNC-Charlotte, and at a satellite campus for Shaw University, a Historically Black University. While I was able to make enough money to cover my bills, teaching six classes at three institutions was not what I expected for my first semester out of graduate school. I had idealistically anticipated landing a full-time position somewhere and barely knew what an "adjunct"—the official title of at least two of my positions—even was. Little did I know that I had greatly underestimated the state of the job market in my field of composition and rhetoric. It

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wasn't until I completed an independent study on academic labor in the fall 2019 semester that I realized the use of contingent labor in academia had been steadily rising since the 1970s (see Connors; Mendenhall for the history of contingent labor in academia), or that I would have far less job security and no health benefits as an adjunct instructor compared to what I had as a GTA. Returning to graduate school for a Ph.D. allowed me the time and support to learn more about the role of contingency in higher education, information I didn't know I needed as an M.A. student, and time and support I didn't have as a part-time faculty member.

Both job security and health benefits are important to me because I am one of the thousands, if not millions, of faculty members with a disability. When I was 17, I was diagnosed with a chronic pain disorder called fibromyalgia (fibro for short). Most days, this means that it's difficult for me to stand or walk for extended periods of time, so I tend to sit or lean on things to relieve some of the pressure on my knees and back when sitting in a chair for a while isn't an option. This is how my habit of sitting on a table, desk, or podium began, a habit some may see as unprofessional and one I didn't begin until after I graduated from my M.A. program. For me, this not only helps to relieve my fibro pain, it also helps to create an informal classroom environment. Casually sitting on a table sends a different message compared to stiffly standing behind a podium or looming over students from a taller-than-me desk chair; seeing me at ease encourages my students to be at ease, too.

Sitting on the table is also far less awkward than dragging the teacher-desk chair to the center front of the room. I can sit and switch sitting positions as needed—something I can't do much of in the desk chair—and my students can still see me. And I know they can see me because, in the spirit of transparent vulnerability, I disclose my disability to my students on day one to explain why I sit where I do and ask them if they can see and hear me well. In classrooms where sitting on a table isn't an option, I scope out the best places to lean, and I look forward to planned activities during which I can sit for short periods while my students work. Incorporating such collaborative learning activities into my lesson plans began as a pedagogical best practice but quickly doubled as a personal best practice for self-accommodation, an act that is normal for many GTAs with disabilities, both visible and invisible (Fedukovich and Morse). Again, I also let my students know that they can always call me over if they need me since I'm not always physically able to make the rounds.

I find it so important to disclose my disability to my students because they don't usually see it. My fibro, classified as a permanent physical disability, is largely invisible. I experience a low level of pain somewhere every day, but after over a decade of living with fibro—and, more recently, having Gabapentin to help—I'm accustomed to this normal amount of pain and can easily ignore it. My disability only makes itself visible at certain times: (a) when I begin to slow down or limp due to pain and fatigue, (b) when I experience cognitive difficulties from fibro fog (or

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brain fog) that noticeably impair my ability to communicate effectively, and (c) when I have a major flareup that keeps me on my couch.

However, there are times when I make my disability visible through acts of self-disclosure. For example, I have a state-issued handicap placard that always hangs from my rearview mirror, partly because it's hard and annoying to take it down and put it back up, partly because my terrible fibro-addled memory means I'll probably forget, and partly because I've long gotten used to the disbelieving stares I frequently receive, stares that recently intensified when I began to use a walker during the harder days. I also now openly identify as a person with a physical disability and am comfortable having the conversations that live at the core of transparent vulnerability with anyone.

As a GTA in a Ph.D. program, I tell my students, peers, teachers, and administrators why I sometimes have to miss class, why I sometimes don't make sense when I speak, and why it sometimes takes me a while to figure out what I'm trying to say or to recall a word or phrase. I also explain to them why accessibility is so important to me, both as a GTA and as someone with a disability. This is a level of self-disclosure I wasn't necessarily comfortable with as an M.A. student building a professional identity who wasn't sure she wanted her students to know she was a brand-new teacher, or when I was working solely as a part-time faculty member between graduate programs.

I always told my teachers and supervisors about my fibro, but, in the latter case, not until after I had been hired as I was afraid it would hinder my desirability. I also didn't discuss my fibro with my students until/unless I had to cancel class due to a flareup. As an M.A. GTA, I was trying my best to have a good start to what I've always seen as a life-long career and didn't want to be viewed as unreliable or difficult, especially since I needed my paltry stipend to help pay my tuition and fees. As a part-time faculty member, I knew I was easily replaceable and wanted to do everything I could to appear indispensable, especially when I learned what it felt like to have all of my classes bumped to full-time colleagues during my second semester as an adjunct instructor. As a Ph.D. GTA, however, I have guaranteed funding for four years, a level of job security that made me comfortable enough to think about what kind of message choosing to "pass" as able-bodied until I no longer could was sending to my students and peers.

I realized that I was also somewhat "passing" as a full-time faculty member, though not consciously. Other than my email signature containing my institution-issued title of Graduate Teaching Assistant for First-Year Writing or Adjunct Instructor of English, I rarely if ever talked to my students about my position in the university hierarchy and what it meant. In retrospect, I suspect this was an unconscious decision on my part, driven by my awareness of the stigma surrounding GTAs and some non-tenure track (NTT) faculty—particularly part-time NTT faculty holding the title of adjunct instructor—as not being real teachers. This also

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sent a message: that contingent status, like disability status, should be hidden in an effort to gain respect from both students and colleagues. Now, however, I practice transparent vulnerability with my students by talking to them about what my position is and what it means. It helps that my students think being a Ph.D. student is a mythical designation and is therefore cool.

What I want far more than my students thinking I'm cool is for them to understand that as a GTA with a disability, there are a lot of obstacles that I face, and these obstacles impact not only me and other GTAs with disabilities but students as well. If GTAs with disabilities aren't hypervisible and being vocal about what we need and how our universities should be more accessible, nothing will change. As some undergraduate students also face issues of access, and all undergraduate students are the main consumers in a neoliberal university, they make for a major ally in efforts to increase accessibility for all, and GTAs are the best suited to lead the charge if many of us stop attempting to "pass," consciously or unconsciously, as full-time faculty members and/or as able-bodied.

While not all GTAs are fully funded, all of us receive stipends and are usually more valuable to a university than our NTT peers since our successes in graduate studies bring prestige to our institutions (Wright), and we're much cheaper than full-time NTT faculty. As I mentioned earlier, this affords me more job security—along with benefits—as a GTA than as an adjunct instructor of English, especially when considering that I'm largely protected by my primary status as a student. On top of all this, we also take up a large slice of the contingent faculty pie, which means that we're best positioned to take up issues of accessibility with less risk to our jobs, a point that becomes clear when looking at GTAs as contingent faculty members.

GTAs as Contingent Labor

Faculty members with contingent appointments and/or with disabilities have historically faced stigma, discrimination, and issues of access in higher education. These issues and histories have been well explored by scholars like Jay Dolmage, Brenda Jo Brueggemann, Stephanie Kerschbaum, Margaret Price, Robert J. Connors, Seth Kahn, William Lalicker, Amy Lynch-Binieck, and others. In the following section, instead of retelling these histories, I discuss how GTAs uniquely experience these issues. I've chosen to first look at contingency and then disability separately so as to paint a clear picture of each before discussing what they can look like when they intersect (see Breslin et al. 166-168 for discussion of the multiple ways intersectionality can be applied).

While GTAs are typically viewed and studied as a category unto themselves, there are too many similarities between GTAs and other contingent faculty types to place them firmly outside the umbrella of contingent labor (see the introduction to Schell & Stock's *Moving a*

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Mountain for a more detailed description of contingent faculty). The three most apparent similarities are limited contracts, restrictions on how many classes we're allowed to teach, and primarily teaching lower-level courses. In my current program, for example, GTAs are not guaranteed funding through an assistantship after four years; we can only teach nine credit hours a year, not including summer teaching opportunities; and we typically teach 100- and 200-level courses. In addition, many of us are paid stipends that are far too small to survive on, which forces us to have secret side hustles since we also aren't usually allowed to work outside of our assistantship.

Under these contingent conditions, GTAs work from an interesting and frustrating duality of student and teacher and therefore must learn to effectively and efficiently juggle the responsibilities of both identities. We also must choose whether or not to disclose our primary identity as a student to our own students through transparent vulnerability. On the one hand, choosing not to "pass" as another type of faculty member means that we share the commonalities we have with our undergraduate students, lending us credibility when we say that we understand their struggles with college as it is currently, not as it was back when we were undergraduates. On the other hand, it means running the risk of our students not taking us seriously, of them assuming we don't know what we're doing since we are students ourselves.

However, as GTA positions are tied to our graduate education and funding packages that are sometimes guaranteed for a set number of years, I would argue that we have better job security than many other contingent faculty types; unfortunately, living at the intersection of teacher and student means that we also have the added pressures of being good students who bring prestige to our universities through research, publications, retention, graduation, and emerging from an intensely competitive job market with good, secure positions, preferably the gold standard tenure-track positions. In other words, while we're focused on doing well in our teaching assistantships—including lesson planning, grading, and day-to-day teaching activities—we're also working on our own homework, putting our committees together, conducting research, presenting at conferences, figuring out how to publish our work (often for the first time), getting ready for and entering the job market, and trying to make sure we have enough money for bills, food, and student fees that aren't covered by funding packages. As someone who has been both a GTA and a part-time faculty member, life seemed less complicated, though still stressful, when all I had to worry about was being a good teacher.

In addition to our ability to juggle student and teacher responsibilities, and the stress that comes with them, GTAs also have the ability to effect change in academia from a unique space. We are contingent faculty members, our dual status privileges the student status before/above the faculty status, and we're seen as future colleagues by

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many of our instructors. It's true that joining the fight for social justice in higher education could put our academic standing and assistantship in jeopardy, a job security issue faced by all contingent faculty members. As students, though, it's a bit safer for us to do this since we're consumers before employees and have larger numbers, potentially giving us a better chance of being heard by administrators. Doing nothing, however, never leads to change. Take Susan Wyche, for example. In "Reflections of an Anonymous Graduate Student on the Wyoming Conference Resolution," she recounts how she stood up at the Wyoming conference and became the catalyst for a movement that led to the Wyoming Resolution through an act that I would consider to be an example of practicing transparent vulnerability. While many accounts have been written about her as the "Anonymous Graduate Student" to protect her identity as she completed her doctoral degree, this was Wyche's first time telling the story from her point of view for publication. She was one graduate student fed up with GTA labor conditions and mistreatment who could no longer stand silently as the scholars around her seemed indifferent to academic labor issues, and she did so in a time period when GTAs were exploited and abused far more often than we are currently.

Over three decades later, we have graduate student unions across the country, like the Teaching Assistants Association (TAA) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the union at the City University of New York (CUNY), where graduate students from all types of backgrounds and departments come together to stand against unfair labor conditions and other injustices with faculty and staff members (see Martin for the history of academic labor unions). If Wyche alone could begin a process for positive change, then, logically, GTAs standing together with the support of their unions and other allies like our students, faculty, and professional organizations should be able to do far more.

While we've come a long way with pushing against the exploitation of GTA labor, we still have a long way to go when it comes to truly being heard by the academic community. GTA positions will always have a place in our academic structure as spaces in which students gain teaching experience alongside the scholarly and research experiences they gain from their graduate education. Because of this, we—current GTAs and future colleagues—can effect some positive changes from our unique positions, such as making the issues GTAs face hypervisible, including issues related to disability.

GTAs with Disabilities

Disabilities have always endured stigma, defined by Bernice A. Pescosolido et al. as "a mark separating individuals from one another based on a socially conferred judgment that some persons or groups are tainted and 'less than'" (431). While this stigma has noticeably reduced over time, especially in the past century, it doesn't mean that it has disappeared. We're still very much living in an able-bodied world and

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getting our education from able-bodied institutions. This isn't to say that our institutions specifically discriminate against students and employees with disabilities, but that they aren't recognizing the diverse needs of this population. For example, an older university like NC State can do its best to accommodate students in their classrooms through an office of disability services, but if they don't update their campus to make physical spaces more accessible—like adding elevators to parking decks—they're excluding some members of their campus community. Practicing transparent vulnerability could help to make necessary changes to a campus to make it more or fully inclusive for community members with disabilities.

There's also the issue of how the stigma that continues to linger can keep some GTAs from feeling comfortable enough to request accommodations, a fear that Stephanie L. Kerschbaum explores through faculty members with disabilities in "Access in the Academy." Seeking accommodations means disclosing a disability, at least to those from whom one needs accommodations, which can be an uncomfortable situation if someone isn't ready to disclose their disability. For students, this typically looks like an accommodation letter from an office of disability services, but for faculty, it's a more intimate process since such an office doesn't usually exist for us. On top of this, it can be difficult to get effective accommodations, particularly if the faculty member isn't consulted on what would be the most helpful to them (Kerschbaum, "Access in the Academy" 37).

While getting accommodations as a GTA may seem easy on the surface since we're students before we're faculty members, it can instead be complicated administratively by our dual identities. As students, requesting and receiving accommodations may be as simple as going to the office of disabilities with the required pile of paperwork and then handing letters to our professors, but doing the same in our roles as teachers is just as difficult as it is for any other type of faculty. This is compounded by the fact that many GTAs are new to teaching and are trying to build their professional identities and teacherly personas without attracting uncomfortable attention to themselves. The conflict produced by these dual identities could lead some GTAs to feel "even more excluded, isolated, or inclined to 'pass' than undergraduates, if the nature of their disability makes that possible" (Damiani and Harbour 402). These and other feelings lead some GTAs to rely on self-accommodation rather than disclosing their disabilities to get official/legal accommodations from their institution as either a student or an instructor. Casie Fedukovich and Tracey Ann Morse explore how the GTAs with disabilities involved in their study "worried about how disclosing their disabilities might affect their teaching assistantships" (40), believing that self-disclosure of a disability would lead peers and faculty to see them as ineffective instructors. In some cases, losing a teaching assistantship could mean losing the attached funding package and any hope of finishing the degree.

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In less extreme cases, a GTA could be reassigned to a research assistantship that doesn't factor in attendance as much as teaching face-to-face does but also doesn't pay as well as a teaching assistantship. Both cases could lead GTAs to decide that practicing transparent vulnerability is too risky, that it's safer to self-accommodate and, for those who can, attempt to "pass" as able-bodied.

To "pass" or not to "pass," that is the question for faculty members with invisible or hidden disabilities. It was also a question Elizabeth Sierra-Zarella had to answer for herself in graduate school: "[d]enial, shame, social stigma and stubborn defiance against our own limitations motivate many invisibly disabled people to conceal the true nature of their disabilities" (139). Her experience as a GTA with invisible disabilities led her to think and write about how faculty can create inclusive, accessible classrooms, an approach that often benefits all students, not just students with disabilities. Several non-GTA faculty members with invisible disabilities have also written about their experiences with "passing" and self-disclosure. Others discuss personal identification processes and impression/perception management (Olney and Brockelman; Valeras), the ethical and professional challenges surrounding self-disclosure (Lingsom; Tal-Alon and Shapira-Lishchinsky), and how self-disclosure can be used as a teaching strategy in the classroom (Tobin). All of these authors—who, I would argue, are practicing transparent vulnerability through publication—agree that choosing between "passing" and self-disclosure can be a complicated decision to make and is very much situation dependent. It's also a decision impacted by levels of accessibility faculty encounter in academia.

GTAs and Accessibility

As with many terms in academia, "access is a moving target, a concept that sounds promising on its surface yet frequently offers little more than empty gestures" (Brewer 152). In other words, there are innumerable ways to define and discuss accessibility, which is why I began this article with as broad of a definition as I could think of: that something or someplace is accessible when someone is able to reach it with minimal impediments. This section takes this definition and applies it to three particular situations in which GTAs with disabilities experience issues with accessibility: physical spaces, health care and insurance, and job security.

Accessing Physical Spaces

GTAs, especially those who must work as part-time faculty members at other institutions to survive financially, face accessibility issues with professional physical spaces and becoming oriented to new workplaces (see Street et al.). When it comes to on-campus workspaces, GTAs are rarely afforded the private spaces many full-time NTT and T/TT faculty enjoy. For example, when I was at UNC-Charlotte, all FYW GTAs shared desks with at least one other GTA or PT faculty member in a small, former

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computer lab with a single phone to share between all of us. We did, however, have dedicated mailboxes in the building's mailroom. At NC State, we have a larger and nicer dedicated space on the bottom floor of a small building addition, but we have to share our cubicles with at least one peer and share the one printing computer and two desktops with all of our peers. In that space there is no phone, and we have one shared mailbox in another building that most students don't know exists. One way my peers and I at NC State practice transparent vulnerability is by voicing our concerns to our faculty and program administration team through our student association and two student program representatives.

For GTAs also working as adjunct instructors because they are unable to live on the small stipend they receive from their university, stressful working conditions can include teaching at multiple institutions and campuses, having limited contracts that can be canceled without prior notice, unpaid course preparation time, and a general lack of resources, including a workspace. For both GTAs teaching only on their campus and for those teaching at multiple institutions, the lack of access to appropriate workspaces can lead to less face-to-face communication between GTAs and their students and therefore fewer opportunities for GTAs to act as mentors, an issue explored by Amy M. Bippus et al. in "Teacher Access and Mentoring Abilities: Predicting the Outcome Value of Extra Class Communication."

For GTAs with disabilities, numerous issues with accessing physical spaces or being able to work well in them can arise. These issues could manifest as something broader, like a general lack of accessibility on a campus in the form of difficult walking surfaces, or as something more specific, like a tall desk chair one has to climb up into in order to lower it. An issue I recently encountered was a smart podium desk too high for me to stand at without being blocked from my students' view by the large monitor—and that's without it being raised at all since it can also be a standing desk for people taller than my 5'4"—and almost too high for me to be able to hop up onto so I could exist in my preferred teaching spot. That was in an already tiny, cramped computer lab classroom that was difficult for myself and my students to navigate. These were all issues that I addressed in my cohort's pedagogy course as part of a classroom analysis project, a wonderful project that provided all of us with the opportunity to practice transparent vulnerability. Other physical space issues, such as bookbags on the floor blocking walking paths, are often discussed in books and articles focusing on disability issues in academia (see Dolmage's "Mapping Composition" and *Academic Ableism*; Tal-Alon and Shapira-Lishchinsky).

Accessing Health Care and Insurance

While some GTAs have health insurance—though many with questionable coverage—included in their funding packages, those who don't must purchase health insurance, either through their school or

elsewhere, since having health insurance is a student requirement. GTAs with disabilities who have insurance then face an additional obstacle: going to get the health care they need. Attending appointments can mean canceling the classes we teach and/or missing the classes we take, absences that may need to be explained, especially if the disability requires regular visits to a doctor. For GTAs who have not self-disclosed their disability and aren't comfortable with self-disclosing, this can be a situation in which they're forced to either make up an excuse or practice transparent vulnerability before they're ready to. Or, in the case of some teachers who participated in Noa Tal-Alon and Orly Shapira-Lishchinsky's study, they neglect "their commitment to taking medication or to visiting the doctor because they did not want to miss a day of work" (7). For many GTAs, including myself, canceling or missing class due to a disability can quickly and easily lead to anxiety about how students, supervisors, and professors are perceiving our academic performance and work ethic.

Accessing Job Security

As suggested by the term "contingent," every contingent faculty member has a temporary position; the only difference in contingency is the timetable. So long as tenure is held up as the gold standard and the only way to achieve true job security in higher education, job security will be a troubling issue for many contingent faculty members for whom teaching is their main source of income. As a part of just-in-time hiring practices, part-time faculty members are often the last ones to receive teaching assignments and the first to lose their courses to full-time faculty—both T/TT and NTT—and GTA peers when enrollment is low. "The unnecessary scale and scope of practices such as 'bumping' clearly undermine the ability of faculty to prepare for their courses" (Street et al. 6), which is especially problematic when they had little (and unpaid) time to prepare in the first place. While GTAs can also experience bumping, this means our programs shift the responsibilities of our assistantships to another class (or something other than teaching) instead of losing our positions entirely. Plus, not all GTAs find a TT or full-time NTT position first thing after graduation, so becoming a part-time faculty member is just a matter of time for many of us.

Job security can also be impacted by attendance and performance as mentioned above. As someone with a physical disability that is served with a side of mobility and cognitive issues, I find that I'm very self-conscious about canceling or missing class because of fibro. Will my supervisors think I don't take teaching seriously? Will my professors think I'm lazy? Will my students think I'm just blowing them off and/or don't care about them? And how about in the case of Tal-Alon and Shapira-Lishchinsky's participants who neglected their self-care to avoid anxiety-inducing questions like these? Perhaps if more of us practiced transparent vulnerability by being open about the accessibility issues we face and the

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disabilities we live with, we could work together to create a space in which GTAs and other contingent faculty with or without disabilities can feel more included, more secure, and free of worries about job security because of their medical history.

Practicing Transparent Vulnerability

As I mentioned earlier, it would be highly unethical to ask every GTA to practice transparent vulnerability, so this approach requires a minimum level of comfort in discussing faculty status and/or disability with others, either one-on-one or in a group setting, with students, colleagues, supervisors, and/or professors. For example, I disclose my faculty status and disability to each class I teach at the beginning of the semester as part of my introduction. As a GTA, this means talking about how I'm also a student with homework and papers to write; as an adjunct instructor, this means talking about what a part-time faculty member is/does. In both cases, the conversation can include or induce a discussion of labor conditions. This can be especially helpful as students often don't know that there are different types of faculty and, when they do, can't correctly guess their professor's employment status (see Bippus et al.). For my disability, this means explaining what fibro is, how it affects me, and how it could potentially affect our class. Examples include asking my students to let me know if I'm not making sense, asking them to be patient with me as I attempt to catch the words that elude me, or telling them why I can't always give them notice several days in advance of when I need to cancel class due to a flareup.

I'm already as open and honest with my students as I possibly can be about everything else pertaining to our class, such as why we learn what we do and the purpose of activities and assignments, so talking with them about my position as a contingent faculty member and about my fibro is an extension of that. It also opens up conversations about what it means to be a contingent faculty member, what disabilities can look like, how both can impact our academic lives, and why the continued stigma surrounding them is unnecessary and detrimental. My being so transparent about my faculty status and my invisible physical disability does make me vulnerable to criticism and further stigma, but it also allows my students and me to begin effecting positive change through righting misconceptions and removing the mystery surrounding contingency and invisible disabilities.

What I don't tell my whole class is that I have experience with psychological disabilities, too. I spent the majority of my childhood and teenage years battling clinical depression, and I've dealt with mild obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) my entire life. I've also struggled with whether or not it makes me disingenuous to talk about only one of my disabilities, but that's where level of comfort comes into play when practicing transparent vulnerability: I'm very comfortable talking about my fibro, I'm thankful that I don't quite remember what it's like to be

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depressed every day, and I'm very uncomfortable talking about my OCD unless it's the cute I'm-an-organizer-extraordinaire part of my disorder.

However, if a student comes to talk to me about their struggles with either depression or OCD, I disclose my experiences to that particular student to let them know that I sincerely do understand where they're coming from, and that I will by no means judge them. Practicing transparent vulnerability doesn't always mean doing so with an entire group; it can look like having a meaningful conversation with one person at a time. Such conversations let students know that they aren't alone and can help to build or enhance teacher-student relations that are beneficial for both parties (see Abery and Gunson; Spilt et al.). Further examples of one-on-one self-disclosure conversations about disability—what they can look like and how other faculty members experience these conversations—can be found in pieces like Wendy Chrisman's "The Ways We Disclose: When Life-Writing Becomes Writing Your Life," Susan Lingsom's "Invisible Impairments: Dilemmas of Concealment and Disclosure," and Lad Tobin's "Self-Disclosure as a Strategic Teaching Tool: What I Do—and Don't—Tell My Students."

GTAs can also practice transparent vulnerability with their colleagues. Conversations with colleagues, supervisors, and professors can be both more impactful and scarier than conversations with students for the same reason: while we have students for a limited amount of time—sometimes just a single semester or one short session—we work with our colleagues and supervisors much longer; therefore, they have a more direct and longer lasting impact on our professional lives. This can look like talking with other GTAs to determine shared experiences with access issues that a larger group of GTAs could potentially tackle and then expressing concerns with program, department, and upper-level administrators to make such issues hypervisible. While this practice could have a negative outcome, as feared by the faculty members with disabilities mentioned in Kerschbaum's "Access in the Academy," it could also begin or expand conversations about contingency, disability, and access in departments/programs that lead to positive change.

Conclusion

Ultimately, if we don't have more open, public conversations about contingency and disability more often, the stigma clinging to these identities will never fully dissipate. As Kerschbaum says, "[h]aving such conversations is one of the best ways to reduce the misperceptions and lack of awareness that persist around disability, both of which must be reversed if the academy is to cultivate an environment in which disability is truly welcome" ("Access in the Academy" 39). The same can be said about contingency.

Perhaps the best place to begin practicing transparent vulnerability is with each other. There are many graduate student unions in existence across the country, and more are starting up, such as the one at Colorado

State University – Fort Collins described by Zachary B. Marburger in “Away with the Apprentice: Graduate Worker Advocacy Groups and Rhetorical Representation,” or the one that began at my current university around the time I entered my Ph.D. program. One of the best sources of support for a graduate student dealing with the very real stress of graduate life and the looming job market comes from other graduate students. Knowing that we’re not alone is a small thing that can go a long way. Practicing transparent vulnerability with other GTAs on campus and discovering common access issues is the first step to creating a larger conversation across campuses and the country.

For those larger conversations that move beyond GTA circles, no one should be forced to disclose faculty status or disability, and a GTA should only disclose what they’re comfortable with and what they feel is safe, especially since our situations vary from one program, assistantship, and institution to another. For example, I went back and forth for a while on whether or not to self-disclose my OCD in this article. After reading Kerschbaum’s “On Rhetorical Agency” in which she explores self-disclosure in academic writing and after having long conversations with my parents and peers, I decided that while I’m comfortable with disclosing the situations in which I would share my OCD with someone—one-on-one when students and peers share a similar issue with me, or with a supervisor or instructor if my OCD begins to affect my academic/job performance—I’m not comfortable disclosing how my OCD manifests and impacts my life.

It’s important to understand that choosing not to disclose faculty status or a disability—choosing to “pass”—is not disingenuous: it’s a form of self-care. The goal is to eventually transform academia (and, ideally, the rest of the world) into a welcoming and accessible space for all. I would prefer if no GTAs were harmed in the making of that utopia.

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