

Accessible Futures: On Failure, Inclusion, and the Not-Yet

Richard H. Godden

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-3842-3409>

Louisiana State University, U.S.

Godden. 2025. Accessible Futures: On Failure, Inclusion, and the Not-Yet. *New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession* 6.1: 8–11.

https://escholarship.org/uc/ncs_pedagogyandprofession/ | ISSN: 2766-1768.

© 2025 by the author(s). This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial No Derivatives 4.0 license. *New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession* is an open access, annual journal sponsored by the New Chaucer Society and published in eScholarship by the California Digital Library. | https://escholarship.org/uc/ncs_pedagogyandprofession/ | ISSN: 2766-1768.

The editorial staff of *New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession* works hard to ensure that contributions are accurate and follow professional ethical guidelines. However, the views and opinions expressed in each contribution belong exclusively to the author(s). The publisher and the editors do not endorse or accept responsibility for them. See https://escholarship.org/uc/ncs_pedagogyandprofession/policies for more information.

Accessible Futures: On Failure, Inclusion, and the Not-Yet

Richard H. Godden

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-3842-3409>

Louisiana State University, U.S.

Abstract

This short essay reflects on the incomplete and often inconsistent nature of access in academic spaces. It shows how, despite good intentions, access often fails in practice and argues for more thoughtful, flexible approaches to building accessible futures. The essay concludes with additional suggested reading on the topic of access.

Although the title of my article most likely reads as relatively pessimistic, I do want to start with the following observation: as a disabled medievalist and as a wheelchair-user, I find that the field in particular and the Academy in general is far more accessible to me now than it was when I started as a graduate student 25 years ago. The reasons for this include digitization of manuscripts, e-books, video call technologies, and much more awareness about accessibility. However, this statement needs to be qualified in numerous ways. For instance, although the *now* is better than the *then*, one should not necessarily presume linear improvement, and one should especially *not* assume that such improvements will continue inevitably into a wholly accessible future. Further, when an event or space is deemed accessible, we should not assume that the work is done. Most importantly, I would suggest that whenever we use the words *access* or *accessibility*, we should always add an asterisk next to it. In this article, I am going to consider the promises and problems of the idea of access (particularly in relation to academic spaces) through a critical disability studies lens.

Access can often be understood as *accommodation*, as a static and completed *fix* that incorporates, often retroactively, disabled people into a sense of inclusion. I also want to note that, while my own experience centers a certain form of mobility impairment, I hope that some of this discussion is more broadly applicable to questions of access of all sorts, including not just sensory impairment, neurodivergence, and chronic illness, but also economic and other factors. Critical disability studies is less concerned with identifying or predicting disability than it is with discovering and critiquing the structures of power that produce inequity and difference.

Despite the progress I mentioned at the start, I find that, even now, accessibility often veers towards failure, perhaps unavoidably so. On paper, most event venues (for conferences, lectures, workshops, etc.) have accessible entrances, restrooms, and more. But, as Margaret Price describes in her recent book *Crip Spacetime: Access, Failure, and Accountability in Academic Life*: “Disabled academics know” (2024, 1). What, exactly, do disabled academics know? We know that access can mean accommodation, afterthought, alternative, compromise. We know that all pronouncements or assumptions of accessibility always get tested against what Price calls *crip spacetime*, that is, a distinct sense of reality singularly experienced by individual bodyminds. We know that, as Price observes, official statements of *access* (such as policies and signage) tend to be (even with the best of intentions) institutionally or bureaucratically indifferent to the vagaries of *crip spacetime*, that is, they tend to treat disability as stable, identifiable, and predictable (6).

While events or venues might be considered accessible, disabled academics come to their own conclusions by performing a calculus of time, space, and cost. Some of my own calculations are as follows: Would it be worth the time needed to travel to said destination? Would my panel be at a time of day I could manage given certain disability needs? Would there be enough time between sessions to use the restroom or would I need to skip a panel just to do so? Would there be enough space at the front of the room where I was giving my paper for my wheelchair? Would the buildings be accessible and would all required doors (internal and external) be unlocked? Would the ramps actually work for me or would they be too steep or too close to the stairs for my chair to turn comfortably? Would the accessible room at the conference hotel actually *be accessible for me*? Could I procure the additional

funds I need to cover disabled travel? All of these questions have, often unexpectedly, been answered in the negative.

So far, I have focused on in-person events in order to illustrate some problems of access, but even hybrid or virtual events, which could be viewed as an accommodation toward disabled academics or as a way to make events more accessible in general, have their own host of issues. But, because this essay is meant to lay out some key issues in a brief manner, I won't here be able to fully discuss the inevitable access friction involved in some hybrid or virtual academic events. For instance, it seems impossible to make all events at an in-person conference accessible remotely because it is prohibitively expensive to do so, and it is equally challenging to make it feasible for in-person attendees to participate in online sessions, let alone expect them to do so. Further, sometimes people forget to monitor the chat, and software and hardware fail at the worst times. From a broader perspective, institutional support may not cover the registration for an online event, and fully remote conferences might accelerate the drying up of institutional funding altogether. Even when individuals, groups, and institutions have the best of intentions, planning for accessibility and fostering inclusion, access friction can be unavoidable.¹

Although I fear that this short paper is veering towards the genre of complaint, and that I sound like a disabled killjoy, I hasten to add that I am grateful for the opportunity to share some of these thoughts in a journal/platform such as this where the term *access* is interrogated rather than taken for granted. I offer all of this because it feels important to describe just a fraction of how difficult accessibility can be, how it is never quite finished. What suits a disabled person as a quality of access today may not do so tomorrow. The temporality of accessibility, I'd suggest, often takes on the asymptotic curve of the *not-yet*. And so, even with the best of intentions, accessibility may fail. However, this failure recognizes that disability is dynamic, not only in the ways that it changes over time, but also for how it can productively disrupt "business as usual." In closing, I would encourage our readers to reorient our view of access and accessibility. Tanya Titchkosky, for instance, redefines access away from a top-down or unidirectional relation between institutions and individual bodyminds, that is, from access as accommodation, and toward access as "an interpretive relation between bodies" (2011, 3). By further acknowledging the incompleteness of access, its potential for failure can become generative, can be interpersonal and intersubjective rather than institutionally or bureaucratically indifferent. It can be an opportunity for individuals to gather, to plan for and to create accessible futures, not just for disabled academics, but for all of us.

Works Cited

- Price, Margaret. 2024. *Crip Spacetime: Access, Failure, and Accountability in Academic Life*. Duke University Press.
- Titchkosky, Tanya. 2010. "The Not-yet-Time of Disability in the Bureaucratization of University Life." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 30 (3/4). doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v30i3/4.1295.

¹ For a similar discussion regarding the utopian promises of Universal Design, see Richard H. Godden and Jonathan Hsy, "Universal Design and Its Discontents," in *Disrupting the Digital Humanities*, ed. Dorothy Kim and Jesse Stommel (Punctum Books, 2018).

Suggested Reading

- Alexandra, R. A. Lee, E. R. P. Champion, and Doherty-Harrison Hope, eds. 2025. *Towards an Accessible Academy: Perspectives from Disabled Medievalists*, Premodern Transgressive Literatures. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications.
- Bednarska, Dominika. 2009. "Rethinking Access: Why Technology Isn't the Only Answer." In *The Culture of Efficiency: Technology in Everyday Life*, edited by Sharon Kleinman. Digital Formations, 158–69. New York: Peter Lang.
- Godden, Richard H. 2011. "Getting Medieval in Real Time." *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies* 2: 267–77. doi.org/10.1057/pmed.2011.13.
- , and Jonathan Hsy. 2018. "Universal Design and Its Discontents." In *Disrupting the Digital Humanities*, edited by Dorothy Kim and Jesse Stommel, 91–115: Punctum Books. doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv19cwndqv.9.
- Hamraie, Aimi, and Kelly Fritsch. 2019. "Crip Technoscience Manifesto." *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 5(1): 1–33. doi.org/10.28968/cftt.v5i1.29607.
- Kafer, Alison. 2013. *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. Indiana University Press.
- Linton, Simi. 1998. *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity*. New York University Press.