Care, Capacity, and Mental Health in Graduate School in the Wake of COVID-19:

New Materialist Theories and Methodologies

Dissertation

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Abstract

This project explores the mental health experiences of graduate students enrolled in humanities programs in the United States. To this research focus, I apply first the lens of material rhetorical theory, a field of study that seeks to understand connections between and amongst environments, humans, non-human animals, discourses, and objects. Doing so enables an articulation of the various elements with which graduate students come into contact during their study, as well as the influence those elements exert upon students' success and wellbeing. Of primary interest are neoliberal, capitalist ideologies undergirding the functioning of the university institution and promoting unhealthy productivity standards. Then, I discuss the concept of capacity, explored through readings in disability studies, human rights discourses, and legal studies. I do so to offer and examination of what is at stake when graduate students work too much for too little pay, and often subsequently experience a decreased ability to focus on what excites them about their research or take the time to care for themselves.

The next half of this project addresses the qualitative research undertaken, in which I distributed a survey to humanities graduate students across the country and then conducted semi-focused interviews with three survey respondents. In addition

to methods used, I present findings from the gathered data, diving deep into a discussion of barriers to access and mental thriving students identified themselves as facing as a result of their enrollment during COVID-19. I then emphasize the human relationships, rooted in care and mutual support, that sustained these students. Finally, I present the affordances gained through sustained communion with others, particularly as they apply to students' intellectual, emotional, and physical capacity to accomplish their goals while enrolled in their given programs. This communion is the ultimate intervention made through this work—an assertion of the importance of human beings caring for one another within disabling institutions.

Dedication

Dedicated to young Liz, who never dreamed life would turn out to be so

unexpectedly wonderful. I'm glad you're still here.

Acknowledgments

There were many moments throughout my time at Ohio State when I felt uncertain about my ability to make it to the dissertation phase, let alone write the actual document. I struggled to find my place within Rhetoric and Composition, and Disability Studies, as a scholar who had something worth saying, worth listening to. And then came a global catastrophe.

I would like to extend gratitude to the following folks, whose care and support proved invaluable:

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Fields of Study

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Chapter 1. Introduction: Graduate School in the Humanities and the Materiality of Crisis

Scholars have long lamented the mental health crisis in higher education, particularly for students. Much of this crisis is due to American universities' implication in global regimes of capitalism (see Fritsch, 2015; Nishida, 2015; Puar, 2017), which necessitates a sustained focus on graduate labor conditions and programmatic expectations. A search online reveals that the "crisis" extends back several decades, with scholars, students, and journalists alike documenting problematic university workloads and campus-related suicides. Mark Salzer, for example, notes the difficulty mentally ill students face in terms of engaging with their peers and participating in coursework, leading to many students feeling ostracized and no longer able to continue their studies (2010). This remains as true today as it did at the time of Salzer's publication. Coverage in the past few years makes heavy use of the term "crisis," with more and more universities grappling with growing demands for mental health services and pushback against their refusals to take any form of responsibility for the overwhelming difficulties students experience during enrollment, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (Abdu-Glass et al., 2017; Hartocolis, 2021; Xie, 2022). It was not until September 2021

that the Virginia Community College System no longer prohibited schools from offering mental health services (Aslanian & Roth, 2021). In some cases, schools have standing policies to remove students who are receiving mental-health care[1].

Much of the discussion of mental health on college campuses in the United States concerns itself with undergraduate experiences. As important as such realities are to consider and rectify, I'd like to draw attention to the unique plight faced by graduate students, straddling the line between student and faculty as they often do. (For extended cross-disciplinary conversations on faculty experiences with mental disability on campus, see: Skogen, 2012; Thomas, 2014; Price et al., 2017; Lashuel, 2020; Cliburn, 2020; Flaherty, 2020.) Grad students encounter many of the same stressors as undergraduates, though they often do so with higher professional stakes, greater isolation, power struggles, and impossible expectations in terms of workload. Such a workload includes full academic course loads in addition to paid work, such as teaching and administrative duties, upon which their financial support often relies.

The COVID-19 pandemic only heightened these concerns and starkly illuminated universities' prioritization of revenue over human health and safety. Colleges across the nation required students to come to campus for a partially face-to-face enrollment in Fall of 2020, exposing many to the novel coronavirus without

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[1] For more information, Margaret Price documents such policies in Chapter 4 of *Mad at School* (2011).

concern for the lasting effect of the virus, many of which are unknown as the full impact of the illness remains under study. Additionally, many universities instituted widespread budget cuts, particularly harmful to Arts and Sciences colleges without the extensive outside grant funding central to science disciplines, along with layoffs and increased workloads without additional pay for the most precarious folks. Graduate students, for example, were in many cases denied expected raises and cost of living pay increases, despite the millions and billions of dollars in endowments of the schools refusing adequate compensation. Some students also lost their paid positions completely, often with little to no advance notice.

Despite the obvious misfortunes brought on by COVID-19, I want to highlight that this "crisis" is an inherent element of academia, particularly for minoritarian subjects (Muñoz, 1999). In entering university spaces structured for white, cisgender, straight—normative—bodyminds (Price, 2015), people of color and gender and sexuality minorities face the possibility of real harm and trauma. The same may be said of international, non-traditional, low-income, and first-generation students. With a still-frequently-white-and-male canonical curriculum alongside the growing presence of people who do not appear white or male, universities are often set up to other or alienate students. For example, Sara Ahmed details at length how institutions take on the shape of the bodies that inhabit them:

"Spaces acquire the 'skin' of the bodies that inhabit them. What is important to note here is that it is not just bodies that are orientated. Spaces also take

shape by being orientated around some bodies, more than others. We can

also consider 'institutions' as orientation devices, which take the shape of

'what' resides within them" (2007, p. 157).

Institutional spaces, such as American universities, were designed with normativity

in mind; bodies that do not fit the mold are expected to conform, or re-orient

according to the norms of those spaces, often with devastating effects.

Though I cannot fault journalists and other authors who refer to the mental

trauma occurring at university institutions as a crisis, I find this terminology dubious

in that it obfuscates those bad actors who ultimately contribute to mental illness

and disability more directly. University leaders who refuse to acknowledge their

role in students, staff, and faculty mental health or allocate appropriate resources to

combat this trauma and the precarity so many folks face; proponents of cold and

unfeeling capitalistic bureaucracy; productivity expectations promoting near-

burnout transmitted throughout classrooms and offices—these need to be

addressed just as much as student accommodations accessed through the

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) or the (lack of) availability of counseling and

other psychiatric services. Often, too, there are folks working in administrative

positions, acting, perhaps, with good intentions but otherwise unable to

meaningfully alter the institution causing so much pain. Such is the bulldozing

power of bureaucracy. It's difficult for me to regard something as a crisis that has

been simmering for decades. Though we've now reached a boiling point, perhaps

more clearly exposed by the pandemic, folks' concerns are not new or unique to the current era.

As Jay Dolmage writes, universities are inherently disabling institutions in that many folks experience mental illness as *a direct result of their enrollment*. In defining rhetoric as "the circulation of discourse through the body" and articulating how institutional discourse "shapes the bodies within these spaces" (2017, p. 8), he captures one of the mechanisms by which bureaucratic, capitalist, neoliberal ideals and norms affect the bodyminds that populate university spaces. For Dolmage, then, mental illness, and other disabilities, result directly from the mismatch between body and discourse. When a person feels they don't belong or that the labor expected of them doesn't align with their neurocognitive reality, pain can naturally result. Braidotti uses the intriguing phrase "cognitive capitalism": "The practice of labour in such a system is simultaneously highly sophisticated, as it requires cultural and algorithmic fluency, and also highly unregulated and hence open to exploitation" (2019). In other worlds, ablebodied and ableminded expectations produce situations not conducive to thriving, let alone surviving, for many students.

"Covid-19 has worsened the student mental-health crisis," according to a recent article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Brown and Kafka, 2020). In my mind, the reason for this is two-fold. In addition to the issues highlighted above, mainly institutions' violent power and money grabs following the initial lockdown

in the US of March 2020, pandemic life has been most unkind. Folks quarantining themselves have faced extreme isolation and loss of social support, often confined to their homes, which may or may not exist as safe and healthy spaces to begin with. Unemployment has run rampant, with the recent Trump administration and now the Biden administration offering little assistance to those in need. The human stress response has remained activated for nearly two years now, with no end in sight, and this is something we are supposed to "get used to" for the foreseeable future, even beyond the advent of the coronavirus vaccine and available booster shots.

I hesitate to use the phrase "the new normal" (Fisher, 2020; Florida, 2020; CNN, 2020) that has been in vogue since the pandemic began. What is newly "normal" for many has always been the norm for many disabled people in the United States and across the globe. Chronically ill folks in particular have long known the challenges of avoiding sickness by disinfecting spaces and protecting themselves in situations that facilitate the spread of dangerous viruses and bacteria. Their bodyminds possess the knowledge (and often the fears) many people have only recently begun to acquire and which many conservative-minded individuals unfortunately shun. In any case, the truth is that times have been tough for folks and will continue to be tough for folks, despite the fact that productivity expectations have not declined. In many cases, for example, funding has not been extended to graduate students beset by the pandemic, and they are still expected to

find employment in a humanities job market that was already in decline before 2020. It is therefore no wonder that mental illness continues to be a common experience, particularly when considering the fact that mental health care on college campuses remains abysmal in many cases, with students regularly unable to find or afford therapy or psychiatry in other spaces. Such difficulty was only compounded during the pandemic, with even non-university counselors and mental health providers finding their schedules booked solid, unable to accept new patients, regardless of their need (Caron, 2021).

When reviewing all this ink spilled on this issue, I have to ask: are we really in the midst of a "crisis" if it's been ongoing for decades now? Or, have universities been designed to run this way? Are we merely reflecting on the core essence of the American neoliberal university, and if so, especially given our country's inability to turn away from capitalism, how can we protect the most vulnerable among us, ourselves included? Scholars like Lauren Berlant (2007) liken contemporary life across the globe as "crisis ordinariness," characterized by moments in which "experience is simultaneously at an extreme and in a zone of ordinariness, where life building and the attrition of human life are indistinguishable, and where it is hard to distinguish modes of incoherence, distractedness, and habituation from deliberate and deliberative activity" (p. 754). Essentially, crises, defined as moments of trauma and their lingering ramifications on human behavior, are not

discretely confined within static places in time. Instead, they are everywhere, inherently a facet of our contemporary world.

For example, at the time of this writing, I am currently existing alongside and in relation to the following crises, personal, political, and global: COVID-19, ongoing complex post-traumatic stress (c-PTSD), the Russian invasion of Ukraine, generalized anxiety, depression, and dangerous conservative discourses concerning bodily autonomy and heteronormativity. This list is far from exhaustive, but I include here what immediately came to mind. Compassion fatigue[2] seems part and parcel of the crisis ordinariness that threads through our lives, making it difficult for me to identify further traumas if I wish to continue writing.

It's no accident that COVID-19 has revealed the demons lurking within the university machine, including what Kate Daisy Bone calls "the crisis ordinariness of academic work" (2021). Drawing upon Berlant's articulation of "cruel optimism," or the phenomenon of an individual desiring something that is actually "an obstacle to [their] flourishing" (Berlant, 2011, p. 1), Bone draws attention to the "increasingly precarious academic workforce" that is a direct result of "market-driven values and pressures" that subject employees to "efficiency, quality, accountability, and other business-oriented and corporatization changes." In

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[2] The term *compassion fatigue* was first used by Carla Joinson in her discussion of the "secondary traumatic stress" experienced by emergency room nurses through continuous contact with life-altering pain and suffering (1992). Since then, it's been theorized to apply to a variety of professions and life experiences, even beyond healthcare settings.

essence, many academics, including the graduate students who will be discussed throughout this project, come to their work from a place of passion for the subject matter, social justice commitment, desire for self-fulfillment, and/or an interest in self-directed projects and variable working hours. Neoliberalism actively works against such values, supplanting them with financial gain and reputation (though not for the academics, who often remain in precarious positions). Bone's research participants regularly embraced this cruel optimism, seeking ways to adapt, healthfully or not, to the crisis ordinariness of their precarity and the capitalism that cares not for their hopes and dreams.

Ordinary Crisis: Ramifications of Neoliberal Capitalism

This dissertation reflects my exploration of this crisis ordinariness, as experienced by graduate students enrolled in humanities programs in the United States. However, I want to understand more than just the problems they face. In addition, I want to understand individual as well as communal spaces for subversion in ways that I hope move beyond cruel optimism and acceptance of the status quo. Finally, I want to know how humanities methodologies, perhaps emerging from disability studies, enable us to care for one another and combat the mental and physically disabling bureaucracies in which we find ourselves enmeshed.

9

Summed up, the question driving my dissertation project is: *How can we re-imagine graduate study in the humanities in a way that centers mental wellness and thriving?* To this end, a discussion of terminology first becomes necessary: what is meant by "mental wellness"? Who determines what "thriving" looks like? I offer no clear definition of either concept, electing instead to allow research participants to deploy their own understandings of them. As readers will come to see, I directly asked the folks who contributed to my project what mental health means to them, what they interpret as "succeeding" in graduate school. In the interest of facilitating the legibility of my ideas, however, I consider *mental health/wellness* to encompass the ability to cope with life's hardships in ways that feel sustaining to a given individual. For some, this can entail therapy, medication, exercise, hobbies, lying on the floor, eating ice cream, crying, knowing when to take a mental health day, or any number of activities that do not cause further harm to oneself or others. I do *not* take mental health/wellness to mean an *absence* of mental illness or disability diagnoses or experiences, perhaps partially because I have no sense of what such an experience would even look like. Too many of my disabled siblings would be erased from the conversation if such were the case. *Thriving* then can mean anything that isn't undertaken solely for the sake of surviving amidst trauma and crisis, and instead approaches self-actualization, or what folks might consider *happiness*.

Given my own mental health journey as a graduate student, which I will explore in the pages that follow, I have firsthand knowledge of the disabling reality of graduate study in the United States. Thankfully, I also have firsthand knowledge of some of the strategies needed to navigate these programs and institutions, as well as an ability to articulate what's missing and what needs to be changed for the sake of mental health, safety, and equity. I write these lines closer to the end of my study than the beginning; having experienced the process myself, I can both provide a glimpse into the inner workings of graduate study and offer thoughts on re-imagining grad school in the interests of those most harmed by it. People of color, disabled folks, and/or first-generation students, among many other individuals, for example, often experience lasting harm while enrolled in graduate school that is compounded by the other stresses and crises they face throughout their lives.

Many will say that graduate school is *supposed* to be difficult, *supposed* to be rigorous, and they are not wrong. What they are wrong about, however, is that what they may interpret as difficulty, by virtue of their (often white, cis-normative, heterosexual) privilege, is in fact very real psychic damage with potentially lifelong influence. Academic institutions are inherently disabling for many folks, regardless of the many others who have successfully navigated them via social privilege and economic prosperity. They have manufactured the nationwide mental health crisis through practices intrinsic to their goals of amassing the most wealth in the shortest amount of time.

The same authors I cite above in their indictment of Covid-19 as heightening the mental health crisis, Brown and Kafka (2020), point to "resilience training" as a solution to this calamity. What the language of "resilience" and "grit," also deployed in the article, fails to capture is institutions' responsibility for putting students, faculty, and staff at risk (Aubrecht, 2012), particularly those who are BIPOC, disabled, unwell, crazy[3], and/or poor. Resilience training is in fact endemic to neoliberal capitalism. It purports to offer a solution to life's hardships, but it in fact places the blame and responsibility for alleviation upon the individual—the individual already burdened beneath a million other things they are supposed to be doing within the academic system. Indeed, recent research in nursing education suggests that resilience training doesn't appropriately resolve burnout precisely because it ignores environmental factors contributing to workplace fatigue (Taylor, 2019). It's not a far stretch to contemplate how the various human resources-directed "training" sessions we undertake as part of our academic employment inadequately address the burnout threatening so many graduate students and faculty.

As someone who enrolled in an English PhD program at an R1 institution, I have experienced firsthand the disabling effects of graduate study at a "rigorous"

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[3] Here and elsewhere, I deploy terms like *crazy, Mad, mentally ill,* and *mentally disabled* to reclaim language either historically harmful or contemporaneously fraught with stigma. I use them as a mode of solidarity with folks, past and present, who have been harmed, murdered even, by the state institutions designed to "address" mental illness.

university. Importantly, it was during this enrollment that I went through the most profound mental health crisis (a real "crisis" that I'd like to think is not intrinsic to who I am as a person) of my life thus far, one from which I have not fully recovered. Indeed, following Berlant and Bone, I expect to carry the ramifications of my graduate study, both positive and negative, around with me for many years to come.

For evidence of the lingering effects of graduate education and precarious academic employment, I can look easily to the many publications by folks who have left academia[4] and who have reported the leaving to feel like a breath of fresh air. I, for one, would like to breathe fresh air, but I don't want to have to leave my desired profession to do it. Nor do I want any graduate students I serve in the future to feel similarly. Because there are many things I love about what I do, including working directly with students, researching projects close to my heart, and writing (sometimes), I would much rather use my time working toward the improvement of our disciplines than putting out fires set by higher-ups who have no idea what life looks like for those of us in precarity. In many ways, this dissertation is a love letter to myself, for surviving, and for the folks with whom I've developed mutual aid configurations along the way. If, as Jay Dolmage claims, "how we want to

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[4] For a nuanced discussion of "quit lit," including how the genre has been altered by the pandemic, see Lara Mackenzie's recent blog post (2021) on the topic. Though Mackenzie offers an Australian-centric perspective, her post captures well the essence of academia in the United States. Neoliberalism is a global phenomenon.

understand ourselves affects how we construct and experience space (2017, p. 45), we need to seriously consider, perhaps as those who've left have done, the value, beyond monetary worth, of our work and how we can push against the status quo—if and where doing so is possible.

Filtered through the Prism of Rhetorical Theory

When I consider the overwhelming nature of graduate school, with stimuli in the form of expectations and responsibilities seemingly incoming from all sides at all times, I think of theories of entanglement and enmeshment, of ecologies and assemblages—concepts articulated through the field's understanding of material rhetorics. In this section, I will examine what rhetoricians sometimes refer to as "the new material turn" to articulate graduate students' complex and confounding orientation within their respective universities. Though I will later mention a few critiques of our field's movement toward materialist perspectives—most notably that many texts considered canonical appropriate Black and Indigenous knowledges—I nonetheless find it valuable to use a material lens to think through the complicated relationships between discourses, temporal and spatial orientations, physical locales, digital environments, and expectations so central to graduate education. Even if this analysis isn't perfect, it affords methodologies and insights that become useful in teasing apart folks' experiences and in proposing alternative configurations of institutions.

To begin, a definitional footing. Because I am exploring the material-discursive spaces of graduate school, I must first define what I mean by such a space. Karen Barad (2008) makes the case for the term *material-discursive* thusly:

"The relationship between the material and the discursive is one of mutual entailment. Neither is articulated/articulable in the absence of the other; matter and meaning are mutually articulated. Neither discursive practices nor material phenomena are ontologically or epistemologically prior. Neither can be explained in terms of the other. Neither has privileged status in determining the other" (p. 140).

In essence, both the physical reality of bodies and objects and the discursive reality of the words and ideologies that float through and around them exist in inextricable entanglement. *Material-discursive* is a concept I mobilize throughout my dissertation to help characterize the spaces graduate students regularly inhabit and the structuring norms, hidden or visible, bound up in those spaces. Accordingly, I argue that these norms, often mandating hyperproductivity, burnout, inequitable pay, whiteness, and neurotypicality, among others, are inextricable from the physical and digital spaces of graduate school.

Thomas Rickert (2015) refers to this ever-present backdrop as *ambience*. Specifically, "ambience is given a more vital quality; it is not an impartial medium but an ensemble of variables, forces, and elements that shape things in ways difficult to quantify or specify. These elements are simultaneously present and

15

withdrawn, active and reactive, and complexly interactive among themselves as much as with human beings" (p. 7). All elements in a material-discursive situation possess an affective register—or the ability to act upon and with other elements (human, object, animal, etc.) in a space. Whether or not such affective potential is available to our consciousness is a matter of the complexities of a given situation[5], which influences the disclosure (or not) of various actants. I contend that graduate students' capacity for action, agency, and adherence to expected norms is diminished when salient elements remain ambient and undisclosed. For example, one may not know how to act "professionally" in the neoliberal academic institution without professionalism mandates being made explicitly clear in one way or another.

Agency therefore occupies a central space in my exploration of humanities graduate programs. To what degree do graduate students find themselves capable of making real choices within the rigid norms of the academy? What opportunities exist for independence and creativity? Finally, how do constraining elements like a constant and elevated workload reduce the capacity students have to actually complete academic tasks successfully and meaningfully?

To begin exploring this topic, particularly in regard to graduate students' material-discursive entanglements, I first work through the ontological orientations

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[5] Also crucial is our *capacity* to access and understanding these complexities, a topic I will discuss in the next chapter. For now, this footnote serves as a theoretical placeholder that will soon be addressed.

offered by two scholars of agency and new materialism: Karen Barad and Jane Bennett. Barad's (1998; 2007; 2008) articulation of "intra-activity," which "signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies" (2007, p. 33) is useful in conceiving of graduate student agency in relation to the material and discursive agencies present in the environment. Specifically, in contrast to the usual "interaction," which assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede the coming together of matter (including humans, animals, and objects) within an environment, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies "do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action" (p. 33). Barad is also careful to highlight that it is the intra-action of elements in given situations that defines them; they do not exist as distinct "actants" (to borrow terminology from Latour's actor-network theory, 2005), but rather come into being through their coming together at specific times in specific places.

To further our understanding of intra-activity, let's consider the following fictional rendering: a graduate student in their first year enrolled in their history program, while excited at the prospects of a doctoral degree, doesn't quite grasp some of the "rules" they are expected to follow. Let's say this student's name is Montoya. Montoya is the first person in their family to attend graduate school and doesn't know much about what it means to *be* an academic, but they're passionate about the discipline and love teaching. As some of us may know, grad students are "supposed" to network with professionals in their field, often at academic

conferences. This pressure exerts a strong force upon Montoya, potentially impacting their career prospects and opportunities for collaboration and communion with others, whether or not they become aware of such ramifications. But they prefer to spend their time at conferences attending sessions and decompressing in their hotel room. And they don't drink alcohol and therefore don't feel comfortable attending after-hours social events—the very events during which connections are so often forged and strengthened.

For the purposes of this vignette, it doesn't matter if Montoya knows they are supposed to socialize with other scholars in the conference space. They are there to learn and grow as a historian. However, the expectation nonetheless exists, and their refusal to submit, purposeful or not, influences their experience of graduate school through the connections they make (or do not make) and the opportunities that become (or do not become) available to them.

This is a simplistic example, to be sure, but it's one that reveals potential for understanding the hardships grad students face as well as routes for reimagining the very essence of such an education. Sure, it could be considered unfortunate that Montoya possesses not the ability or inclination to network at conferences, but maybe that wouldn't be inherently useful for them in the first place. Perhaps their strength lies in their community or familial ties and their commitment to projects outside the academy. The point here is that they should not be considered a "bad" student, an "unsuccessful" academic; at the same time that they encounter

normative definitions of scholarly existence, they also construct their own

meanings of what it means to be a historian. And the academy is all the richer for

it.

In *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Jane Bennett explores the

vibrancy, or liveliness in enacting agency, of matter thus:

> "to paint a positive ontology of vibrant matter, which stretches
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> received concepts of agency, action, and freedom sometimes to the
>
> breaking point and to dissipate the onto-rheological binaries of
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> life/matter, human/animal, will/determination, and organic/inorganic
>
> using arguments and other rhetorical means to induce in human
>
> bodies an aesthetic-affective openness to material vitality" (2010, p.
>
> x).

Specifically, in generating her theories, Bennett takes up a decidedly anti-

anthropocentric approach, even "overemphasizing," in her terms, "the agentic

contributions of nonhuman forces (operating in nature, in the human body, and in

human artifacts) in an attempt to counter the narcissistic reflex of human language

and thought" (p. xvi). What emerges in this anti-anthropocentrism, then, is a focus

on distributive agency that spans human and non-human actors and calls forth

specific "notions of moral responsibility and political accountability" (p. 21). This

articulation of "distributive agency" proves helpful in thinking through the forces

graduate students encounter and how they shape students' educational experiences

as well as their formation into academics—or professionals in other lines of work. Her words serve as a potent reminder that so much of our existence lies beyond our control or conscious comprehension.

However, my work inevitably focuses on the human, as I cannot forget the high stakes inherent in graduate education, particularly for those from minoritized backgrounds. A common critique of new materialism draws attention to its emphasis on *things*—which, yes, can be fascinating—at the expense of the social justice commitments some scholars consider to be a more valuable use of academic energy.

In any case, I make use of theorists like Bennett, Barad, and Braidotti for their emphasis on agency to better understand and articulate grad students' intra-action with the discourses that make up their lives, exploring the neoliberal, ableist norms at play in graduate school programs across the country. Thinking through Bennett's vibrancy, for example, helps me appreciate human agency as emerging only in relationship to the other human and non-human actants that compose the assemblages that cull together the force of distributed agency. Where Barad provides the focus upon the material context in which graduate students are situated, Bennett serves as a useful reminder that the human is not everything (even if my focus in my project is on the human). Instead, graduate students as humans intra-act with the material-discursive environments of programs and universities alongside other humans.

Thus far, the theories of Barad, Bennett, and Rickert have helped me explore graduate student agency and existence within academic spaces. I'm able to conceptualize the materiality of students in the context of structuring discourses, but I also need to understand how possibilities for action emerge within material-discursive entanglements. As I conceive it, disclosure seems an integral element in knowing when and how to exert agency in the various bodily ways available to graduate students. However, one needs to consider how disclosure operates along classed, racialized, and able-bodied axes. One's ability to notice environmental discourses, whether consciously or unconsciously, is linked to Rickert's articulation of attunement: "there is a fundamental entanglement, with the individuation of particular facets being an achieved disclosure. Thus, wakefulness to ambience is not a subjective achievement but rather an ambient occurrence, an attunement. Attunement can, of course, take place at numerous levels, with consciousness being only one" (p.8). Thus, Rickert provides me with an understanding of the ambient environment of graduate school at OSU: what affective discourses, norms, or expectations are graduate students aware of? Which ones elude their notice? These concerns guide my overarching research questions as I consider how something like the ambient environment of academia influences graduate student mental health.

An Extended Examination of "Agency"

21

Rhetorical studies as a field has historically been influenced by Quintilian's emphasis on rhetoric as belonging to "the good man speaking well" (to paraphrase from *Institutio Oratoria*). Though scholars of feminism, disability studies, and fields focusing on people of color have critiqued virtually every word in that phrase, the discipline writ large remains indebted to this fraught historical lineage. Despite the presence of female rhetors (like Aspasia and Christine de Pizan, to name a few) and disabled figures (such as Hephaestus) throughout rhetorical history, Quintilian's view of rhetoric continues to exert influence today. (To say nothing of the voices and bodies lost or forgotten due to oppression and marginalization, including people of color and/or the working class.) Significantly, any assumptions about just *who* or *what* possess rhetoricity—and, indeed, what even constitutes rhetoric— influence the core concepts scholars of rhetoric mobilize in their theory-making, methodological focus, and pedagogical orientation (Prendergast, 2001; Lewiecki-Wilson, 2003). For the purpose of understanding graduate student agency, success, and thriving from a material lens, I focus in this section on the central construct of *ontology*.

An *ontology*, or understanding of the what-ness of the world, channeled through Quintilian's words, makes problematic assumptions about who or what is worthy of academic respect and theoretical consideration. This in turn influences to whom scholars ascribe *agency*, or the ability to meaningfully take action or exert influence, which ultimately determines where academics focus their research and

what methodologies they employ. More expansive ontologies and understandings of agency ultimately enable us to take on more equitable and accessible research. Increasingly utilizing "contemporary scholarship emanating from the intersections of science studies, feminist studies, and political theory" (Gries, 2015, p. 4), alongside emphases on embodiment and materialism over logo-centric conceptions of discourse, rhetorical scholars have begun grappling with the implications of our field's history. This dissertation project belongs to a tradition that seeks to open space for more capacious ontologies that afford greater care to (ideally) all types of people and the entities—animals, objects, and environments— humans encounter throughout daily life.

To illustrate my growing understanding of agency and to begin to connect it to graduate education, I continue my exploration of new materialist texts. This enables me to articulate the nature of the ontologies frequently deployed in the field and what definitions of agency emerge from their deployment. These works are useful in that they have allowed me to formulate my research questions and move toward a productive conceptualization of graduate student experiences and potential routes for interdependence and care. I also use this section of the chapter to engage works that focus in on a select few issues (such as visual rhetorics and digital circulation, humans' relation to mushrooms, and our relation to the environment writ large) to provide readers with examples of practical applications

of new materialist theorizing beyond Heideggerian philosophy and high-level physics.

What these latter texts reveal is that much of this practical application retains focus on the human, and I include them as a means to reflect on the use of material rhetorics as methodology. This methodology, to be further explored in later chapters, I regard as a social justice-oriented commitment that explores crucial concerns from alternative, perhaps unexpected, perspectives. Human-centered work remains important because, as Sara Ahmed (2007; 2012) reminds us, so many humans are not granted agency under current political, philosophical, and ontological regimes, and because humans are ultimately the actors responsible for "fixing" the planet, it is vital that our theories and methodologies remain human-focused. Therefore, I emphasize a discussion of agency, a concept difficult to entangle from its common definition of deliberate, willful action.

New materialist rhetorical scholarship today frequently cites texts by Barad, Bennett, and Rickert—authors whose contributions I have already begun to foreground in my work, as illustrated earlier in this chapter. Because these scholars provide the backbone for so much academic work in the field, I will briefly explore the ontological understandings they offer the field as well as crucial implications for agency afforded via their theories. Drawing upon Niels Bohr, Barad (2007) seeks to understand "the epistemological and ontological issues that quantum physics forces us to confront, such as the conditions for the possibility of

objectivity, the nature of measurement, the nature of nature and meaning making, and the relationship between discursive practices and the material world" (p. 24). In working through these issues, she introduces the theories of *agential realism* and *intra-action* as a means of re-theorizing humans' place in a larger material world. Specifically naming agential realism as an ontological framework, Barad draws attention to the inextricable links between the "human and nonhuman, material and discursive, and natural and cultural factors in scientific and other social-material practices" (p. 26). Introducing her theory of intra-activity and the inseparability of the various components that form phenomena in the world, she argues that reality cannot be parceled into discrete pieces; it is inherently composed of actors and material-discursive behaviors and cannot be severed from these without becoming something else (2008). Nothing exists apart from the phenomena of which it is part. Things therefore *intra-act* as mutually constituted elements of a larger, emerging whole rather than *interact* as distinct entities.

Understanding human agency as connected to the nonhuman (objects, animals, and environments) and discourse linked to material realities affords an ontology that is "continually reconstituted through our material-discursive intra-actions" (Barad, 1998). Barad's discussion of ontology holds crucial implications for human agency; for her, taking action is a way to intervene in the world's becoming. In a scholarly sense, therefore, her contention that we as humans inevitably co-exist with the nonhuman does not mean that we cannot take action

or exert our agency. Rather, we are not merely the sole actors and influencers of the world, but that's not to say we can't direct our agential energies and academic privilege toward neglected areas of study, including marginalized human populations, but also plants in decaying environments, the technology we create, or our assumed dominance over animal species. According to Barad, "there are no individual agents of change. Responsibility is not ours alone. And yet our responsibility is greater than it would be if it were ours alone. Responsibility entails an ongoing responsiveness to the entanglements of self and other, here and there, now and then" (2007, p. 394). Extrapolated to rhetorical studies, this assertion necessitates scholarly attention to our entanglements and concerted effort to effect change within those entanglements.

Advancing new materialist theories, Bennett (2010) offers an ontology that more explicitly focuses on the vitality of matter: "the capacity of things—edibles, commodities, storms, metals—not onto to impede of block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own" (p. vii). Emphasizing the *thing-ness* of the world, she seeks "to see how analysis of political events might change if we gave the force of things more due" (p. vii). The vitalism piece is crucial, for, as Bennett contends, humans' tendency to view matter as dead or inert has brought about rapid consumption and destruction of the planet (p. ix). Drawing upon Latour's actor-network theory, she, like Barad, troubles binaries between human and nonhuman, highlighting the

assemblages (what Barad might call intra-active entanglements) that ontologically compose the world.

Bennett's assemblages presuppose that all actants are created equal and are equally capable of exerting influence under this ontological orientation that view all entities as equally capable of agency. Foregrounding the agency of worms, electricity, and food, she claims that "a theory of vibrant matter presents individuals as simply incapable of bearing *full* responsibility for their effects" (p. 37, emphasis in original). Bennett thus takes the new materialist ontological understanding of distributive agency (p. 31) to a level that simultaneously affords understandings of neglected topics and agencies and fails to account for the differential agencies of humans and how human beings have disproportionately contributed to the destruction of Earth's natural resources. Such a move has been denounced by critics of new materialism as a "flat ontology"; in assigning equal ontological and agentic footing to *all* humans and nonhumans alike, scholars like Bennett fail to account for humans' responsibility for enacting reparations.

Also taken to task for similarly flattening the ontological relationship amongst humans and between humans and objects is Rickert's *Ambient Rhetoric* (2013). In this work, Rickert introduces *ambience* in place of intra-action or vibrant materiality to his scholarly audience as "an ensemble of variables, forces, and elements that shape things in ways difficult to quantify or specify. These elements are simultaneously present and withdrawn, active and reactive, and complexly

27

interactive among themselves as much as with human beings" (p. 7). Drawing

clearer attention to environment than the previous theorists under discussion, this

articulation of ambience grants agency to the very spaces we as humans inhabit, be

they private or institutional settings, urban or natural locales. Essentially, each

situation contains ambient elements that compose part of our assemblages or intra-

actions—elements that we are more or less aware of, consciously or not. What's

more, these elements differentially disclose themselves to our awareness, thereby

limiting our agency according to what we can know and access.

This intuitively makes sense, but less acknowledged in the work is the

question of *why* certain aspects remain outside human awareness and *who* has

access to disclosure and therefore knowledge and agentic potential. Mobilizing the

concept of *attunement* as "wakefulness to ambience" (p. 8), Rickert does not

explicitly discuss the political entanglements wrapped up in ontological discussions

of ambience and agency. I'd like to clarify here that I do not necessarily consider

these theorizations as ontologically equivalent or as equally applicable to all

situations. Rather, I highlight the similarities in these concepts to illustrate basic

ontological premises that make up the "new material turn" in rhetorical studies.

Each theory offers subtly different implications for agency, but they are similar

enough as to cohesively fall within the purview of new materialism, and so I

mobilize them together to loosely analyze what might be thought of as a new

materialist ontology that considers agency as distributed across actors, and actors as more or less entangled in the coming into being of one another.

Despite critiques of new materialism, rhetorical scholars, canonical or otherwise, retain a human-centered focus. Perhaps this is because totally eschewing the human remains practically difficult; we are ego-centric beings, and I find it difficult to conceive of a reality without people. Bennett, for instance, poses human-centric research questions she believes can be answered through research funneled through her theoretical lens: "Did the typical American diet play any role in engendering the widespread susceptibility to the propaganda leading up to the invasion of Iraq? Do sand storms make a difference to the spread of so-called sectarian violence? . . . Can an avian virus jump from birds to humans and create havoc for systems of health care and international trade and travel?" (2010, p. 107). Such questions enrich a humanistic (or posthumanistic, as Barad specifically names her work, 2007, p. 32) discipline by advancing research questions and scholarly focal points that enable us to better understand human concerns and apply practical caring solutions. Rickert poses the Heideggerian concept of *dwelling*[6], "a mode of thriving—knowing, doing, and making—attuned to what an environment affords" (p. 15). This, too, is a human-centered construct, focused on people in ambient spaces.

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[6] Future iterations of this project will seek to tease apart the distinction between concepts like *dwelling* and *thriving*. For now, however, the two terms appear almost interchangeably throughout this manuscript.

I argue that with this human-centered focus, even with the criticism new materialism often accrues, all three scholars above offer much to rhetorical studies more broadly. Foregrounding issues like dwelling, the agentic potential of nonhuman objects, and the ontological co-becoming of elements (including humans) in constructing material phenomena enables scholars of rhetoric to advance their work in ways that may help improve our health care systems or help us better understand weather's role in influencing human behavior, to borrow from Bennett's questions. Many rhetorical scholars already possess ethical commitments to marginalized populations, be they psychiatrized patients or Black users of digital technology, amongst many others, and a new materialist focus, with its methodological attention to neglected elements, affords new insights that can be used to improve the political realities of humans and potentially bring us all closer to Rickert's notion of dwelling. The uptake of new materialist ontologies and application of canonical concepts like intra-action and vibrant materiality illustrates this feature of the new material turn.

Material Rhetorical Methods

What do the theories outlined in this chapter look like applied concretely to the world around us? In an attempt to answer this question and pave the way for my study of humanities graduate students across the country, I reflect briefly upon the continued uptake of new materialist paradigms. Gries (2015), for example,

explicitly situates her visual rhetorical work within new materialism, claiming that "all things have potential to become rhetorical as they crystallize, circulate, enter into relations, and generate material consequences" (p. 11). Drawing explicitly on both Bennett and Barad, she draws attention to the "distributed rhetorical ontology" (p. 19) embedded in the circulation of altered Obama hope images across a variety of digital spaces.

Gries mobilizes circulation and virality to envision how intra-action and fluid becoming morphs and changes throughout cyberspace, which she studies via methods known as iconographic tracking. Iconographic tracking "is specifically designed to elucidate how images become rhetorical and iconic in the sense that once actualized in multiple versions, they become not only vital actants capable of catalyzing change and producing time (and space) but also readily recognized and culturally and/or politically significant to a wide cultural group" (p. 110). Ultimately, then, Gries's work retains a political and cultural focus despite methodologies that track image circulation rather than the traditional rhetorical focus on human rhetors composing something for a specific audience. In other words, we learn something about human agency, referred to as "actancy" by Gries (p. 87), and how human-created images take up "lives of their own," so to speak, online. Such a methodological and theoretical focus affords greater understandings of human politics, which is crucial in an age where images circulate widely quickly and have proven to influence elections.

Scholars such as Amy Propen and Anna Tsing (2012), while focusing on humans' relationships with the natural environment, remind us of the respect and care we owe the planet. Propen in *Visualizing Posthuman Conservation in the Age of the Anthropocene* (2018), like Gries, mobilizes Bennett's distributive understanding of agency and Barad's agential realism to explore ecological implications for environmental restoration and conservation. Specifically, she wants us to "conceptualize agency in such a way that avoids understanding ethical responsibility as an 'us or them' proposition and acknowledges our entanglement with the material world and all its kind, while also acknowledging the consequences of human knowledge-making in these ecological dilemmas" (p. 15). Agency in any new materialist, posthumanist theory that seeks practical application within the natural environment must account for the destructive consequences of human behavior over time as well as possibilities for future conservation. Interestingly, Propen takes Barad to task a little bit, questioning what the ethical responsibility asserted by Barad involves. Propen argues that "it entails the sort of entanglements in which rhetoric plays a role—in which visual-material rhetorical artifacts intra-act with and within the material world and help produce specific versions of world-making" (p. 11). In essence, rhetorical research methodologies, whatever a scholar's ethical commitment to groups of people or to the planet, must attend to human and the artifacts we create, albeit intra-actively, or encounter and

become entangled with. According to Propen, the very survival of planet Earth depends on it.

Tsing takes an even more specific approach, highlighting how humans have been in interspecies relationships for as long as humans have existed as a species. For example, "cereals domesticate humans" (2012, p. 142), and humans have lived alongside naturally grown fungi for centuries, foraging rather than cultivating the environment, existing in relation to rather than controlling nature. It is this "interspecies frame for our species [that] opens possibilities for biological as well as research trajectories" (p.144). What's more, mushrooms have always been there, at the margins, enriching our lives. This marginal existence, celebrated by Tsing for the pleasure she finds in hunting fungi, provides a research frame beneficial to rhetorical studies, particularly if the field seeks to conduct equitable studies: "*The mushrooms we eat congregate at edges*. Fungi are ubiquitous, but edible and medicinal mushrooms only grow in a few places. Many favoured mushrooms flourish in agrarian seams: between fields and forest, and at the margins of zones of cultivation" (p. 151, emphasis in original). More explicitly put, "biological and social diversity huddle defensively in neglected margins" (p.151), and we as scholars owe it to humanity to conduct research and activism that best serves those, humans or otherwise, neglected and underserved in those margins.

As I hope I have shown throughout this section, the new materialist turn in rhetorical studies, though not uncomplicated by flat ontologies and perhaps a

fetishization of things in some cases (see critiques of object-oriented ontology[7], a

philosophical thread with similar theoretical underpinnings to new materialism),

can be and has been used to enrich understandings of the rhetoricity and agency of

human lives. In "A Phenomenology of Whiteness" (2007), Sara Ahmed highlights

the whiteness of institutional spaces. For her:

> "whiteness 'holds' through habits. Public spaces take shape through
>
> the habitual actions of bodies, such that the contours of space could
>
> be described as habitual. I turn to the concept of habits to theorize
>
> not so much how bodies acquire their shape, but how spaces acquire
>
> the shape of the bodies that 'inhabit' them. We could think about the
>
> 'habit' in the 'in-habit'" (p. 156).

For me, this focus on "inhabiting" hearkens back to Rickert's concept of dwelling,

itself previously articulated by Tim Ingold (2005). Through Rickert's focus on

thriving, as opposed to merely surviving, I contend that while inhabiting spaces,

natural or institutional or private, people alter the essence of those spaces, the

thing-ness of the surrounding objects, to the degree to which they are attuned to

the actors constituting the various assemblages in which they are enmeshed. Thus,

while Ahmed does not work consciously within rhetorical studies, her work is often

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[7] Consider, for example, the following publications: Cole, 2013; Lemke, 2017; Boysen, 2018; Wilde, 2020.

mobilized within rhetoricians' scholarship, leading us toward fruitful and compassionate interests.

I conclude with Ahmed's crucial questions that hold direct import to new materialism: "Who gets to use what? How does something become available to use? Can something be available as a public facility—like a well from which we can draw water—without it being usable by everyone?" (2019, p. 7). Agency is therefore not free and open to everyone. Humans have a handy knack of treating each other poorly, even accidentally, and so it remains the case that rhetorical scholarship, applying the methodological focus on new materialism, must remain human-centered in the interest of securing human rights, dignity, and safety.

A Look Ahead

After studying in-depth the mental health landscape for humanities grad students associated with the contexts listed above, I attempt to answer my guiding question[8], drawing upon disability studies paradigms, particularly those rooted in care and mental health practices. Also drawing upon international research in the fields of feminist studies, philosophy, psychology, and legal studies, my work will be centered upon re-considering the theoretical construct of *capacity,* one that addresses material and medical constraints in taking action and exerting agency, to

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[8]As a reminder: *How can we re-imagine graduate study in the humanities in a way that centers mental wellness and thriving?*

this examination. Because capacity (or capability) holds sway in labor discourses and human rights discourses (Nussbaum, 2013), it is necessary to re-consider what work and/or productivity expectations are feasible for graduate students amidst a shrinking job market and increasing wealth and health disparities on a national and global scale. Capacity, a crucial concept in disability studies (see Miserandino's discussion of spoon theory, 2003, for example), provides the through line for highlighting institutional constraints and violences in our fields, starkly illuminated by universities' handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, and for articulating more caring and equitable routes forward in graduate study.

This study will add to existing knowledge in new materialist theories that address ethical orientations between and amongst humans, animals, objects, and environments, though I will ultimately focus upon the human and environment dimensions. It is my hope, too, that my work will allow for a re-articulation of concepts, such as *disclosure*, and facilitate conversations in the field about new materialist methodologies. With this latter goal in mind, I will apply Adele Clarke's (2003) situational analysis approach to grounded theory to the qualitative data, to be described in the following chapters, I collected from graduate students across the United States.

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36

The data I've collected reveal insights into academia as perceived by humanities graduate students in ways I hadn't consciously considered, despite my own experiences as a Master's and then a doctoral student at two separate American institutions. Though it was because of these experiences that I became interested in the topic of mental health from perspectives rooted in disability studies and material rhetorics, listening to the stories of research participants points toward crucial avenues of analysis and activism at the same time that it validates what I witnessed while enrolled in graduate education.

The story of a disabling academy is my story, and it is also not my story. I have been enmeshed within the rigid capitalist system of university institutions in often painful ways—it was not until my enrollment that I *required* counseling and psychiatric medication in order to survive. I felt overwhelmed by the sheer amount of words I had to peruse on a weekly basis; I struggled to connect with colleagues from wealthier backgrounds than I; and I never exactly understood what was expected of me, despite "putting myself out there." I wrote seminar papers and journal articles, some of which actually did go on to be published, but the extreme emphasis on publishing early in my academic career--especially when I knew this was not the case a few decades ago--often left me feeling insecure and stressed. My peers referenced Derrida and Deleuze during class discussions and used words that were never defined. Meanwhile, there existed an overarching feeling that I wasn't

supposed to ask. To admit that you didn't know something was tantamount to admitting you didn't belong in academia--or so it seemed.

Of course, graduate school wasn't all bad. I had many professors who offered personal support alongside professional workshops designed to further acclimate me to the world of professoring and publishing. I also met some wonderfully kind people, brilliant yet unassumingly so, with whom I remain friends. I'll write about such relationships, where they did and did not exist, in a later chapter, but for now, I want to focus on those elements of graduate education that do not facilitate mental health, and in fact actively work against it.

When I say that the story of academic trauma and exploitation is not my own, I mean that people inevitably experience graduate school differently, in as many ways as there are graduate students. For example, some folks, for whom academia was designed, thrive in these settings. Even folks for whom the academy decidedly was *not* designed thrive here. While I applaud those individuals, with only a twinge of envy, I wish to focus upon those whose experiences have not been so rosy, those whose experiences through into stark relief the systemic violence inherent to academia.

Chapter 2. Capacity as Organizing Concept: Research Methods and Critical Concepts

To develop an understanding of graduate student mental health experiences, I set out to ask the folks who would best be able to address my concerns: the graduate students themselves. It felt imperative to me to incorporate the perspectives and lived experiences of others navigating some of the same systems I navigated instead of relying solely on my own narratives and reflections. Who else found certain theorists inscrutable, and not in a way that some academics tout as "rewarding"? Was there a contingency of folks who also found the exam reading period maddening, isolating, confusing, and obscure? How many other folks had come to feel that they might not belong? Essentially, I could theorize all day about my understanding of graduate students in humanities programs across the country being enmeshed within the material assemblages of academic institutions and discourses—and I certainly will be doing so—but I also wanted gather information about how other students might view those same assemblages. I did not, of course, ask questions in such specialized language, however.

Instead, I conducted survey and interview research to capture the emotional nuances of what it means to grapple with the dissertation project, to inhabit spaces that may feel (and, indeed, may actually *be*) inaccessible and inhospitable, to

struggle to make time for self-care and fulfill home obligations, to maintain boundaries between work and home lives—and to attend to these phenomena all at one and at the same time as fulfilling other expectations and responsibilities set by one's program, university, or discipline.

This emotional nuance, this affective component, represents a core element of my understanding of graduate school. In later sections of this chapter, I will address these topics through the lens of *capacity*, a fraught term in disability spaces but nonetheless useful for articulating components fundamental to the graduate school experience for so many people. I speak here of the cognitive load, the affective dynamics an individual encounters as a direct result of their enrollment in university institutions. This dimension—capacity—will be defined at great length throughout the second half of this chapter, after I have first highlighted the methods involved in carrying out my research and made space for my participants.

I make no claims that my findings are generalizable, as we all inevitably experience academia differently, whether by virtue of our economic (in)security, our race, our gender, our disability status. And these are only a few of the many factors that complicate the way individuals move through graduate school and the degree to which they do so successfully. I use research participants' experiences, as well as my own, as case studies that illuminate the ways academic institutions are designed to reinforce normative hierarchies, the ways they bolster harmful capitalistic realities and discourses, and the ways they are inherently at odds with

what we might variously call mental health, mental wellbeing, or sanity, among other terms. As will be discussed, several disability scholars have theorized the academy's role in disabling many enmeshed within and/or alongside, and negative mental health experiences and diagnoses are absolutely part of that phenomenon. I'll discuss this at greater length later, but for now I will say that for some folks in graduate programs, academia causes very real harm that may or may not be permanent.

I had an interesting conversation with my psychiatrist recently. During one of the many medication adjustment appointments I've had to attend during graduate school—and notably *not* before I enrolled—she suggested that some of my mental difficulties might abate following my graduation, my transition out of my program. I don't know the veracity of this claim, but I trust my practitioner. What I do know is that, should I obtain faculty employment at a new university, I would not want my students, graduate or otherwise, to experience the same hardships I and my research participants have faced.

Learning should be rewarding. At the very least, it should not be painful, and yet we regularly accept traditional hazing rituals, such as candidacy exams (arguably), as part and parcel of doctoral education. For many, the dominating thought is, "I suffered and so should everyone else." This is not to argue that obtaining a PhD shouldn't be a rigorous process; instead, I argue that we need to ascertain what separates rigor from trauma. In their introduction to *Presumed*

Incompetent II: Race, Class, Power, and Resistance of Woman in Academia (2020),

Niemann et al. describe the "context" of universities in the United States:

> "the context can be ugly enough to derail careers and injure physical
>
> and mental health. Such hostile climates are grounded in racism,
>
> sexism, homophobia, and classism. The related behaviors including
>
> shaming, disregard of cultural values, bullying, harassment, trolling,
>
> gaslighting, betrayal, lying, tokenization, coercion, stealing
>
> intellectual property, stealing grants, silencing, and blatant disregard
>
> for university policies and processes" (p. 3).

Many of the behaviors outlined in this list clearly represent "bad" behavior, but

what about practices that cause harm less overtly, like expecting students to "look"

an "act" like professional academics without teaching them what that means or

interrogating the racist and classist undertones of the very concept of

professionalism?

Some people working in academia may overlook the very real effects of

implicit bias, microaggressions, ignorance, institutionalized racism and ableism,

and compulsory heteronormativity. My purpose in this dissertation is to draw

attention to the existence of some of these elements, through material-discursive

analysis and through illuminating the concept of *capacity* as organizing

institutional beliefs about who belongs in academia, who is able to do the work

expected. To borrow terminology from Niemann et al., I explore who is "presumed

incompetent" by academic discourses and policies, and how such presumptions influence graduate program milestones that often feel inflexible and inaccessible.

Capitalism and bureaucracy have exponentially ramped up since the decades during which many long-working professors studied, and expectations for graduate students have likewise done so along with them. The "publish or perish" adage no longer applies solely to professors seeking tenure; graduate students wishing to obtain tenure-track faculty positions often must also be heavily published.[9] Immense pressure weighs upon graduate students in the humanities— and in other disciplines as well—both from academic-specific expectations and late-stage capitalistic requirements for being considered a "successful" member of American society. This dissertation project seeks to foreground these pressures, the degree to which they cause potentially irreparable harm to many graduate students, and the ways such violence has been amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic.

It has been impossible to conduct this research without accounting for the pandemic that uprooted, or ended, so many lives across the globe. During the time I wrote this manuscript, the delta and then the omicron variant of the virus ran rampant through many US regions heavily populated by unvaccinated folks and those who are inoculated but immunocompromised. Worse still have been the pain and death continuing in many other countries. As I will show throughout this text,

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[9] For an in-depth discussion of the quandaries involved with graduate student publications across disciplines, see Flaherty, 2017, published in *Inside Higher Ed*.

graduate students are intertwined within local and global assemblages in which the coronavirus occupies a particularly agentic space, emerging and influencing so much of students' daily lives as well as their interfaces with academic institutions.

In later chapters, I will enumerate the challenges and trauma navigated by folks while existing under lockdown mandates, as represented extensively in the responses I obtained to my distributed survey. The interview data, while in alignment with survey responses, present a slightly different reality in that many interviews were conducted either right before or after vaccinations became widely available in the United States. Because of this, interviewees were in closer proximity to "normalcy" and therefore reported similar yet altogether different experiences as part of the progression from home quarantine to restricted freedom via required mask wearing to the eventual lapsing of all restrictions and thus the ability for many people to traverse society maskless.

Conducting the Survey

To get a baseline sense[10] of how graduate students in the humanities feel about their experiences during program enrollment, I distributed a survey request via disciplinary listservs, including those promoting Disability Studies in Rhetoric and Composition, Writing Studies, the Association of Internet Researchers, and the

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[10] Such a baseline would ultimately serve as the foundation for my theorizing about graduate education. Subsequently, this grounding would be further developed through in-depth interviews and sustained contemplation of new materialist rhetorics and insights generated through my reading in disability studies.

Digital Humanities[11]. I sought American email lists that were geared toward

graduate students or were field-specific within the humanities umbrella. In this

way, I attempted to limit responses to students in humanities programs in the

United States. Once distributed, the survey elicited strong interest, resulting in a

data set of roughly 80 usable responses. In the interest of transparency, I include

the questions asked respondents, edited for brevity's sake, below:

Table 1: Survey Questions

Topic or Question Posed	Sub-Questions and Response Types
Demographic Information	- Are you a first-gen student? - What is your racial ethnic background? - Gender identity? - Sexual orientation? - Do you identify as disabled, with or without a formal diagnosis?
What discipline are you enrolled in?	- How far along are you in your program? - What made you decide to enroll in graduate school?
List a few words or phrases that come to mind when you hear the phrases "mental health" or "good mental health."	Open-ended response
What are some ways that you try to maintain mental health while enrolled in graduate school?	Open-ended response

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[11] For more details on my research methods, see the Appendix, which takes the form of a timeline of my research progress.

How has COVID-19 affected your mental health strategies while enrolled in graduate education?	• Open-ended response
Would you like to be contacted for a follow-up interview or focus group?	• Multiple options for response (or could be skipped entirely

Prior to March 2020, I focused my study solely on mental health experiences, though I would ultimately revise my questions and methods to also include dimensions specific to the coronavirus pandemic. This accounts for the COVID-specific question and the shift in focus of my research beyond *just* university functioning in its standard operation, business as usual. I designed the survey based on the following research questions:

1. How do graduate students in humanities disciplines define "mental health" in the context of graduate school?

2. How do graduate students in the humanities describe their approaches to maintaining mental health while in graduate school?

3. How do graduate students in the humanities describe the supports and barriers that affect them while in graduate school?

Generated from my initial guiding question (*How can we re-imagine graduate study in the humanities in a way that centers mental wellness and thriving?*), discussed in the previous chapter, these questions served as a means to conceptualize current mental health experiences for students who felt compelled to respond to my survey request. Before I could articulate alternatives for graduate

programs, I needed first to understand how things operate presently for a not insignificant number of folks. I therefore developed my survey prompts from these specific research questions.[12]

Ultimately, the survey resulted in a collection of demographic data, diverse in some senses and more normative in others, along with an overarching impression of how graduate students were faring during lockdown. I will discuss these results at length in later chapters, but suffice it to say for now that folks were struggling.

I used the obtained responses to determine which individuals to contact for further study participation. Specifically, in the interest of diversity sampling over representative or generalizable sampling, I selected people who indicated demographic data of those more likely to struggle in academia due to traditional oppressive practices and normative expectations: women, international students, and/or disabled people.

Qualitative researchers often refer to "purposeful sampling," or "the identification and selection of information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources" (Palinkas et al., 2015, p. 2). Specifically, those employing this strategy argue that "identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of

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[12] Remaining research questions will be discussed in the following section of this chapter.

interest" (p. 2) leads to "conceptual robustness" (Benoot et al., 2016, p. 10). This desire for conceptual robustness guided my selection of interview participants. Though I ultimately interviewed only three grad students, the experiences they shared with me proved revelatory, proving that my hypotheses about graduate education were more than speculation based upon what I alone have been through.

Though I cannot draw exact conclusions that reflect what every person experiences, I can triangulate my case studies with education research on graduate student retention and prejudice and bias in the academy, and on the lived experiences of those regularly feeling the burden of academic oppression and/or violence. See, for example, Leonard Cassuto's interrogation of the idea that graduate education is "broken," a continued manifestation of "our collective longing for a brief postwar golden age when a job as a professor was waiting for anyone with a doctorate" (2015, p.2). Though I might disagree with the thought that such a longing is truly representative of all academics today, it's likely true that this ideology holds sway as an overarching discourse organizing institutional practice for decades. Many of us would love to land that dream job of a tenure-track faculty member free to teach and research according to personal passions, though it's increasingly become clear supply cannot meet demand.

Conducting the Interviews

After examining the survey data collected, I selected three respondents to interview via Zoom meetings. Thanks to the pandemic–for once–our growing familiarity with and dependence upon video chat software facilitated remote communication with research participants. Previously, I might have opted to schedule meetings via Skype, the only software I knew how to use, having not realized the immense usability of tools like Zoom. For example, Zoom automatically provided me with an initial transcript of each recorded interview, giving me a starting place for my analysis and cutting transcription labor significantly.

As I did with the survey questions I developed, I include here also a list of the questions I posed to interviewees:

Table 2: Interview Questions

Question or Prompt Posed	Sub-Questions and Probes
What program are you in?	• How far along are you in the program?
How did you choose this program to attend?	• What were your goals when you joined the program?
How would you characterize your experience in graduate school thus far?	• What's been your experience with courses? • with professors? • with peers? • with any other aspects of your enrollment
How did you learn about academic or professional expectations in your program?	• How did you figure that out? • What was the process like?

	• Did you talk to your peers about them? • What were those conversations like?
Tell me about a time when a peer helped you figure out something that wasn't clear.	• What did they help you figure out, and how? • What happened?
Have there been moments when you felt you were not able to meet your program's or institution's expectations?	• Open-ended response
When do you feel satisfied with your work?	• What brings you joy in graduate school? • How do you have fun?
What are your thoughts on mental health as it relates to graduate study?	• Are there things you do to maintain your own mental health? • What do you feel sets you back in terms of mental health?
How would you describe "good" mental health for a graduate student?	Consider someone who does a good job at this: • What do they do? • How do they act?
Where do you see people (administrators, faculty members, staff, other graduate students) promoting mental wellness in graduate school?	• How are people helping and supporting one another?
Identify elements that you think need to be changed to better support graduate students, if any.	• Open-ended response
What other thoughts come to mind as we are having this discussion?	• Open-ended response

These questions enabled me to expand upon what I asked in the distributed survey. Furthermore, interviews did not solely encompass the questions included in this table. Because of the nature of conversation, our discussions often addressed different, yet similar, topics–all of which offered useful insights I might not have otherwise asked for. In any case, these conversations helped me address the following remaining research questions, in addition to the ones outlined in the previous section:

4. How do peer relationships and/or peer networks figure into the mental-health approaches of graduate students in humanities programs?

5. What do graduate students in the humanities identify as sites of potential or needed change, if any?

6. What do graduate students in the humanities understand graduate school to be "for"? In other words, when asked about their reasons for pursuing graduate education in the humanities, what goals (short- and long-term, concrete and abstract) do they express?

Notably, this phase of my research sought to understand sites of joy, collaboration, interdependence, and/or thriving in graduate school, as well as ways to mobilize such sites for potential change.

Demographic Data

Demographic information represented a curiosity of mine, as I wondered whether folks' negative (or positive) mental health experiences while enrolled in graduate programs intersected with marginalized standpoints. Whether enough data have been collected to draw significant conclusions remains to be seen, though I will be exploring throughout this chapter, as well as remaining chapters, the implications of this information. Specific questions posed to survey respondents appear in Figure 1, above.

Nearly three quarters of those who completed the survey indicated they were not first-generation students, with only 28% of participants identifying as such. Roughly three quarters (74%) also selected "White" as representative of their racial/ethnic background. None of this is surprising, given the privilege embedded within graduate school attendance. However, no easy conclusions may be drawn from the whiteness of the majority of survey respondents, as doing so would not account for lived experience or intersectionality[13]. For instance, race alone doesn't reveal whether a person expresses their gender identity comfortably in their academic environment, whether they have sufficient funds to afford nutritious

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[13] Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality" in 1989 to address "the marginalization of Black women in feminist theory and in antiracist politics" (p. 140). Arguing that Black women's experiences could not be understood through the already existing analytical categories of "women" or "Blackness," she highlighted the need to interrogate the ways people can be multiply marginalized by society. Calling for the interrogation of the systems of oppression harming Black women, she urged critics toward addressing these systems as sites of change, away from the bodies of Black women themselves.

meals. It is nonetheless enlightening to consider what kind of folks would feel

comfortable responding to a survey distributed by a person with a white-sounding

name like mine. Everyone who participated in my study would have felt compelled

to do so for a variety of reasons, perhaps due to personal interest in the topic or a

desire to contribute to the knowledge accrued through my research that may

hopefully lend itself to transformation in the academy. Or maybe they were just

bored or procrastinating on their own work.[14]

In my call for survey respondents, I did not openly identify myself as queer

or disabled. Nor did I explicitly articulate my research as seeking queer

perspectives. Perhaps because of this, or perhaps due to some of the concerns just

enumerated, the majority of folks who contributed identified themselves as

heterosexual. In this case, though, the majority was smaller, with only 54% of users

identifying as straight. Exactly one quarter of folks identified themselves as bisexual,

with smaller representation in the asexual, gay, pansexual, and "other" categories.

It has been my, completely anecdotal, experience that academia harbors more

queer folks than in other areas of life–at least in the fields I study. This likely is due

to the tenuous acceptance of identity studies and scholarly theories rooted in

marginalized perspectives, such as queer theory or crip theory[15], as well as the

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[14] I hesitate to admit this is often the reason I participate in activities extraneous to my research.

[15] For an extensive look at queer and crip theories and connections between them, see Carrie Sandahl's "Queering the Crip or Cripping the Queer" (2003).

desire of many folks to share their communities' knowledge in the legitimized

spaces of the university institution. No matter the case, I will devote later sections

of this chapter and manuscript to teasing apart some of these identity features and

considering how they intra-act with university discourses and materialities.

Finally, I asked survey participants to identify, if they felt comfortable doing

so, their disability status. 19% of those who responded claimed such an identity,

which piqued my interest, given the subject matter of the project. Mental illness

has not traditionally been regarded as falling within the purview of disability, but,

thankfully, disability studies and activism has folded Mad experiences into its

theorizing and practice for several decades now. Mad studies[16], a field developed

in alignment with insights generated through the work of disability studies,

specifically addresses concerns held by those who are mentally disabled (or

mentally ill, or *Mad[17]*) and promotes praxis to combat the saneism[18] inherent in

Western societies and institutions.

I will discuss the scholarly work of Mad studies and critical disability studies

in a later section, but for now I will say that I find it curious that so many graduate

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[16] For a look at some of the contours defining Mad studies, see the 2013 edited
collection *Mad Matters: A Critical Reader in Canadian Mad Studies*.
[17] As a reminder, I use these terms, often interchangeably, to align myself with
those who may prefer one over the others, and as a way to reclaim language,
including "crazy," that has historically been used to harm and to Other.
[18] PhebeAnn M. Wolframe (2013) defines saneism as "systemic discrimination
against people who have been diagnosed as, or are perceived to be 'mentally ill.'"
This text also provides an illuminating look at saneism and sane privilege in
university spaces.

students responded to my call and, indeed, articulated profound negative mental health experiences while enrolled in graduate programs during the pandemic. Despite doing so, many of them explicitly chose not to identify as disabled. Whether because common understandings of mental health and disability do not situate the two as overlapping, or because respondents wanted to keep this information private, over 75% of folks marked themselves as non-disabled. (The small remaining percentage reflects those who wished to keep private their relationship with disability.)

Disciplinary Data

Survey participants represented thirty-five academic disciplines, represented in Figure 1, below:

Participant Discipline
- Rhetoric and Composition
- English
- Anthropology
- Sociology
- Communication Studies
- Psychology
- American Studies
- Appalachian Studies, Public History
- Asian Studies
- Bioethics and theology
- Biology
- Classics
- Cultural Studies
- East Asian Culture Studies
- Education
- English Composition and Applied Linguistics
- English Literature
- Health Humanities
- Hispanic Sociolinguistics
- History
- History & Library and Information Science
- Interdisciplinary
- Literary Studies
- Medicine
- Modern Languages and Cultural Studies
- Performance and Performance studies
- Philosophy
- Political Science
- Pre-modern Chinese literature
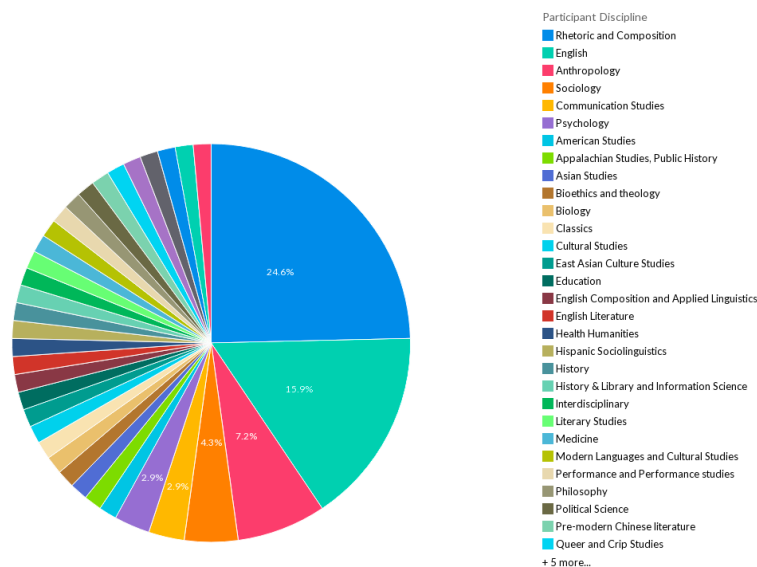- Queer and Crip Studies
- + 5 more...

Figure 1: Participant Discipline

This pie chart reflects the percentage of participants who come from each identified field. The two largest slices reveal that nearly half of the respondents belonged to an English department or a rhetoric and composition program. Other disciplines represented include: cultural studies, communication studies, religious studies, history, and health humanities. Several respondents seemed to work beyond the traditional scope of the humanities, such as the individuals who aligned themselves with medicine, psychology, and sociology. However, given the methodological and theoretical linkages between the social sciences and the humanities, and the growing understanding of the importance of a humanities education in medical school, I have elected to represent these folks' contributions to my study, if only for the purpose of highlighting the affinity such students felt for the humanities as well as the difficulty in establishing clear disciplinary boundaries. If someone wishes to identify themselves as a humanist (or a posthumanist), I am not one to question their decision.

Survey participants' progress through their respective programs spanned the entire spectrum, from having just enrolled for their first year of graduate school to nearly completing their dissertation and preparing for graduation. One respondent noted they had entered the tenth year of their program at the time they completed the survey. Aside from this outlier, however, each year of enrollment (from one to six) and every phase of study (coursework, reading for exams, writing the dissertation, etc.) appears in the data collected. Though, as stated, I seek not a

representative sampling of the American humanities graduate student population,

or a complete picture of their mental health, I find it valuable that folks at various

points in their graduate careers elected to participate in my study. This has ensured

a range of responses that contribute to my understanding of graduate education as

mentally disabling on the whole. Though some milestones might feel more difficult

to reach than others, there is no stage that is widely considered "easy" on one's

mental health. It would be interesting to see future research charting the highs and

lows of folks' mental health experiences as they move through their programs to

help determine which, if such information can be obtained through this work,

elements might require revision for accessibility, equitability, thriving,

collaboration, and/or support.

Selecting the Interviewees

I was fortunate to be able to chat with three graduate students in very

different programs—a robust cultural studies program in a large Midwestern

technological university, a traditional English department on the East coast, and a

small program centered on theology and healthcare ethics at a private institution in

the Midwest. In determining who, from the survey responses I received, to contact

for further study participation, I selected folks who did not meet the criteria of a

"traditional" or normative graduate student. For example, I reached out to folks

who identified themselves as international students, or as queer or disabled.

Though I remain interested in the mental health experiences and material realities

of *all* students, I consider it valuable to include the perspectives of those who have

not historically been represented in American universities, especially at the

graduate level. I wanted to know, following Sara Ahmed's lead, the degree to

which such institutions are shaped by the bodyminds within them and how folks

traditionally marginalized in those spaces navigate them. This latter question

remains an ongoing concern of mine, and though I did not ask my research

participants identity-based questions, their words nonetheless reveal examples of

the kinds of hardships and opportunities faced by so many.

      The first interviewee, to whom I will refer as Carla for the purposes of this

study[19], was an international, first-generation student enrolled in what I would call

a traditional graduate program in terms of structure and organization, with

progression from coursework to exams to dissertation. Interested in critical theory

and cultural rhetorics, Carla decided to continue her graduate education at the

doctoral level upon taking Master's courses that stimulated her desire to learn more

and to conduct research of her own. At the beginning, she had no solid plan for a

career beyond the PhD; getting the degree was her first priority and she'd hopefully

figure out the rest along the way. But then, of course, came COVID-19.

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[19] Here and throughout this manuscript, I have endeavored to omit personally identifying details in order to maintain confidentiality.

Unable to renew her student visa[20] or easily access her research field site,

Carla had to entirely shift the methodological orientation of her dissertation project.

She had no family nearby on whom to rely, living as they did on a completely

different continent, and she could not visit home, due to global travel restrictions

throughout the pandemic and still in place during the time of our interview.

Despite these setbacks, however, she seemed in relatively positive spirits. What

most stood out to me about our conversation was Carla's marked assertion of what

she called "balance" in her working life, as well as the value she placed on

developing strong relationships with her similarly aged peers and with her advisor.

I'll return to these concerns in later chapters.

Next, I interviewed Zoe, a recent American citizen enrolled in an applied

linguistics program. She identified as disabled in her survey responses, though we

only briefly discussed disability during our interview meeting. What I found

remarkable during our conversation (and what I become focused on) was her

discussion of her graduate program: students only attend their university for classes

over the summer–so two months–and then return to wherever they live for the

academic year. During that time, they are responsible for securing their own

employment, though most seem to be able to find teaching positions. Students also

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[20] Carla advised me that "to renew your visa, you have to go back to your country and do an entire visa application process, which I can't do because of COVID."

don't have to take comprehensive exams, and instead create a portfolio with an

article to be subsequently revised for publication.

At the time of our interview, Zoe was nearing this phase of her program and

was almost finished with coursework. I valued her contribution to my study

because as part of my project, I want to think about ways to do graduate school in

the humanities differently. And this program was *very* different. As I'll note in later

chapters, this program's orientation was not without its own faults, and it certainly

wasn't immune to the pandemic's snaking tendrils. Interestingly, the concerns Zoe

revealed were at times not unlike those voiced by other participants, survey and

interview alike. At other times, though, the challenges she faced were directly

related to the alternative figuration of her program–something that helpfully

reminded me there will be no easy fix to the problems afflicting graduate education

in the humanities in the United States.

Finally, I interviewed Josie, a student nearing the end of her study in

theology and healthcare ethics. Much of our conversation centered around Josie's

disability, a chronic illness diagnosed during her stint as a graduate student, and

which flared in proximity to her comprehensive exams. This experience, which I

address at length in the next chapter, colored nearly every aspect of her time

enrolled in her program, leaving her with strong feelings–articulated during our

interview–about the degree to which her university and workload were responsible

for the trauma she faced. While individual people may have worked to ensure an

accessible learning environment predicated on crip time[21], she interpreted the

overarching institution and its bureaucratic policies as cold, unfeeling, uncaring.

Near the end of the interview, as I asked Josie whether we had skipped any

topics she wanted to presently address, she articulated a strong indictment of the

very practice of comprehensive exams, at least in how they currently operate. In

many disciplines, these exams take the shape of a period of intensive reading of

scholarly and/or primary texts deemed crucial to a student's understanding of their

chosen field. Following this, many will then compose an essay or series of essays

within a protracted time frame and then subsequently "defend"[22] this work in front

of their committee. This process is frequently experienced as isolating and

overwhelming–at the very least, it's something that ought not be navigated alone.

I'll return to a discussion of program milestones and how folks might move through

programs collaboratively and interdependently at a later moment.

As stated earlier, I initially focused on demographic data when selecting

potential interviewees, wanting to chat with folks who don't necessarily fit into the

traditional graduate student mold. But the more I think about it, the more I realize

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[21] Crip time, articulated by Alison Kafer in *Feminist Queer Crip* (2013) "involves an awareness that disabled people might need more time to accomplish something or arrive somewhere" (p. 26). It "requires reimagining our notions of what can and should happen in time . . . a challenge to to normative and normalizing expectations of pace and scheduling" (p. 27).
[22] This word–*defend*–has always felt unnecessarily adversarial to me, even in instances where the process is actually more collaborative in practice. If I am ever put in charge of a graduate program, I will promote the use of an alternative word, though I'm not entirely sure what that should be. *Verify*? *Evaluate*?

there are lots of folks enrolled in graduate programs who don't fit that mold. Considering all the queer, BIPOC, and/or disabled folks I met while enrolled myself, I don't know if there's a "typical" grad student–though, either way, universities still expect so many of us to behave in certain ways that don't always, or often, mesh with who we are. Carla, for example, enrolled in a more traditional program, identified many of these mismatches in her program/university in ways that Zoe did not. The former at times felt she did not fit in, particularly in terms of networking, while the latter seemed very pleased with the support offered by her program, even during the academic year when she was not physically present at the university.

I was reminded during these interviews that graduate students can have such *different* experiences of grad school. Because I personally have struggled, I tend to view graduate school itself as unnecessarily overwhelming and complicated, but there are people who do not feel that way. This gives me much to think about, that not everyone experiences their enrollment as harmful–and I wouldn't say that I always inherently did myself–and I need to think more about why certain people thrive while others struggle to survive. The kind of life experiences that become distilled and oversimplified into what we call demographic data cannot be entirely responsible.

In any case, I greatly valued the time spent conversing with Zoe, Josie, and Carla. Not only did I learn a lot from these participants, but the interviewees

seemed genuinely interested in contributing to my research project. I could tell the topics we discussed were of great importance to them, not just because they themselves were graduate students, but also because they'd already identified clear problems with graduate education and had ideas, upon prompting and reflection, about what needs to be changed in academia. Notably, all the participants seemed pessimistic about the possibility of large-scale changes to graduate education in the US, which I find revealing in that I may need to confront the reality that capitalism might perhaps be too great an influence in universities for there to be meaningful change. I certainly feel urged to consider my own place in the academy, particularly the degree to which I contribute to the propagation of such a flawed system.

However, there is much that I respect and appreciate about the work I do, even if I find it difficult and sometimes overly challenging. Academia affords me accessible options for completing work–such as being able to work from home and set my own schedule–at the same time that it proves inaccessible and, indeed, disabling in other arenas. To what degree can academia be simultaneously a site of trauma and also resistance? Where might we see points of pushback, hope, solidarity, creativity, or healing? This project, along with future work I hope to undertake, explores such dimensions for the sake of, perhaps too optimistically, creating a more hospitable environment for folks who come after me.

Mobilizing Capacity

One of the primary concerns motivating my writing arises from my interest in disability studies as an academic field—but also especially in disabled people as folks I care about and whom I'd like to see better represented in the academy. Wherever disabled people gather, whenever they attempt to exert agency over their situations, the frustrating topic of their capacity often emerges. This is why I have so painstakingly charted the social, cultural, legal, and political parameters of the concept, to articulate that the challenges disabled academics face are issues of trauma and human rights. What's more, I admire the field's interrogation and promotion of interdependence as praxis, which contributes to my thinking about the potentiality of graduate students navigating the material realities of graduate school collaboratively.

Thinking through the ecologies in which students find themselves assists in identifying routes of change, particularly as I concern myself with the networks of care such folks can employ to differentially intra-act with the problematic discourses and expectations so readily challenging their health and wellbeing. This entire dissertation project is one that considers what education looks like when we make space for love and care, for doing things together rather than by ourselves (when collective doing is desired, anyway), for seeking different methods of attunement (following my discussion of material rhetorics) to one's environmental actants, human and non-human. With more mindfully networked bodyminds

present in an assemblage, similar to what I will discuss at the end of this chapter, the greater the chance of identifying and interpreting material-discursive actants (review my articulation of disclosure in the previous chapter), and the better the opportunity for successful student (co)agency.

As an aside, it's difficult to discuss a concept like "agency" outside humanistic terms, particularly when such a term frequently connotes taking purposeful action or asserting one's voice or perspective. This definition absolutely forms part of my understanding of agency, but I also want to emphasize the unconscious nature of our actions, the effects upon assemblages of human movement and behavior. And I'll note here as well that my articulation of "assemblage" may come across as neater than I intend; when I consider the linkages that graduate students form, un-form, and re-form with the various elements that comprise graduate education, I envision something messy. An entanglement. Rough connections that ebb and flow over time.

Definition and Discussion

Ultimately, my goal is to understand how materialist theories take shape via and through the bodies and networks of graduate students. Specifically, I think through *capacity* as a guiding focal point in relation to materialist understandings of graduate students' lives and the hidden discourses and norms their lives come up against.

Capacity is the ability to do *something*, the ability to engage in a given activity or thought process. Capacity has been theorized by Jasbir Puar in *The Right to Maim* (2017) as the opposite of debility, which she defines as "the slow wearing down of populations instead of becoming disabled" (xiii). Debilitation is a distinctly racialized phenomenon, as in many parts of the world people of color lack access to "disability" as a state of identity, since disability is usually understood as an event that happens to an individual—with "individual" generally understood in liberal-humanist terms. For Puar, capacity takes on a distinctly neoliberal tone, as nation-states "increasingly [demand] neoliberal formulations of health, agency, and choice—what I call a liberal eugenics of lifestyle programming" (13). In other sectors, though, capacity could conceivably be understood in positive terms, and I intend to explore these differing definitions in my dissertation project. Capacity rendered differently, for example, might mean, in the case of some disabled folks, the ability to live independently, and it is often mobilized within rehabilitative spheres as something to be increased to promote quality of life. It also works as the guiding concept behind Christine Miserandino's spoon theory (2003), which refers to one's possession of available energy, time, and motivation for given undertakings. In essence, a chronically ill or disabled person has the capacity to complete various cognitive and physical tasks based on a certain day's allotment of energy. While I understand the move from Puar's site of study, the Global South, to graduate students in American universities is not simple or without conflict, I intend

to theorize this move with care, drawing upon the thoughtful work of disability

studies (DS) scholars like Alison Kafer and David Mitchell and thinking through the

World Health Organization's International Classification of Functioning.

Capacity is also a concept we see taken up in human rights discourses,

though in many cases it's mobilized under the term *capabilities*, made widely

known by the Capabilities Approach advocated by Martha Nussbaum (1997; 2009;

2013), amongst other human rights theorists. Most notably, theorists of this

approach to human rights advocate for these capabilities as fundamental human

rights, ones that governments around the globe ought to foster. Nussbaum

articulates her ten Central Capabilities as follows: life; bodily health; bodily

integrity; senses, imagination, and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation;

(relations with) other species; play; and control over one's environment (2013, pp.

33-34). Importantly, she explicitly names the capabilities to which she thinks all

humans have a right, noting that these capabilities should be choices made

available to people and not forced upon them.

What's missing from Nussbaum's articulation of capabilities, however, is a

teasing apart of certain assumptions, like *bodily health* or *practical reason*, for

example, both of which hold crucial implications for disabled people, including

anyone experiencing mental health concerns. Caroline Harnacke (2013) critiques

the capabilities approach and the United Nation's implementation of them via the

Disability Rights Convention as maintaining "strong normative commitments about

what human beings essentially are and what is morally relevant about them" (p. 777). Ultimately, Harnacke concludes that the Capabilities Approach, while it initiates discussion about human rights and dignity, it does not adequately guide legal implementation. In any case, there does seem to be some value in discussing this framework in relation to disabled people, as Trani et al. (2010) discuss.

Essentially, the Capabilities Approach does not adequately address instances where governments and institutions lack economic or educational resources to support individuals, or do not agree that certain groups of people deserve human rights. Hartley Dean (2009), for example, argues that the Capabilities Approach, as do so many discussions of capacity, productivity, and other concepts regularly intersecting with disability, is an inherently liberal one and therefore remains deeply embedded in capitalism and all its attendant assumptions about human lives and their economic "purpose" in relation to one another. Specifically, Dean critiques the approach for its (perhaps willful) ignorance of three key issues: "the realities of human interdependency; the hegemonic liberal conception of the public realm; and the extent to which capitalism's global reach is predicated upon exploitative relations of power" (p. 262). Thus, while the Capabilities Approach, dependent upon liberal notions of capacity, props up useful ideas about ways to improve individual lives, it does not account for the reality of human relationships and the complex and often fraught networks we inhabit alongside other people,

both locally and across the globe, and the institutions that either support or oppress

our livelihoods.

Relatedly, Kelly Fritsch (2015), mobilizes the term *neoliberal biocapitalism*

to discuss our enmeshment within these networks and how disability activism

inadvertently contributes to the debility of certain populations, particularly people

of color, by desiring inclusion in the global labor market. For Fritsch, "non-

normative ways of being disabled, forms of disability that do not fit into the neat

packages of a highly mobile, young, wheelchair user working to be independently

productive, are easily dismissed as not truly deserving of benefits or

accommodations within neoliberal biocapitalist economies" (p. 33). Like Puar, she

uses the concepts of debility and capacity to open up "space for analyzing the

ways bodies are differentially produced" (p. 33), arguing that focusing on the

debility/capacity binary over normal/abnormal or abled/disabled binaries offer

more capacious understandings of the function of (bio)capitalism and its rejection

of people who cannot be exploitatively capacitated for labor production.

Stacy Clifford Simplican makes a similar point, though with decidedly less

focus on capitalist participation and more emphasis on citizenship in *The Capacity*

Contract (2015) where she discusses the ways disabled people and allies have

deliberately set themselves apart from those with intellectual or developmental

disabilities in asserting their capacity for "meaningful" civic participation. Part of

this bifurcation developed from early disability activism in which disabled people

69

needed to claim their right as human beings capable of political engagement. This move, however, valuable in gaining disability rights, continues the historical lineage of folks not granted capacity being left out of critical conversations—or worse, institutionalized or killed.

The issue of mental capacity, also referred to as *legal capacity* in legal studies and in juridical applications of the concept intersects with all the above discussions of capacity in the sense that a legal determination of *incapacity* enables an institution to take over decision-making for an individual or to assign those responsibilities to someone else. Because decision-making is so wrapped up in liberal definitions of autonomy (Owen et al., 2009, p. 80), mental capacity becomes important when discussing who gets to be considered a citizen worthy of human rights. This is perhaps why more and more philosophers and physicians highlight the practice of support decision-making, which, when appropriately implemented, makes use of an individual's existing social networks and incorporates certain standards of care to ensure folks aren't being taken advantage of (Gooding, 2013). Crucially, though, the concept of mental capacity as articulation by Nicholson et al. (2008), reminds us that it is disabled people, via physical impairments and psychiatric diagnoses, who are assumed to lack capacity. For nondisabled people, capacity is considered inherent and incapacity must be proven by medical assessment (p. 324). Any discussion of capacity, or capability,

therefore, must account for disability, and, I argue, its enmeshment within global

capitalism and the differential debility of certain populations or groups.

Through my dissertation, I explore these disparate definitions of capacity in

order to understand how graduate student bodyminds (Price, 2015) encounter both

individual bodily and institutional neoliberal conceptions of capacity. What

happens when graduate students' bodies, already classed, racialized, and/or

disabled, inhabit the discourses and spaces of the academy? In academia in

particular, capacity relates to neoliberal mandates for productivity (Nishida, 2015)

within a neurotypical cognitive space (Chen, 2014) regardless the number of

spoons an academic has on any given day. Such factors—expectations of

outlandish productivity, ablebodiment, and normative behavior—construct what I

argue are virtually insurmountable barriers to one of the hallmarks of fulfilling,

stimulating, and creative work: flow, a psychological state articulated by Mihaly

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) that involves complete immersion and enjoyment in a

project.[23]

As previously discussed, Sara Ahmed argues that the environments bodies

move through are far from neutral. Her work, alongside Mel Chen's, provides the

stable basis for my articulation of new materialist theory in a way that can account

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[23] My future work on flow will need to address its relation to capacity and disability to better understand whether flow is achievable or desired by all bodyminds— remembering, of course, that bodyminds are remarkably different from one person to the next.

for the lived realities of graduate students: sure, concepts like intra-action and vibrancy are engaging and enjoyable to consider, but it's important to remember that not all bodies are considered "vibrant" in many public space. Not all bodies are regarded as possessing the capacity for vibrancy. Many norms and essential discourses inevitably remain hidden from the bodies that do not take the shape of institutional bodies. Further, not all folks have the intellectual or mental capacity to pick up on (or adhere to) unspoken or deliberately hidden norms. Autists and other neurodivergent people, for example, benefit greatly from explicit discussion of expectations, and white, middle-class privilege affords white bodies knowledge easily that people of color have to work harder for. Capacity is therefore a racialized and classed construct, in addition to its neoliberal, disability-oriented overtones.

My ongoing thinking about capacity, agency, and knowledge in graduate school is further informed by Mel Chen's *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (2012). Chen defines "animacy as a specific kind of affective and material construct that is not only nonneutral in relation to animals, humans, and living and dead things, but is shaped by race and sexuality, mapping various biopolitical realizations of animacy in the contemporary culture of the United States" (p. 5). Therefore, animation helps me think about just *who* is considered human and who is considered animal, who is worthy of life and who is worthy of death. Animacy thus refers to an actant's capacity for affect and for affecting other

actants, but significantly it also refers to the animality ascribed to many humans throughout history and today. This concept is thus relevant to my work because it accounts for graduate students' disparate lived realities on the basis of marginalization and oppression, which in turn influence individuals' intra-actions with present discourses. Capacity as a construct, then, is heavily modulated by race, disability, gender, sexuality, trauma, and class, amongst other life experiences that bring people closer to or further away from some of the hidden norms embedded in academia, such as productivity and professionalism.

In summary, I mobilize capacity as a key construct in my dissertation for thinking through what it means to be a graduate student bodymind in an American institution. Capacity as a concept already carries scholarly weight in disability studies, particularly in relation to disability itself but also debility as articulated by Puar in *Right to Maim*. It certainly isn't the "opposite" of disability, for disability is capacious in its own right, with complex and nuanced understandings of identity and reality. Importantly, too, disabled people are not incapable of living, let alone thriving. However, disabled people may not always have the capacity for a full range of action when faced with ableist discourses and material spaces, such as public institutions, shaped around non-disabled bodies and minds.

Bennett, for example, may regard all actants present as contributing to the distributive agency of a given assemblage, but I contend, drawing upon Chen and Ahmed, that some people will become blocked from acting fully or within their

best interests based upon knowledge available via disclosure of institutional norms. I'll discuss this a little more carefully in the next chapter. Following that, I will ask—as a means of thinking about ethical future action—how can graduate students dwell vibrantly in graduate school, following Rickert's theorization, and how do they already do so? For Rickert, "dwelling, [Heidegger] tells us, is a mode of thriving - knowing, doing, and making - attuned to what an environment affords" (p. 15). In other words, how can folks thrive in graduate school?

Situational Analysis

Following Adele Clarke's revision of grounded theory (2003), I've elected to conduct a situational analysis of the various elements I regard as significant actants influencing the lives of humanities graduate students. Specifically, Clarke's approach entails a researcher asking "what ideas, concepts, ideologies, discourses, symbols, sites of debate, cultural 'stuff' may 'matter'" in relation to the focus of a given study (p. 563). In asking these questions, it's important to be as thorough as possible:

> "*The goal here is to lay out as best one can all the human and nonhuman elements in the situation of concern of the research broadly conceived.* In the Meadian sense, the questions are: Who and what are in this situation? Who and what matters in this

situation? What elements 'make a difference' in this situation?" (p.

561; emphasis in original).

To facilitate this work, Clarke advocates for mapping out the elements of concern,

allowing for the initial stages to feel messy, incomplete, and/or unwieldy.

(Ironically, this messiness mimics the very nature of the ecological connections I

address in this study.) Clarke also helpfully provides different categories in which to

organize various elements and actors, as she terms them.

Before I collected any qualitative data, I conducted a situational analysis of

graduate school representative of my own experiences and those of my friends and

colleagues. The following table charts this analysis, undertaken starting summer

2020[24] and continued through the time of this writing. Bolded are the actants

explicitly addressed by study participants in surveys and interviews.

Table 3: Situational Analysis

Analytical Category	Key Actants
INDIVIDUAL HUMAN ELEMENTS/ACTORS –	**graduate students in the humanities** **faculty** **staff** **administrators**

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[24] This date is notable because conversations about race and policing in the United States occupied much of our political and cultural focus during this time. Readers may recall the international Black Lives Matter protests prompted by the police murder of George Floyd on May 25th, 2020 in Minneapolis, Minnesota. American universities participated in such conversations, often in ways deemed superficial or unhelpful, which absolutely had ramifications for graduate students of color enrolled in these institutions.

e.g., key individuals and significant (unorganized) people in situation	• **people unaffiliated with academia but still connected to grad students in some way: family, friends, medical professionals, etc.**
COLLECTIVE HUMAN ELEMENTS/ACTORS – e.g., particular groups, specific organizations	• **counseling services** • **universities** • **mental health task forces** • BLM task forces • COVID task forces • US federal, state, and local government
DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS OF INDIVIDUAL AND/OR COLLECTIVE HUMAN ACTORS as found in the situation	• **neoliberal discourses on productivity and individuality** • **individual/personal responsibility** • **mental health/illness/disability stigma** • **apparent value of grad student labor** • **wellness discourses and dialogues on campus**
POLITICAL/ECONOMIC ELEMENTS – e.g., the state; particular industry/ies; local/regional/global orders; political parties; NGOs; politicized issues	• **health insurance policies** • **wages paid to precarious students** • 2020 presidential election in the United States • **austerity measures implemented to counteract pandemic losses** • COVID as a political concern
TEMPORAL ELEMENTS – e.g., historical, seasonal, crisis, and/or trajectory aspects	• histories of exclusion of marginalized peoples from academia • institutional racism • police brutality • histories of ableism and ableist research in universities • **COVID crisis**
	• **Who should pay for mental health care?**

MAJOR ISSUES/DEBATES (USUALLY CONTESTED) as found in the situation	• **Who is responsible for mental health?** • What is the role of police on college campuses?

NONHUMAN ELEMENTS ACTORS/ACTANTS – e.g., technologies, material infrastructure, specialized information and/or knowledges, material "things"	• **COVID-19 (virus itself and wider pandemic)**
	• **work-from-home technologies (accessible/inaccessible)**
	    o **Zoom**
	    o Twitter
	    o Email
	• **healthcare infrastructure available to grad students**
	• face masks
	• delivery services

DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF NONHUMAN ACTANTS as found in the situation	• **failing healthcare system** • **rampant capitalism** • healthcare as right vs. privilege • mask debates
SPATIAL ELEMENTS – e.g., spaces in the situation; geographical aspects; local, regional, and/or global issues	• **Where does work happen? on campus? at home? in cars? in bed?** • **work "space" versus home "space"**
OTHER KINDS OF ELEMENTS as found in the situation	• **specific coping strategies utilized** • **feelings about grad school and COVID** • **mental health diagnoses/struggles in grad school and in the face of COVID** • **reasons for attending grad school**

Even though some actants listed here did not directly come to light during the

study, I nonetheless include them as a way to be mindful of significant elements

77

operating in a student's life that were not specifically addressed in the questions I asked participants.

Throughout this manuscript, I refer to this collective of actants as an assemblage or an ecology. These terms are shorthand for something that cannot easily be rendered: the lives of graduate students and what's at stake in terms of career trajectory, identity, disability, health, educational success, and connection with others. Readers will want to keep in mind that when I use such terminology, I gesture toward this complex and nuanced *mess* called life. The chapters that remain will examine this complexity by analyzing data collected through Clarke's analytical framework.

Chapter 3. "The Kinds of People That Come Out of Graduate School": Case Studies and Situational Analysis

Some will say that you are supposed to give your whole life to graduate school, and especially your dissertation, but what's left when you do? What about everything else that contributes to the mess we call life, the material ecologies that enrich—and complicate—our daily routines and experiences? People often have families to care for, friends to consider, life events to handle, and hobbies to maintain. Some folks work jobs outside the walls of the ivory tower, many have pets to walk and feed, and most require time and space to rest, recharge, sleep, refuel, or otherwise do nothing at all. While conversations occurring around the general topic of graduate education, and academia in general, have begun to address self-care and boundaries, institutional norms and bureaucratic practices remain entrenched, difficult to overturn, let alone chip away at. As an example, a recent article published in *Mason Grad Insider*, for students at George Mason University, endorses nap-taking, spa visits, exercise, and recreational activity as viable self-care practices to use while enrolled in graduate school (Nikita, 2020). These activities, certainly beneficial for one's mental health, require *time*, something often in short supply for grad students. It's not a stretch to see why some

might forego sleep to finish their seminar papers, even at the expense of their own wellbeing.

By consulting some of the folks navigating between these different material commitments, I seek to construct a fuller picture of academia's physical, digital, and ideological landscape as it intersects with (or even overshadows) other elements that construct a student's personal identity. This work not only illuminates challenges faced and harm induced, especially during the COVID pandemic; it also shines a light on both the attempts students make to combat these realities and the spaces where we as academics need to look in order to effect meaningful change and eliminate some of the factors that drive graduate students to psychotherapy in the first place. This is not to say that every hardship can be resolved, as many students likewise face racism, homophobia, classism, and ableism—among other things—in addition to the traumas of education. Rather, I want to focus on tangible solutions, things we can do to try to make life a little easier for those who need the support. Why does graduate school need to be so painful anyway?

In this chapter and the one that follows, I will explore findings from collected survey and interview data as I seek to better understand the material-discursive experiences of graduate students in the US today. In particular, I want to know more about the intra-actions that occur between academic and non-academic actants, between students' scholarly commitments, personal obligations,

and important dimensions (like race, class, first-generation status, disability, etc.) that for their sociocultural identities. The present scope of my dissertation project is too small to provide a definitive conceptualization of all of these features; however, drawing upon the words of research participants and those who have written about their experiences publicly, I provide case studies that I hope will illuminate sites of conflict, avenues for change, a general outline of academic factors that cause harm (or elicit joy), and a blueprint for my future research on graduate education.

I will situate findings within the context of what popular media regularly calls a "mental health crisis" at universities in the United States. Because of my commitment to disability, I'll reference disability studies scholarship critiquing American educational institutions. This work, along with the perspectives offered by research participants, will contribute to my growing situational analysis of graduate school in the humanities, providing the framework for my discussion of the material rhetorics and assemblages propagated by the institution itself. For now, my focus will be on how schools, departments, and/or programs are set up, examining how they inherently interfere with the agentic potential of so many people. Interpersonal relationships and topics of care will be explored in the following chapters. At the moment, though, I wish to set the stage, so to speak, of the monolith entangling graduate students.

The first step of my data collection process entailed distributing the survey I developed—detailed in the previous chapter—to humanities graduate students as

widely as possible across humanities disciplines and across the United States. Importantly, I gathered these responses in the midst of the COVID-19 lockdown, meaning that issues inherent to academia participants faced were foregrounded and exacerbated by the pandemic. Thrown into stark relief, these issues are most telling in that they illuminate mental health struggles faced by many at the same time that they highlight universities' inability to meaningfully support students—and, indeed, faculty and staff—during a global crisis.

Throughout the next section, I will focus on the following: what mental health looks like for American graduate students who responded to the survey and the steps many of them took to maintain (or attempt to maintain) their wellbeing while enrolled as students. Additionally, I will examine the ways coping strategies lost some of their utility or were rendered moot by the pandemic. Of course, part of such loss could be blamed upon lockdown and radical adjustment to bleak circumstances, but I will argue that attending graduate education during this time did not help and, in fact, did much to disable students who may or may not have already been struggling. And even if students were not struggling, academic institutions' responses to COVID, from drastic budget cuts and employment termination to a refusal to offer students compensated time off or extra time for degree completion (amongst many other things), proved detrimental to the mental health of many. In particular, survey responses highlighted the incompatibility between participation in academia and global lockdown.

As a quick aside, I'd like to offer an explanation of how I'm mobilizing the term "lockdown" and what I regard as its influence on societal wellbeing. Throughout this chapter, I use the term as a shorthand way of referring to that period of time, beginning in March 2020, when many American cities mandated the closure of non-essential[25] businesses, including gyms, many restaurants, and local shops. Such a move made sense, especially as medical experts didn't yet know what we were dealing with concerning this novel coronavirus. Representative of the mass panic rippling across the country (and the globe), folks flocked to grocery stores, worried that they wouldn't be able to return for the forseeable future if the virus proved as dangerous as they feared. Schools closed. Hospitals filled to bursting. Life seemed to slow to a crawl. Many people had to simultaneously learn to do their jobs from home while also caring for children. Stuck at home, folks contended with extreme disruptions in their routines, along with the as-yet-unknown spectre of widespread illness.

When I employ a term like "lockdown," I do not mean to imply that the practice of confining ourselves to our homes was inherently detrimental to

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[25]This concept—"essential"—has also been controversial in the US, with debates about who gets to determine what counts as essential, what kind of wages (including what's been called hazard pay) employees deserve while working during a pandemic, and the need for locally-owned small businesses to maintain operations in order to survive. Spaces like gyms and other fitness centers are crucial components of the daily health routines of many, including the graduate students who participated in this study, and, while necessary, the closure of such places eliminated self-care practices they relied upon.

Americans' mental health, as some have argued. On the contrary, slowing down life's operations on a massive scale enabled institutes like the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) in the United States and the World Health Organization (WHO) to research COVID-19 and begin to develop prophylactic and treatment protocols before too many folks contracted the virus. Lockdowns across the globe also significantly decreased the spread of illness (Atalan, 2020; Kharroubi & Saleh, 2020; Huang et al., 2021).

Lockdown practices in the US would eventually transition into what might more accurately be called "quarantine," or a period when individuals had more choice about how long they remained isolated from others and businesses could resume usual working hours, whether virtually or in-person. Mask mandates and social distancing protocols were still in effect during this time, and even when not required to do so, many Americans elected to continue isolating at home for the sake of personal and societal health. This latter period coincided with our growing understanding of virus transmission and treatment, along with the development of several vaccines approved by the US government. People adjusted to their routines, or at least found ways to make quarantine life bearable insofar as they were able to do so. But the fact remains that the initial stage of the pandemic, what I have been referring to as a lockdown, was a time of great upheaval and uncertainty, disruption and rapid change. It felt chaotic and never-ending to many, not just

because we were stuck at home, but because the world was experiencing a crisis. It is this period of turmoil I gesture toward when I refer to "lockdown."

Now, I will shift into a discussion of the barriers (and supports) graduate students can face while enrolled in their programs, with some of these barriers inherent to academic material-discursive practices and others catalyzed by the pandemic. Finally, I will discuss research participants' understandings of what graduate school entails: what it accomplishes, why they initially decided to attend their programs, and why they remain enrolled. In thinking through the latter element, it will be vital to consider academics' *love* for their work—a word frequently used by survey respondents and interview participants when reflecting on their reasons for enrollment—alongside the internalization of one of the academy's most pernicious discourses: quitting makes one a failure. Given the frequent absence of alt-ac preparation for humanities graduate students and the subsequent lack of departmental relationships with non-university places of employment, it's hardly surprising that many students see the professoriate as their only career option.

Mental Health in Graduate School

To begin with, I reflect on the themes offered by survey respondents to qualify what they consider "good" mental health, whatever that phrase meant to them, specifically within the context of their enrollment in graduate programs. Thinking through these terms first enables me to examine the degree to which study

85

participants are able to maintain what they themselves identify as mental wellbeing. In particular, respondents emphasized the importance of self-care, social connection, and physical activity. While not especially surprising, it's interesting to reflect on the lack of these activities in many people's lives during graduate school, and doubly so during the pandemic. Throughout this section, I will include survey responses in quotation marks to indicate the language that comes from others and not from me. Because the survey was taken anonymously, unless respondents wished to provide contact information to participate further, I offer no identifying information aside from what was provided.

Though I write this dissertation past the period of that damaging and traumatic lockdown—as I and many of the research participants experienced it—and so many folks are vaccinated, able to work with others once again, and perhaps better accustomed to pandemic life, it remains nonetheless critical to focus on people's experiences during that time. Again, the reason for this is that two potentially traumatic situations, graduate school and global crisis, came together at a single point in time, exacerbating the effects of each. Importantly, many of the elements identified as crucial for maintaining mental health in graduate school— like going to the gym, connecting with others, and establishing a healthy work-life balance—became impossible.

Already contributing to negative mental health experiences while enrolled in graduate school programs in the humanities are things like "job search; pressure

to publish; poor pay in the academy; financial security; overeducated with no job;" among others, as one survey respondent noted. Further, something like "trauma," according to at least one participant, complicates one's experience with mental health and disability, rendering tasks like "meditation, eating well, and getting sleep," as another respondent highlighted, difficult and almost impossible. Academia, itself already a traumatic experience for some individuals, as discussed in earlier chapters, is clearly incompatible with the traumas so many folks experience as part of their childhood, relationships with others, and often daily lives. People already dealing with microaggressions and/or misogyny are not particularly primed to start graduate school with a baseline of "good" mental health. A few respondents clued into this reality as well, with many focusing on "privilege" as an inherent element of wellbeing and others pointing out that "systemic change" is needed to meaningfully address mental health crises in academia and within our American society.

One participant noted, "It's been difficult for me to maintain my mental health while in graduate school due to the pandemic, elections, protests, as well as the fact I'm working and going to school full-time." During the first half of the pandemic, we as a country faced the collective trauma of illness, prolonged isolation, racial unrest, and the stark possibility of a Trump reelection. It's not surprising that so many folks struggled to keep up with their work, hobbies, personal life, and health at this time. I constantly find myself amazed that I

managed to complete my candidacy exams, distribute my survey, conduct interviews, and analyze data while this was ongoing. In fact, at the time of this writing, the pandemic surges ever forward, with many people still refusing to acknowledge the need for vaccination or even the fact that the coronavirus continues to take so many lives—all facts contributing further to the stress and trauma experienced by graduate students in the United States.

Even everyday tasks, like grocery shopping, attending health appointments and therapy sessions, and keeping the house clean back when we still thought everything required sanitization, became unnecessary sources of stress. On top of the mental strain of isolation and stagnation, many respondents could no longer conduct library research, and even when they could obtain the actual books needed for their work, they were still forced to work at home, as many businesses and universities across the nation closed completely. Childcare, too, took on added dimensions, with many parents required to attend to their children's needs and school concerns *before* being able to do their own work or care for themselves. One respondent, a mother, commented that "mental health has not been on the forefront of my brain as I work to ensure my family's health and safety while trying to manage my workload." Just getting through the day began to feel impossible for many.

Many people who answered my survey call were in a similar situation, feeling the need to continue working despite events occurring across the country

and around the world. "Guilt" was a major factor influencing their behavior, with many highlighting the need to remain productive during a difficult, for the sake of sanity, distraction, and/or the program to which they were responsible. One person emphasized their need to "give in to the workload," for example, while another pointed to their attempts to "try to do something little to remain productive every day, even if [they] don't feel like working." For yet another, "taking days off (and not feeling guilty)" was necessary to their wellbeing during this time, though they didn't indicate whether they achieved success with the not-feeling-guilty part of their response.

Significantly, this situation was even more complicated by the need for respondents to maintain clear work-life boundaries during quarantine. But how does one do so when one must work at home? Achieving balance and maintaining boundaries were two of the most cited necessities for mental health while enrolled in graduate study during the pandemic for the participants. Tellingly, these boundaries involved things like not answering emails past 8 in the evening. While I wish to honor the time needs of others, especially those who may prefer to work later in the day or over the weekend, I often wonder how many of these boundaries are put into place to curtail the feeling of needing to work as much as humanly possible. Such is the nature of "success" in academia.

The same student quoted above as contending with the trauma of the pandemic, nation-wide protests, and the upcoming 2020 presidential election highlighted their coping strategies amid their ongoing stress:

> "I've been focusing on setting and respecting my boundaries such as not staying up past 11 pm doing school work. For the most part, it has worked even though there have been a couple of exceptions. I've also been trying to take breaks while I'm doing school work and listening to my body and what it needs. I've been using aromatherapy to create a good working environment too."

My immediate reaction to this quote was to note the 11pm end to the workday, which stood out to me as horrifyingly late. However, I tempered this shock by reminding myself that perhaps this respondent works best late into the evening. Or maybe that's what I tell myself so as to pretend they weren't working absurdly long hours. In any case, I cannot help but reflect upon so many students' needs to enforce rigid timelines for self-care, almost making preserving one's mental health a form of work in its own right. Already before the pandemic, so many people found it difficult to listen to their bodies' needs and take the time away from work to rest and nourish themselves through breaks, hobbies, exercise, and any other activities they find valuable. Across the surveys, respondents emphasized the negative influence of graduate study upon their mental health, along with their beliefs about what practices they need to engage to counteract the accompanying

stress, trauma, and overwhelm. Unfortunately, though, many participants did not possess the time or energy necessary to adequately care for their mental health, with the pandemic only exacerbating these challenges.

However, one thing I don't want to overlook is the sometimes positive experience folks had with working from home during lockdown and receiving the attendant accommodations enabling them to do so. Among the benefits cited by some survey respondents during the pandemic include: extended time to relax, easier means of communication and participation in classes while at home, increased attention to mental health strategies in a way previously ignored, more time to devote to writing (especially for those working on their dissertations), no need to commute to campus or work, increased time to pursue hobbies and other interests, more time spent with family, and distance from toxic productivity environments.

Illustrative of several of these factors, one student's response highlights enormous life change:

> "Due to the pandemic, I had to cancel 6 months of long-term fieldwork that posed a financial strain on myself and that I did not want to do because it meant living away from my home and my partner. I was grateful to have a 'legitimate' reason to go home. It allowed me to start writing my dissertation sooner because I knew nothing was going to go back to normal soon to let me finish my

91

fieldwork. Finally, it put my grad school funding in massive

uncertainty, causing me to apply to non-academic jobs for fear of

financial stability over the year. I landed a job with my city's contact

tracing efforts and I'm making a salary double my grad school

funding and feel like I'm learning real-life skills. This pay boost has

massively improved my and my family's mental health. Also, being

away from academic spaces allows me the distance I need to be able

to see what is important. I no longer stress about the perfect

dissertation or pleasing my advisor because I'm not surrounded by

that (frankly toxic) energy."

I quote this response in full because it emphasizes so much of what is harmful

about graduate school, academia writ large, and our societal impulse toward

exploitative labor conditions: intense pressure to succeed and impress others, toxic

productivity, lack of sufficient funding, and immense workload. I further include it

because it highlights the potential positive outcomes of stepping away from

graduate education and academia by both physical distance and in terms of one's

career. Even though this person still pursued scholarly work at this time, they were

able to immerse themselves in alternative priorities and therefore (arguably)

approach dissertation work with a healthier mindset.

For disabled folks, in many ways, the pandemic was a boon in terms of the

accommodations they needed before COVID-19 spanned the globe. Where before,

working from home was difficult and often impossible—or so employers claimed—now people received the accommodations needed to thrive in their work (Campoamor, 2020; Bramwell, 2021; Bohra & Willingham, 2021). The same held true for disabled survey respondents as well. One participant found that "more people are willing to chat on video calls," potentially easing some of the stressors of graduate seminars. Another person who self-identified as autistic and otherwise disabled reported the following:

> "Making the trip to school every day is tiring and being around people all day is even more tiring. Being able to just Zoom in has been perfect - I've been absent for one class day this semester when I normally expect 6+ absences per course. This kind of unprecedented flexibility is really allowing me to thrive."

For this graduate student, the accommodations provided by the necessity of university closures and therefore the need to work and attend class from home afforded greater accessibility and bodily energy.

Finally, those respondents, identifying as disabled or not, who received mental health care previously and in a few cases *because* of graduate school (according to their own words), reported what they perceive as healthier coping responses to the pandemic than they would have had they not sought therapy and/or medication. For one individual, diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and panic disorder, the situation was not nearly as dire as it might

have been: "I think I've been able to handle the stress of COVID so much better because I had this infrastructure in place before the pandemic hit (and it could have been bad for me because infection and health-related stuff is an OCD trigger for me)." The disparity between folks who reported extensive professional mental health support prior to the onset of COVID-19 and those who did not potentially illustrates the necessity of increased care for graduate students enrolled in humanities programs. At this time, I do not have enough data to make sweeping claims on the matter, but I find the thought nonetheless worth considering further.

Graduate school requires more than neoliberal wellness mandates requiring personal responsibility for one's health, particularly when it comes to mental health. Commenting on our current "age of responsibility" in relation to the ever-popular genre of self-help literature, cultural studies scholar Galen Watts notes that institutions' support of personal responsibility as "central to contemporary moral and political discourse" distracts us "from the myriad ways our successes and failures depend on factors beyond our control" (2018). Hence the lucrative nature of the self-help industry. Economists Mary V. Wrenn and William Waller convincingly argue that "the instinct and ethic of care stands counter to capitalism and is pathological in neoliberalism" (2017, p. 495). The authors define *care* as involving relational feelings and actions directed toward others in social contexts, arguing that "austerity programs increase the need for care, thereby expanding the human caring deficit" (p. 496). This "caring deficit" likely extends to graduate

school ecologies, with folks feeling too exhausted, burned out, or just plain busy to care for or about one another.

Though many survey respondents reported success with oft-touted activities like yoga, exercise, and maintaining a balanced diet, such practices cannot account for things like "governmental negligence, greed, endemic racism/sexism, and elitist indifference," as one respondent noted. Graduate programs, enmeshed within universities often maintained by rigid bureaucracies and harmful austerity measures, cannot be bastions of mental health regardless of any messaging otherwise. This isn't to say that professors and advisors don't meaningfully support their students; rather, when schools seem to exist more for capitalist achievement and normative success (i.e., the kind of career and monetary success that accrues to white, male, cishet bodies), students inevitably suffer—as do staff and faculty. Graduate students in particular, enrolled in paradigms designed when jobs were plenty and tenure could be obtained with a few publications, face the hardship of working within a system no longer meant for them. To avoid this depressing sentiment, I reflect in later chapters on actions people take to make graduate school more accessible and equitable, as I consider alternative approaches to graduate education.

Mental Health, Stress, and Trauma

For many of those who responded to my distributed survey, the concept of mental health was inextricably linked to their experiences in graduate school—so

95

large a presence did their enrollment take in their lives. This is a natural effect of the questions I asked them. Because I'm interested in mental disability in academia—and, in fact, disability in academia more broadly—I specifically asked about their mental health in that context. However, it is worth noting that so many respondents highlighted an inability to separate their work and school life from their home life. Graduate school tends to interweave within other aspects of daily life, gradually merging into a student's behaviors, thoughts, and feelings. Because of this, I suspect many of the respondents would have difficulty discussing their mental health experiences without making direct reference to academia thanks to the shadow it casts over many an academic's life. It takes precedence in one's life, and not always for the best, as illustrated by participants' extended reflection on the stressful elements it entails.

When prolonged, these stressors could lead to ill health effects. Because the pandemic has potentially spanned years of many students' enrollment in their programs, it's imperative to consider the effects of the chronic stress so many graduate students faced--this, compounded by the chronic stress already experienced by many simply by attending graduate school in the first place. The Mayo Clinic (2021) alerts us to the long-term harms of the chronic stress response: "It alters immune system responses and suppresses the digestive system, the reproductive system, and growth processes." In the long term, the suppression of such processes often leads to poor health outcomes, which in turn render satisfying

participation in graduate education difficult. Such is the nature of the disabling

reality of stress and trauma. And because "this complex natural alarm system also

communicates with the brain regions that control mood, motivation, and fear," we

have to consider how folks sensitive to the ongoing stress of the pandemic

experience low mood, a lack of motivation, and continual anxiety about their

health, their loved ones, and/or their work and livelihood. These facts are mirrored

in the data collected via the survey, and it will be crucial later in the chapter to

compare these data alongside those of the interviews I conducted.

Important to consider, too, are those unhealthy coping strategies to which

many turn during difficult times. For example, one respondent noted, "I've also

been drinking more as a coping mechanism due to all the stress, which is

something that feels under control but is nevertheless something that I'm keeping

an eye on." A few others identified similar experiences with increased alcohol

intake during the early stages of the pandemic. We know from extensive scientific

research that drug use curtails successful coping and inhibits healthy stress

responses (Sinha, 2008; Wong et al., 2013). It's easy to see why so many people,

including a few who responded to my survey, would turn to less healthy coping

tools since, as one participant noted, so many crucial mental health practices were

"off-limits" during the lockdown. With gyms closed and health care more difficult

to obtain, it's no surprise alcohol use increased during the first half of 2020.

Further, studies have long shown the detrimental effects of stress on the brain's structure, neuronal pathways, and our ability to maintain memory and focus. For example, Bremner (2006) highlights the impact of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) on the amygdala, prefrontal cortex, and hippocampus. Respectively, these areas of the brain influence emotion, executive functioning, and memory. While it was perhaps too early to assess post-traumatic reactions at the time I collected survey data, many responses I received suggest difficulties maintaining the kind of productivity expected in graduate school.

Time Travel: Conducting Interviews in 2021

It's important to note that I conducted interviews with research participants several months after collecting survey data, meaning that folks I chatted with had more time to adjust to the state of the world and get settled more adequately into pandemic life. Many political fears had been alleviated—though not entirely eradicated—with the 2020 election of Joe Biden. Trump was out of office and, briefly, out of our minds as we considered new potentialities under this new regime. COVID-19 vaccines were on the way, and we hadn't yet seen the degree to which conservative minds would politicize this specific form of inoculation. No one yet knew about the Delta variant that plagued much of 2021, and so many people began to plan vacations and social outings, anticipating an era of relative public-freedom. Racial upheaval and police brutality remained salient concerns, as they will for some time in the US, but much of the President's rhetoric seemed to

support people of color and more folks than ever supported the Black Lives Matter movement. Essentially, I found interviewees' moods, despite the difficult subject matter often discussed, to be more optimistic than I would have expected given the dour tone of many survey responses reviewed prior to these meetings.

Interview participants often reflected upon the negative effects of the pandemic in the past tense, anticipating a shift toward greater socialization and public engagement. The Zoom frontier conquered, many folks established digital socialization practices and routines, or added to their already existing online networks. We had passably figured out how to teach online--though I can't speak to K-12 experiences--and life was moving forward. Stringent sanitation practices were laid aside as scientists and medical professionals came to better understand the airborne dimensions of the novel coronavirus. Some of us developed better coping strategies and began to feel somewhat comfortable establishing a "bubble" with those close to us. People went to gyms, out to eat. The situation felt less dire in certain ways.

This is very clearly not to say that the nation ceased suffering in early 2020—quite the contrary—but in order to survive, we had to "normalize" our circumstances. Media everywhere referred to this as a "new normal," a term that ignores the disabled people who already lived in isolation and quarantine and those workers deemed essential in the grocery, restaurant, and medical sectors. Rather, I suggest greater nuance than is often attributed to this period of the

pandemic. At the same time that folks continued dying and protests marched

ahead, people had acclimated to certain realities and found ways to enjoy life, at

least a little free from the abject terror of March 2020. And as bleak as my writing

sometimes seems, at its core, this dissertation project is about uncovering moments

of joy and brainstorming ways to facilitate them.

At the onset of the pandemic, interview participants found themselves, as

we all did, in unforeseen circumstances, forced to alter the very functioning of their

daily life. However, at the same time that folks were trying to survive and keep

themselves and their loved ones safe, graduate students, especially those

undertaking qualitative studies, rapidly needed to adapt. This was especially true in

cases where universities did not offer additional financial support beyond the

expected graduation timeline to those affected by the trauma of COVID and

drastically needing to shift their research priorities or program milestones. I'd wager

that the true nature of the effect this had on graduate students—the loss of crucial

support and experience and the growing need to seek non-faculty careers—has yet

to be fully understood. At the time of this writing, I cannot espy the end of the

pandemic.

One participant, Carla, reported the following: "With COVID I pretty much

had to change my entire plans, my entire dissertation project, well you know,

keeping the same topics, but still the methodology has had to change and all of

that." A methodological change is not a small one. Carla was an international

student teaching and conducting qualitative research in the United States. Throughout the interview, she offered a unique vantage on the American university, drawing explicit contrast between her experiences in the US and those back in her country of origin. Because of this, I found her thoughts illuminating, as they helped me consider such institutions in a novel light.

Interview participants also indicated an amplification in anxieties about their future academic careers. Though graduate students in the humanities know they cannot necessarily look toward guaranteed faculty positions—though that's what many programs train them for—the pandemic saw a decrease in available positions. And for many, an already tenuous sense of job security plummeted. One participant reported a complete career shift, having obtained a job entirely unrelated to academia--and one that pays more and offers greater benefits than would be expected from an academic position. Another interviewee discussed retrenchment practices undertaken by their university; many faculty members in their department who otherwise believed their jobs safe were laid off. This, a marked trend across the country, as universities instituted austerity measures that removed crucial resources from many folks already experiencing job precarity and programs already struggling to prove the value of humanities education[26]. My own institution, despite financial reserves numbering in the billions (Hildreth, 2022),

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[26] For an extended discussion of austerity, the humanities, and Western higher education, see Hazelkorn et al., 2013; Caraher, 2018; and Shullenberger, 2021.

elected to retract wage increases from those of us awarded candidacy status under remote learning circumstances[27].

Carla remarked that her visa would soon be expiring, making continued enrollment, let alone employment, quite difficult. In order to renew her visa, she would need to return to her country of origin to complete the required paperwork, but, at the time of our interview, travel to many countries outside the United States was prohibited, and there was no guarantee she would be allowed to fly back. Though the visa concerns arose from government mandates rather than solely from university regulations, Carla's position as an international student exacerbated her precarity and the stress she faced. In particular, as referenced above, her research project had to be reconfigured, which she expressly found "difficult to manage" on a mental and affective level. This specific pandemic challenge highlights the difficulties graduate students face in both understanding and following through on the expectations placed before them.

What We Already Knew Wasn't Working: Mental Health Barriers in Academia

The three interview participants expressed frustration about the expectations of their programs or of academia writ large and the difficulty they faced meeting them. For example, a participant I will call Josie, who studied theology and

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[27] In full transparency, the Hildreth article also highlights Ohio State's plan to "use its endowment to eliminate student loans within the decade." This feels like a positive step in the right direction, despite austerity measures taken in the past.

healthcare ethics, noted a clear expectation in her department that "students in the program should publish and we should try to submit all of our term papers for publication." This, a common expectation across graduate programs, was not clearly supported by her institution: "I didn't necessarily know which journals to publish in. My professors didn't quite know which journals to send my work to." Josie didn't know where to start in terms of understanding how to publish her work, and it seems her theology professors didn't quite know either, unfamiliar as they were with relevant healthcare publications. This is not to say that her professors were entirely to blame for their lack of knowledge. However, a clear articulation of what a publishable paper looks like, how to find relevant publications and analyze their conventions, and even the process of submitting a paper and working with editors was not offered.

Josie was a student close to graduation who had accepted employment outside academia but still within the purview of her discipline. At the time of our interview, she was eager to defend her dissertation and leave her program: "Just whenever it's done, that's when I will defend." Of the people I interviewed, Josie leveled the harshest indictment toward graduate school, stridently critiquing what was expected of her and the relative inability of academia to prepare, in a caring way, someone to take on those expectations. I will note here that when I discuss this inability, I refer specifically to the material-discursive elements of the academic environment, the do-it-yourself-or-else aura that permeates. Individual members of that institution, such as faculty or staff, are not

necessarily included in this takedown. In fact, as I will discuss in the next chapter, individual relationships are what make graduate school survivable and rewarding.

Josie was not alone in her publishing struggles. Carla noted intense pressure to publish scholarly articles during her interview—a pressure originating from her program rather than merely the discourses embedded in academia as a career and the productivity paradigms espoused. No, she felt her professors and directors were explicitly telling her to publish more and learn how to "be" an academic. But what an academic was supposed to be was never clearly established. Thus, it can be difficult for graduate students, especially those coming from backgrounds unfamiliar with the minute workings of academia—international students like Carla, working class students who may also be first-generation and/or people of color, etc.—to understand where they fit within the dynamic material assemblage of which they are part. Carla sums up the overall "messaging" she received as "'hey work hard and do all of these things and get published and teach and live the academic life, like, be a good academic.'" Already a challenge, these goals must also be maintained alongside keeping up with coursework and exam preparation, networking, having a personal life, and practicing good mental health, as she acknowledged emphatically during our discussion.

While interviewing folks, I did not explicitly ask participants to comment upon program milestones, not wanting to influence their responses. Near the end of our conversation, Josie specifically brought up the topic of candidacy exams,

104

expressing "that was the most excruciating part of my entire degree." Indeed, many have referred to exams as a form of "hazing," a needlessly stressful and overly taxing affair that requires retooling (*Write Where It Hurts*, 2015; Stephen L., 2019)[28]. For Josie, it didn't make sense that she would have to write an essay as she called "unassisted," without being able to take the time to develop her thoughts and form a coherent argument, consult others, or even spend an adequate amount of time with the texts on her exam list. And that's to say nothing of her oral exam, in which she felt grilled about minute details of various articles, unable to refer directly to them or cogently collect her thoughts.

Some may argue that there are good reasons why candidacy exams are often structured in formats similar to what Josie experienced. By reading *a lot* in a relatively short period of time, graduate students ingest and coalesce an incredible amount of knowledge--the kind of knowledge needed to be an "expert" in their fields, which is ostensibly what doctoral education is for. I know I can say I wouldn't have read so much if I hadn't been forced to, and even though I had to write two essays in 72 hours, I found myself consulting those texts while composing this dissertation document. However, positives though there were, I, too, was miserable at times while I prepared for candidacy. So even though I

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[28] About academic hazing, Tressie McMillan Cottom has been quoted as saying, "I think it's bizarre how we celebrate finishing a thesis or dissertation, forcing frivolity on someone who probably feels like crying. I tell them it's the final traumatic act of education [and they] make you smile at the end" (Warner, 2017).

ultimately found the process beneficial--and only in hindsight--I have to wonder if there are better ways to structure exams or replace them with something else, something that achieves the same goals and maybe even involves similar practices, but on a more realistic scale.

Following this format, candidacy exams do not produce publishable documents, confusingly misaligning with academia's most intense and invasive proclamation: "publish or perish." And they certainly don't engage the collaborative dimension of writing or the time needed to adequately process materials. Further, forcing folks to adhere to this paradigm, regardless of their needs, is—I'll say it—ableist. Thus, my conversation with Josie indicated one potential site of change, something to revise in the process of re-envisioning the work of graduate study in the humanities.

Professoring While Disabled

While kind folks in academia are numerous, it would be a stretch so say that graduate programs--or universities in general--are caring environments. This becomes most apparent in the refusal to allocate resources to mental health care when students burn out not infrequently. It also takes more insidious forms, as Josie experienced, when institutions neglect to offer safe and viable disability accommodations.

The field of disability studies (DS) offers crucial insights into the ableism of scholarly practices, particularly regarding mental engagement and time dimensions. Humans, including non-disabled people, often require time to process information and formulate responses or begin to articulate their ideas and arguments. This is one reason why extensive participation in graduate seminar discussion can be so challenging, as an example. Oral exams, combined with the pressure of "performing" in front of professors and therefore the contention with power dynamics, are not inherently conducive to the kind of academic thought valued in publications and conference presentations. When one's career is on the line--literally, as failure to achieve candidacy effectively one's ability to progress further in the discipline--a person's thoughts are unlikely to represent their true potential. Of course, much of this is mitigated by supportive and understanding exam committees, for those fortunate enough to have them, as I was.

Josie was disabled and openly identified as such. Without delving too deep into specifics, I'll say that she had a chronic illness, one that she believes was specifically exacerbated by the candidacy exam process. Having been in remission prior to entering the reading phase of her program, she experienced a severe flaring of symptoms as she looked ahead toward her exams. Listening to her body, she noted that, "literally just the structure and system of my exams was enough to cause my body to go into significant stress to cause a chronic illness." Confident in her appraisal, Josie highlighted this disability flare as proof that this portion of

107

academia is literally disabling and therefore not properly conducive to healthy success.

Specifically, "it's to me the sign that this is an unhealthy process and imbalanced process, because now I know that anytime I go into a fatigue form, it's because my environment or my context or my response has been imbalanced: like too stressed, essentially." Josie's words emphasize what disability scholarship has been saying for years: academia is inherently disabling (Dolmage, 2017). Attempting to pursue scholarly work beyond the direct confines of the ivory tower doesn't seem to solve the problem either (Price, 2011). As we have seen throughout the pandemic, academic trauma remains untethered from the physical location of the university institution. Remote education does not necessarily alleviate the great bodily stress of coursework or dissertating. I know this as someone who completed candidacy exams and wrote an entire dissertation during COVID-19's grip on the nation--and the world.

There was a time during Josie's acute experience of her chronic illness that she could not walk easily and certainly couldn't commute via her usual bike route. Given these circumstances, it would make sense that the university offer her a temporary disability placard for her car, making travel and class access so much easier. But because she couldn't obtain the exact right paperwork needed to "verify" her disability, and because she certainly couldn't afford the exorbitant parking fee she would need to pay on a graduate stipend, Josie was out of luck. No

parking pass. Fortunately for her, individuals not beholden to the slow workings of the academic bureaucracy--other graduate students--assisted with providing rides just so she could attend classes.

This is just one vignette representing Josie's larger disability experience during her enrollment in her graduate program. In the next chapter, I'll reflect more on the interpersonal connections she made and why they ensured her program felt more welcoming. For now, though, I want to discuss at greater length a term that now feels ubiquitous among disability scholars and activists: *care*. Now, folks in DS have *lots* to say about care, from defining (and redefining) it to musing on practical ways to care for one another, the same cannot be said for the university as an institution. Universities proclaim no duty to care, as evidenced by common responses to students expressing suicidal ideation or those who make actual attempts. Such students are told to return home, take a break, and come back once mental health has been restored. Of course, this in no way addresses the causes of a student's negative mental health and ignores the fact that "home" may be a harmful or dangerous space for some young adults. Removal from one's social networks and daily routine isn't necessarily the best "treatment" either. No, such practices reveal a fear of liability and litigation rather than an inherent care for students' wellbeing.

Networking: Power Dynamics and Social Expectations

One of the interview participants, Zoe, attended a non-traditional program that took place during summer sessions only, with the graduate students responsible for obtaining their own work, academic or otherwise, back in their hometowns. (Because each session only lasted a few months, many enrolled elected not to uproot their lives and move house.) Aside from this alternative arrangement, upon which I'll reflect at greater length in later sections, Zoe and her peers engaged in a more equitable and accessible candidacy process. Rather than hastily compose essays or participate in an oral defense, they instead constructed portfolios of their scholarly work and progress. I'll briefly say here that this illustrates that candidacy can look different and need not be a traumatic or harmful experience. Later sections in this chapter will reflect upon alternative imaginings of doctoral education, built upon interview responses and recent scholarship exploring the topic.

Another common critique interview participants leveled involved social expectations and networking requirements. Though many professional fields outside academia expect folks to consort with others in the career to "get a leg up," so to speak, scholarly conventions governing networking can feel especially intimidating or overwhelming. Carla in particular addressed such concerns, noting that "it's not something that was natural for me." Specifically, she discussed how regularly her program "emphasized multiple times that if you're in academia, you need to network at conferences." Again, the same can be said for other industries,

but academic socializing feels especially weighted with power and consequence. Highlighting the difficulty in approaching established scholars, Carla emphasized the imposter syndrome rampant across graduate students and early-career scholars. When you don't yet have a publication to your name and are presenting on a topic you're just beginning to explore, reaching out to people who have been in the profession for decades can feel overwhelming at best.

For Carla, this feeling arose due to her understanding that communicating with such scholars could literally make or break her career. For example, she had previously thought that "where you end up or what you end up doing depends on how much work you put in, and on the quality of your work specifically." As she progressed through her program, however, experienced told her otherwise:

> "You learn that it's not necessarily the case. It's about meeting the right person that's going to help you out at the right time, which is good, but also sometimes I've seen situations where I'm like, 'this is a little sketchy,' you know. 'This is unethical to me.' . . . I definitely think it's often less about how hard you work and more about connections you make."

Referring to "sketchy" or "unethical" practices, Carla acknowledges the ways folks who "know the right people" often achieve greater success than those who don't, simply by virtue of their facility with networking.

Not only are graduate students expected to overstep power dynamics when networking at conferences and other events (unless communicating solely with other graduate students), the social expectation can be difficult, too, simply because some people are not built to socialize in large amounts and while under pressure. For example, autistic people and those experiencing social anxiety may not find it personally rewarding to engage in small talk and chat to the degree expected. Further, many neurodivergent folks find direct eye contact, an expected element of "good" communication in today's professional world, unpleasant or impossible. Combined with the "always-on" atmosphere of many academic social engagements, such as department or conference parties after hours, networking begins to feel like work for many. Everything in academia, even what should otherwise be seen as unwinding with colleagues, feels loaded, weighted with responsibility for one's career progress.

This analysis is not to suggest that true comaraderie in academia is impossible, and I'll reflect at length on the power of supportive relationships in the next chapter. Instead, I emphasize here the difficulty graduate students face in transgressing power dynamics and the pressure to reach out to established scholars to avoid missing out on career opportunities. When faculty positions seem increasingly rare, and with the major teaching work available, adjuncting, providing inadequate compensation for one's labor and often zero benefits, it's

hardly surprising that so many graduate students feel intense pressure to network or seek employment elsewhere.

This conversation holds import for my larger discussion of graduate students as situated within vast material ecologies. The folks with whom they network inevitably form part of those ecologies, exerting influence at the same time that they co-develop a student's experience of graduate school and preparation for the job market, should the student in question pursue that career trajectory. I will explore these connections in greater length in the following chapter, though I use this present space to think through the degree to which graduate students are enmeshed within assemblages far greater than themselves--ones that can feel overwhelming to those who do not excel at socializing in work environments. The vast ecology that makes up a single student's experience of graduate school involves such great nuance that it can be difficult to even understand one's place or how and where they can exert agency alongside the many, many elements involved.

Academic conferences and other "social" events form what Margaret Price terms "kairotic spaces":

> "Kairotic spaces are the less formal, often unnoticed, areas of academe where knowledge is produced and power is exchanged. A classroom discussion is a kairotic space, as is an individual conference with one's advisor. Conferences are rife with kairotic

spaces, including the Q&A sessions after panels, impromptu elevator encounters with colleagues, and gatherings at restaurants and bars on the periphery of formal conference events. Other examples from students' experiences might include peer-response workshops, study groups, or departmental parties or gatherings to which they are invited" (2011, p. 21).

Graduate students often participate in most if not all of the kairotic spaces listed by Price. These high-stakes encounters, almost impossible to prepare for ahead of time, come together to form a significant portion of a person's graduate career. Listed out at such great length, it's easy to see why many students feel stressed by the pressure to socialize as part of their academic work.

What is Graduate School For?

In this project, I sought to understand how students would qualify graduate school: *What is it "for"? Why enroll in the first place? And how does one "do" graduate school well?*

To return to Carla's words, *what is a "good academic life"? And how are we supposed to know?* Based upon the interviews held (and the survey data collected), it would seem that a "good" academic excels at all expected activities (networking, publishing, teaching, studying), intuitively understands scholarly conventions and expectations, somehow maintains a social life (one often facilitated by alcohol, if personal experience and movies are to be believed), has no problem working late

into the night or over the weekend, and magically balances academic responsibilities with family and home obligations. Indeed, "balance" was a word used frequently by survey respondents and interviewees alike, though in this case it was used to reflect participants' attempts to curb the impulse to devote their entire lives to their academic work. The fact that so many people emphasized a need to achieve a balance between their work and personal lives, and urgently so, illustrates the pressure graduate students--and probably faculty--feel to master all the expected tasks, many of which could be full-time jobs in their own right. There simply aren't enough hours in the day to teach, often multiple courses, brilliantly, write an outstanding dissertation, develop engaging conference presentations, sign up for professional development events, and gain extraneous experience editing journals or organizing various activities.

To illustrate the potential effects of such extreme working conditions, I'd like to reflect briefly on an assertion Josie made late into our conversation:

> "The kinds of people that come out of graduate school are people who survive isolation and survive criticism and tough competition. And so we're creating isolated individuals who don't want to collaborate. In what way is that good?"

When many people think of what it means to be a "good" academic, they think of the solitary writer surrounded by books, with a cat and maybe a mug of tea for company. This, the romanticized version of scholarship, doesn't represent

everyone's experience, and it reinforces our cultural understanding of professoring as a lone activity. Even though we teach, meet at conferences, set up co-writing sessions, and share ideas (in fields where doing so is encouraged, not frowned upon), so much of our work gets done at the dinner table, in isolated offices at home or on campus, hunched over a table in the library. We are often alone during these moments, or we work next to someone, which is not the same as working *with* someone.

When graduate education is framed in terms of survival, the possibility for thriving, for finding satisfaction or contentment in one's work, becomes less visible. Students spend so much time trying to keep up with readings, conducting research, communicating with students, planning lessons, grading, writing, writing, writing. The whole endeavor starts to feel like just doing what needs to be done to reach a goal, which then becomes immediately subsumed by another. At what point are graduate students able to care for themselves? Achieve satisfaction with their work?

Chapter 4: Graduate Student Relationships: "Intra-action" in Action

When asked about moments of joy experienced while working through her program, Josie immediately jumped into a discussion about the pleasure of "engaging with other people": "the joy really comes from connecting with other people and finding a point of connection that's meaningful and exciting." These interviews bolstered my growing belief that success in graduate school, as in many of life's arenas, often hinges on an individual's connections to others, which I broadly operationalize as *relationships*, though the shape and influence they take vary greatly. For the purposes of this discussion, I'll define "success," not as the absence of mental illness symptoms or diagnoses, but rather as the opportunity and ability to address the stressors and traumas faced while in graduate school during an ever-evolving pandemic.

I originally started thinking of the importance of relationships—to soon be defined—while reading Margaret Price's discussion of *kairotic spaces* in *Mad at School* (2011)[29]. Where Price is concerned with power differentials embedded in those spaces and interactions–and I am, too–I also want to consider in more detail

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[29] As a reminder, Price defines kairotic spaces as "the less formal, often unnoticed, areas of academe where knowledge is produced and power is exchanged" (p. 21).

how folks navigate those spaces and interactions. What contributes to graduate student movement through them? Must they be navigated alone? In this chapter, I will analyze survey and interview data to answer the first question, a question I will answer via the second: no, graduate school, however solitary an endeavor it appears to be discursively and materially, need not inherently exist as an isolated pursuit of knowledge. Regardless of the romanticized image of the professor, alone at their desk while they happily ponder esoteric thoughts, I will argue that graduate school can, and for some people *should*, operate collaboratively, as when this is the case, individual capacity flourishes, material assemblages develop strengthened connections, and life feels a little less chaotic—all of which contribute to mental wellbeing.

In thinking about the materiality of graduate education, it has become apparent, through discussion with humanities doctoral students and review of survey responses, that in addition to understanding the barriers to success and mental thriving, we must also consider those ecological connections that indicate agentic potential, that lend themselves to great capacity in academic environments. In theorizing such connections, I have come to realize that it is students' relationships with one another, and with staff and faculty, that largely determine how an individual *feels* about their graduate experience. For example, many folks discussed their ability to progress through their programs *because of* such relationships.

Rhetorical studies work sometimes mobilizes theories of *ecology* to articulate and explore human and nonhuman entanglements in a manner distinct from *environmentalism*, which positions the environment a "a fixed and passive container separate from human activity" (McGreavy et al., 2018, p. 7), and from recent new materialist theorizing that doesn't always acknowledge non-Western and Indigenous contributions to ecological understanding. Rhetoric itself "may not initially seem a fitting site to think of human-nonhuman entanglement, given the centuries-old Western positioning of rhetorical capacity as precisely what distinguishes humans from nonhumans" (p. 8). I have already problematized at length the very concept of *capacity* in Chapter 2, but I find it interesting to see the term emerging in conversations defining the contours of our field[30].

Due to my desire to forward practices rooted in social justice and acknowledge critiques of new materialism and object-oriented ontologies, I embrace definitions of ecology put forth by scholars similarly interested in issues of care.[31] For example, McGreavy et al. (2018) connect disparate streams of ecological and material thought "in order to advance an ecological approach to care," an approach that seeks to foster interdependent spaces where "vibrant attachments among people and things can take root" (p. 3). Such vibrancy provides

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[30] For a continued discussion of ecology in rhetoric and composition studies, see also Cooper, 1986; Edbauer Rice, 2009; and Gries, 2011.
[31] I will discuss, at great length, the importance of *care* to my work and to graduate education in the next chapter.

fertile ground for creativity, agency, capacity, and mental wellbeing—all of which

inhere in my growing understanding of what it means to offer care in academia.

My aim in this project treads along a similar path, attempting to suss out

caring orientations within graduate school assemblages and how such orientations

promote "vibrant attachments," or relationships we might view as *productive*. I

deploy this term, not to signify productivity in the capitalistic sense, but to

emphasize interpersonal connections that enable thriving, creativity, joy, and

wellbeing. Here, I specifically focus on social, humanly attachments because those

are the entanglements survey respondents and interview participants opted to

discuss the most—what they pointed toward as the supports that most helped them

succeed.

In this chapter, I argue that strengthening these relationships and attuning

oneself to potentials embedded within them fosters the individual and collective

capacity to succeed. Here, I take two definitions of "succeed": to adequately adhere

to the normative epistemological and professional paradigms of hegemonic

scholarship in the West; and to embody what we might think of as "mental health."

Again, I use the latter phrase loosely, refusing to set parameters around it, as the

medical model of disability, operationalized via the American Psychiatric

Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, expects. This

DSM, referred to as *DSM-5-TR* by those who specifically reference the most current

fifth edition (with revised text and references), serves as a guide for researchers and

clinicians in understanding mental health diagnoses and therefore knowing when to implement scientifically accepted treatment protocols. According to Laurie H. Gold in *The Journal of the American Academy of Psychology and the Law*, despite the manual's evolution over time, it "continues to demonstrate the influence of the medical model of disability on psychiatric diagnosis. In contrast, WHO's [the World Health Organization's] classification systems reflect the integration of the newer and increasingly more popular social model of disability" (2014)[32].

Noticeably (and purposefully) absent in survey questions and interview discussions were references to specific *DSM* diagnoses. We all have our own personal definitions of what it means to be "well and "healthy," and so I respect whatever definitions individual folks ascribe to the terminology. Indeed, asking research participants to define "good mental health" through my survey questioning led to theoretical stymy. No consensus was reached, and I realized the folly in attempting to define the concept, given the diverse and conflicting discourses so many of us in the West daily encounter.

I re-mobilize capacity in this chapter to reflect upon the relationship between human rights and normative institutions in the United States of America.

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[32] Delineating the crucial differences between the medical and social models of disability lies beyond the scope of this project. For now, though, it is enough to know that the medical model views disability as a "problem" inherent to an individual, something to be cured, removed, or obscured. The social model, by contrast, acknowledges material impairments but blames society for the difficulties and oppression that disabled people face (Shakespeare, 2006, pp. 195-203).

What is possible and what is expected under mandates materially and discursively disseminated through such institutions are often very different. For example, such mandates call for extensive solitary publication at the same time that one attends to course design and teaching and keeping up to date with scholarship and committee service and grading and networking and a million other things. Essentially, such productivity is often not feasible, particularly for those of us who are disabled, those of us discursively rendered beyond the material domain of academe.

Disabled folks have expended much ink, brain space, personal priority, and reputation in service of theorizing *interdependence*. As a concept, interdependence signifies epistemological and ontological oneness, joining together, *doing* together, mutually caring and aiding that acknowledges individual needs and the value of attuning oneself to others' needs and skills. The haphazard nature of crip wisdom might see a physically mobile person transporting a wheelchair user to a medical appointment at the same time as that person on wheels helps the driver through their brain fog and executive dysfunction by helping with house chores or remembering what needs to be done. This, of course, is rather a mundane example of interdependence, one that can feel romanticized when we remember that with disability and mental illness comes pain and conflict.

Speaking on interdependence in academia, Akemi Nishida (2015) promotes community and collective care as routes to healing, as ways of counteracting the exhausting forces of neoliberalism in the West. Not only do such practices nurture

our wellbeing, but community care "is a tangible way to resist the neoliberal academy's compulsion for individualization by nurturing our capacities for democracy" (p. 155). For Nishida, such labor is a matter of "education justice," to be paired with "inclusivity and accessibility" (p. 155).

It is my belief that despite any difficulties graduate students may face or, rather, *because of* these difficulties, there needs to be space to try anyway, to apply a little crip magic (or crip technoscience, as articulated by Aimi Hamraie and Kelly Fritsch, 2019). These authors define *crip technoscience* as "politicized practices of non-compliant knowing-making: world-building and world-dismantling practices *by* and *with* disabled people and communities that respond to intersectional systems of power, privilege, and oppression by working within and around them" (pp. 4-5). What world-building and world-dismantling looks like in academe will inevitably depend on site-specific needs, both individual and collective. Listening to and working with graduate students and fellow disabled folks, however, provides some ideas and guidance. Even when people do not identify as disabled, mental health remains a disability concern, and therefore we can learn a great deal from disabled academics. This chapter, therefore, is indebted to the crip wisdom so many folks have been willing to share.

Western employment adheres rigidly to notions of professionalism, material-discursive entanglements that influence how the academy defines success and that hold disability outside their logics. Such notions invoke normative expectations of

capacity, assuming that it is the neurotypical bodymind that is considered professional. Also regarded as professional? Whiteness. Studies show that in the American workplace, "white supremacy culture explicitly and implicitly privileges whiteness and discriminates against non-Western and non-white professionalism standards related to dress-code, speech, work style, and timeliness" (Gray, 2019). Discourses of assimilation and the "normal" permeate our culture across our institutions, so it would only make sense that graduate students experience the pressure to look and act a certain way, lest they be exposed for frauds, failures, lazies, and the like.

I would like to consider ways we might thwart this system to promote structures of caring within such rigid institutions, à la de Certeau's articulation of strategies vs. tactics. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, first published in 1984, Michel de Certeau outlines the ways in which hegemonic forces exert power over their subjects as well as "the ingenious ways the weak make use of the strong, thus lend[ing] a political dimension to everyday practices" (p. xvii). Aligning strategies with dominant powers and tactics with the subversive behaviors of the ordinary and/or marginalized individual, he highlights differential power realities and the means by which people can inject rebellion, hope, care, creativity, and transgression into their lives, against the current of capitalistic exploitation. We see an example of this in what has been termed the "Great Resignation" to describe labor strikes and workers' refusal to work in exploitative situations occurring

throughout America in 2021 and 2022. Thus, while "subject[s] of will and power"

deploy strategies like "political, economic, and scientific rationality" to structure

reality, tactics refer to the Other seizing the opportunity to "combine

heterogeneous elements" to their own benefit" (p. xix). In other words, laborers

across the country have rejected capitalist economic rationality and have instead

held out for jobs that offer livable wages, comprehensive benefits, and vacation

time.

Those of us navigating the rational strategies of the university can likewise

deploy tactics to make academic life more pleasurable. Specifically, I argue that

working through our own conceptualizations of ourselves as humanists—to hell

with what others think—while foregrounding mental health and radical care via

disability justice tenets, enables theories and practices we can use to better support

one another and further legitimize our work on a grander scale. For example, as

many humanists move toward new materialist and post-humanist theories, it

becomes imperative to remember that we are all still very real humans enmeshed

within systems of global capitalism. Because humanists purport to center critical

thinking, artistic creation as method, narrative inquiry, and student-centered

pedagogy—all *kind* and *caring*—I use this project to explore the degree to which

humanities programs offer related support for graduate students, such as networks

of care and practices that promote mental health.

I argue that there are ways that those in charge of humanities programs can subtly thwart this system, can apply small yet meaningful tactics to make graduate school more habitable for marginalized folks and individuals disabled by its harsh conditions. Such an approach—grounded in disability wisdom, anti-racist praxis, and de Certeau's tactics—might take the form of devising ways to facilitate meaningful relationship formation, methods of attunement to weak or broken linkages in the overarching academic assemblage that would otherwise lend themselves to thriving. Supportive interpersonal relationships are key to such thriving, and prioritizing them within graduate education will go a great deal toward ensuring the meaningful success of students. Notably, these tactics need not take the form of grand gestures. Instead, they might operate more like what Mol et al. (2010) describe as a special kind of experimentation: "persistent tinkering in a world full of complex ambivalence and shifting tensions" (p. 14). We'll never know what works unless we try—and aiming for flexibility and adaptability while we do so.

Throughout the chapter, I listen to the stories of others, mostly those who formally lent their time and energy to this project through qualitative study participation. In doing so, I present the affordances gained through sustained communion with others, particularly as they apply to students' intellectual, emotional, and physical capacity to accomplish their goals while enrolled in their given programs. Other voices, both silent and explicitly rendered populate this

work in that I would not have been able to reach the point of composing these words without my own community. I cannot help but reflect upon the power I've accrued through colleague support, faculty assistance, and the love of many others. My capacity to complete a dissertation has been greatly extended by such relationships, thanks to my willingness to be vulnerable and extend my heart (and mind) to such friends.

Throughout the pages that follow, I will present more of the research participants' words, specifically regarding their relations with others, positive and negative (or neutral), where each variety exists. Perhaps it seems unnecessary to claim that folks need communion with others to thrive, but because interpersonal connection is not baked into the workings of graduate education, I consider this discussion essential. When I reflect back on my own experiences as a graduate student, I cannot help but juxtapose moments of isolation with moments of community and support. Importantly, too, is the consideration that not every interpersonal grouping is the *right type* of grouping. For example, competition has long been an embedded element of much of graduate education. I certainly haven't felt successful or content during times when I've felt pitted against my peers and colleagues.

This chapter–and in a sense this entire dissertation–is a love letter to those who have helped me through it. Those who have accepted late-night phone calls, encouraged my writing and ideas when I didn't feel secure or confident enough to

voice them audibly, made me a cupcake, provided feedback, invited me to happy hour. Those who leveled with me about the state of academia, commiserated about the #PandemicLife, texted me to check in when I felt alone. And those who attended meetings, conferences, seminars, working sessions, and office hours with me.

Non-Academic Relationships: Pre-Existing Ecologies & Quality of Life

Over and again, a common remark in the collected survey data reveals the importance of social connection to our mental health and wellbeing. Participants provided the following words and phrases when asked about what "good mental health" means to them: "friends," "support," "community," "love," "seeking support from others," "sharing," "good relationships," "family," and "fulfilling and healthy relationships." While many terms are broad—what is *good*, anyway?—they nonetheless reveal the significance of graduate students' connections with others. And not just any connections; they should be loving, supportive, personally enriching, and mutually sustaining.

We know from psychological research, and anecdotal experience, that humans thrive, with some exceptions, in communion with others (Berkman & Syme, 1979; Brummett et al., 2001; McPherson et al., 2006; Umberson & Montez, 2010). We are social creatures by nature. How else would familial units, towns, urban centers, and whole societies emerge? Therefore, for the purposes of this chapter, I focus on the meaningful individual relationships graduate students

128

cultivate with others. And though damaging relationships likely exist for many, thereby negating some of the gains obtained through personal connection, I focus much less on these. They weren't the immediate interest of my research, though we have all heard stories of neglectful and abusive doctoral advisors, unsupportive family members, or sabotaging peers–with some of us perhaps experiencing these for ourselves. I simply don't have the data to report on the firsthand experiences of folks in humanities graduate programs, though several personal accounts exist online[33]. Finally, I'm far more interested in examining the possibilities for graduate programs to enrich their enrolled students' lives through community and collaboration. In essence, I already have a clear idea of what *isn't* working, having experienced it myself while pursuing my PhD; what I want to know is how we can better support our students in a capitalist, COVID-dominated country.

The data collected throughout my research process prove most illuminating in answering this question. Specifically, survey respondents, due to the wording of the questions I asked, primarily discussed their non-academic relationships with others: "I try to socialize with friends"; "I prioritize time with my family"; "daily contact with family and friends"; "spending time with those outside of

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[33] Discussed earlier in this manuscript, *Presumed Incompetent II* (Niemann et al., 2020), provides several accounts of abuse and discrimination experienced by female graduate students of color. Additionally, sexual harassment and assault are unfortunately too common in academic spaces. The recent lawsuit by three graduate students against Harvard for allegedly ignoring faculty abuse provides one such example (Hartocollis, 2022).

academia/family"; "I maintain a constant support system with my mom"; "I confide

challenges in other people."

On a lengthier note, one respondent noted: "I really rely on my social

networks to get me through a program that continues to challenge me. My friends

and family are typically my sources of feeling loved and supported." Another

highlighted the importance of "maintaining relationships with people outside of my

graduate department. I am fortunate to have a long-time romantic partner who is

not a graduate student that helps to keep me grounded. I try to always prioritize

making time for our relationship to just be together in a space where I don't have to

think about school." Interestingly, too, several folks mentioned their connections

with non-human animals: the dogs, cats, and other pets with whom they share their

lives.

Such statements indicate a clear need for non-work, non-academic

connections and activities. Though already discussed in this project, these

"outside" endeavors seem for many to entail bonding with friends and family,

establishing networks of support and kinship outside the parameters of graduate

school. What would it be like for programs and institutions to encourage these

relations? What would it look like, for example, for them to prioritize families and

hobbies? And I don't mean hosting social events on campus, as doing so would

only strengthen the presence of academia in a person's life, something that isn't

desired by everyone, particularly when it can already feel like an all-consuming

reality for many. The truth is that graduate school is not the kind of "job" where one can simply mentally check out at 5 pm on the dot–at least, not for those who want to satisfactorily complete every task set before them: teaching, grading, publishing, writing the dissertation, reading for classes, composing exams, reading for exams, completing necessary paperwork, finding and applying for jobs, compiling application materials, etc. But what would it look like if we *could* "clock out" at 5 pm, or some comparable time at which we end our "day" of work?

I honestly don't know what this would entail. I personally instituted this practice while in graduate school—stopping work after 4, not working on the weekends—and I most certainly was not a model scholar doing all the things. It strikes me that many scholars do not necessarily think of their work in terms of employment. Absent on college campuses are cubicles, and, unless one works in a staff position, clear managers overseeing one's progress. Of course, folks still need to report to their advisors or tenure committees, but much of academic labor is completed in isolation and according to one's own needs and predilections. We largely determine for ourselves how we want to organize our courses, when and where we will complete our grading and our writing. Such independence is part of what draws so many folks to the profession in the first place. But it's important to remember that academia and intellectual work is still a *profession* nonetheless and therefore worthy of reflection in the context of labor law and workplace expectation.

In the midst of what has been termed The Great Resignation, American workers increasingly call for working conditions more conducive to individual happiness and wellbeing: the ability to work from home, where possible; higher salaries and hourly wages to better support basic life needs; health insurance and benefits, including for those working service jobs; meaningful paid time off; common decency and respect. Regarding the latter, one might think extending fellow human beings such a courtesy would be a given, but we need only turn to leftist organizing spaces, such as r/antiwork, to understand the degree to which so many employers in the US simply don't care about the quality of their employees' lives.

What does this have to do with academia? Our work has historically been romanticized as intellectual rather than physical labor, as fulfilling lofty aspirations rather than attending to the menial basic needs of sustenance and residence. But the fact remains that we *do* require these things, with graduate students especially needing advocates for these most basic human requirements. Someone has to pay the bills, and faculty should not forget the hardships faced while enrolled in graduate programs, the difficulties that make their future employment possible. Academics ought to work in solidarity with the growing labor movement in the country, even where establishing a union feels difficult, even impossible. Part of this work entails ensuring distinct demarcations between working hours and time and mental space allotted to other concerns, obligations, and joys—something

research participants so desperately crave during their graduate enrollment. This means both encouraging such balance in the lives of students and modeling it in their own livelihood.

Interview participants reported similar desires for what many participants referred to as "work/life balance" and greater workplace treatment, which extends to the value they placed upon non-academic relationships. The American Management Association (AMA) notes the fraught nature of the term "work/life balance":

> "While doing the job of two or three people at work, we're expected to be exemplary parents AND have a fulfilling personal life in which we rear perfect children, enjoy our hobbies, volunteer in the community, and take superb care of our bodies, spirits, and minds."

Impossible to achieve, this "balance" is actually an extension of neoliberal hyper-productivity discourses. According to the authors of this AMA article (2019), the quest for "balance" "has become one more 'to-do' on an ever-expanding, guilt-inducing list." What's more, many folks don't have the luxury of participating in some of these activities because, for a variety of reasons, they or their families can't survive without their working extensive, often untenable hours.

I suspect that when participants referred to "work/life balance" they probably meant something closer to a "well-rounded life" (AMA Staff, 2019) that attends to life's complexities and holds space for a range of non-academic

practices. Though I may employ the term "balance" in my writing, I do so to adhere to participants' vocabulary and attempt to understand their perspectives. By no means do I wish to promote neoliberal discourse, even inadvertently.

Josie, as readers will recall, was diagnosed with a chronic illness prior to her enrollment in her university. Unprompted, she indicated in her interview that hers was "an institution that does not have the systems to support that." Well, why not? And what will happen should academia as a profession fall prey to the Great Resignation so derided by companies across the nation? We don't need to look very far to come across stories of people who have left academia entirely, choosing instead to pursue employment opportunities that afford a better quality of life, often with greater pay and less time expected to be spent on work tasks[34]. The fact that so many folks elect to leave the profession, and not only because of the dearth of tenure-track positions, should indicate *something* that needs to be worked out.

Though I don't presume to know the precise solution to such a problem, I feel confident saying that a caring employer leads to greater capacity for meaningful (and perhaps enjoyable) work performance. Josie, for example, noted the potential value in "changing the system through longer timelines for degree completion or greater financial support for degree completion." For her,

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[34] Even the briefest of Google searches calls forth personal testimonies from those who left their "dream" tenure-track jobs, reams of advice for current students and faculty considering seeking employment elsewhere, and discussion forums featuring folks questioning their own positions in the academy.

eliminating what she regards as unnecessary stress, due to intractable timelines and abysmal stipends, would help graduate students feel cared for and less concerned about making rent or buying groceries—things that can occupy the mental space and energy that might be better used in attending to program tasks and milestones. Of course, this is *not* to claim that one's worth ought to be linked to their productivity output. Rather, I only wish to make the case that American workers deserve to feel a sense of job security and the knowledge that their bills will be paid and their living needs met. These are human rights.

Much of what I discuss in this section describes factors and relationships that may not necessarily emanate from within academia but that nonetheless influence an individual's wellbeing and success. What happens at home absolutely affects what happens at work, and so it matter that graduate students have a chance to meaningfully connect with loved ones and make time for hobbies and other life-sustaining activities. Leisure time, too, inextricably links to these outside-of-academia relationships. And, importantly, all of *this*, these intra-acting elements, come together and subsequently interface and intra-act with the discourses, workplace expectations, relationships, and environments associated with academic employment. Where one slice of the assemblage--the academic side, for instance--outgrows the other, capacity diminishes, burnout can feel imminent, individual wellness declines, and other crucial aspects of life do not receive their due.

Linkages break, wither, and nourishing activities and connections no longer possess the power to exert their refreshing agency to a meaningful degree.

Of course, none of this is to say that all graduate students, and academic employees more broadly, will experience the assemblages of their lives in the same way. No, some may be more attuned than others to racist or ableist discourses in their environments, for example, and folks desire differing degrees of work/life balance. People differentially allow bleeding between these two facets, among many, of their lives. Zoe, for one, noted that, "I guess I just like having things kind of separated, compartmentalized." Some students may thrive with greater time spent ruminating, more focus allotted to the development of their ideas, with others prioritizing familial obligations, social connections, self-care activities, and/or other employment. The point I am making here is that graduate students should be able to *choose* the degree to which their education does or does not dominate their lives, as hailed by so many proponents of the modern labor movement. Students have a right to help determine the degree to which they are shaped, or traumatized, by the institutions under which they labor, as well as the amount of influence they wish to exert therein. Much of what I suggest here feels impossible, which again is why I direct our attention to the smaller actions we can take to help others survive.

Academic Relationships

Despite the importance of "non-academic" relationships, I want to focus more intensely and intentionally on academic relationships, as these connections fall within the purview of workplace change. I've spent a lot of time writing about the barriers humanities graduate students face while enrolled. With "barriers," I refer to the material-discursive actants that seem to prohibit what an individual views as mental thriving. And though mental health is undeniably a personal phenomenon, difficult to pin down concretely, we know from anecdotal evidence and published scholarship that the institutional enterprise of the American university affects many folks similarly in that it disables. However, now that I've thoroughly examined my study's participants' thoughts on mental health while enrolled in graduate programs, I turn toward a case study of those academic relationships that sustain. Because of the affective register I seek to maintain throughout this chapter–one of hopeful pondering in the context of respondents' own words–I will dwell upon damaging personal connections insofar as they represent roots that need more carefully be pruned. For the student to flourish and accomplish individual goals, a heartier base should be established and cared for.

We see through the interviews conducted that many folks develop their own peer networks to navigate and survive graduate school, often in ad hoc or surreptitious manners. Zoe, for example, noted that she happened upon a helpful co-working partner due to proximity, happenstance: "I saw in my master's, out of

my cohort, there was one friend I was closer with. And he and I work, like, exactly the same, like, eerily similar. So we were very scheduled and planned everything out, and we kind of pushed each other to get everything done." Here, Zoe speaks of the routinized nature of their approach to their academic workload, having to carefully schedule each task, making sure to allot enough time for each. Tellingly, she referred to their collaboration as "*pushing* each other" through their work (emphasis added), which can certainly help with meeting deadlines and maintaining focus. Setting a calendar and planning out a to-do list makes good job sense. However, I often wonder about how obsessive such scheduling can feel as an academic and how difficult it can be to adhere to so rigid a lifestyle. It's no surprise, then, that many graduate students require moral support, a close peer with whom to commiserate and mutually encourage.

I am especially reminded here of Carla's words, discussed previously: "With COVID I pretty much had to change my entire plans, my entire dissertation project, well you know, keeping the same topics, but still the methodology has had to change and all of that." The academic timetable bends to no will, not even that of a rampant pandemic. With the onus on the individual to alter their plans and upend their calendars, a strong support system becomes even more necessary.

While it has become commonplace for those of us in disability studies to promote *crip time*[35] bureaucracy has yet to heed the call for more equitable degree plans. What's known as "slow professoring," a term originated by Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber (2016), would seem to challenge academia's "culture of speed," and has indeed been well received in some sectors. This approach, however, promotes individual rather than collective slowness, which can ultimately leave people behind, stuck in what Price refers to as an "accommodations loop" (2021). Access and equity in education can only be achieved through collective organizing and accountability measures—crip time enacted on a grand scale. Until that happens, we will remain in an environment in which graduate student success seems to hinge upon individualized factors and a little "luck."

"It's about meeting the right person that's going to help you out at the right time," as Carla noted during our conversation together. What the "right person" means will invariably depend upon the person in question and the circumstances in which they find themselves. In Carla's case, it was a fortuitous matter of forging meaningful connections with her advisor and faculty in her department. However, Carla was also quick to point out the more *nefarious* associations that accrue to the phrase "the right person." For example, we often hear about business and

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[35] An earlier footnote quotes Alison Kafer's definition of crip time, featured in *Feminist Queer Crip* (2013). As a reminder, this term signifies flexibility with time-oriented phenomena like deadlines, schedules, and the very concept of how long folks spend on the activities that make up their daily lives. For an in-depth look at the notion, see Ellen Samuels's "Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time" (2017).

promotions that it's all about "who you know." In some cases, all this means is networking and fostering genuine connections with others. In others, it can refer to nepotism or to faculty who take an unusual, and often unethical, liking to a student. In all cases, such expectations place disabled people at a disadvantage, as so many of us struggle in social situations or, perhaps mistakenly, consider networking as "fake" communication fraught with small talk and awkward conversation.

This is clearly a nuanced situation, and graduate programs should consider the types of relationships in which they expect students to engage. And, of course, my argument depends upon the lack of preying faculty or uncooperative peers, which just isn't a feasible reality to assume. However, I am reminded of Piepzna-Samarasinha's discussion in *Care Work* regarding the importance of trying our best, of navigating difficult circumstances and "difficult" people[36], and caring anyway. Even cross-disability care and intimacy can prove challenging. Regardless, we have to try. "Making space accessible [is] a form of love" (p. 78) that is lacking across the academy as a bureaucratic institution, but that certainly doesn't have to be the case.

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[36] In her words: "Ableism means that we—with our panic attacks, our trauma, our triggers, our nagging need for fat seating or wheelchair access, our crankiness at inaccessibility, again, our staying home—are seen as pains in the ass, not particularly cool or sexy or interesting (p. 77)."

Graduate students meaningfully foster supportive and healing relationships specifically within academic environments, and I suggest that graduate programs need to reconsider the nurturing nature of these connections to combat the isolation so many scholars face as part of their work. Even aside from collaborative writing and teaching, which can be a boon for many but isn't a topic I addressed with participants, academic linkages that are also social and mutually caring make all the difference. And such relationships need not feel like an undesirable extension of work into one's personal life, although I fault no one who *does* feel this way and subsequently sets healthy boundaries. Instead, working and living with and alongside others can provide the sustenance needed to thrive in graduate school, and in academia more broadly.

In considering the connections she's fostered in her program, Carla noted:

> "The people who are 25 to 30 years old and single–or not single, but have no children–or are in the same situation as me, I've become really good friends with in general. And it's been helping a lot to have people around that share the same experiences as you. You can talk about all the things that don't work, you know, support each other."

For Carla, and for many others, building relationships within one's cohort–or, at the very least, with those at similar stages in their careers–provides an opening for reflecting upon and working through "all the things that don't work," many of

which I discussed in the previous chapter. It feels significant, based on personal experience and others' testimonies, that socializing with folks who have shared similar experiences helps students devise solutions and feel less alone in an overwhelming, depersonalizing institution.

Josie, who, as noted earlier, experienced a disability flare while enrolled in her graduate program, highlighted the crucial role played by her peers in ensuring her ability to continue participating in her education. Unable to afford an accessibility parking pass, she often required assistance commuting to campus and attending her classes. During our interview, she emphasized the importance of "good relationships" and the ability to depend on others: "because I had such good relationships with the people in my cohort, they were able to pick me up often and help me get [to class]. So I did depend on those relationships a lot during that time." Josie's connections with her peers fostered the accessibility she needed to continue her education during a bout of chronic illness. Without these relations, it's not unimaginable that she would have needed to drop out or take some time off, which would have jeopardized her financial stability.

Also facilitating the accessibility of the program were Josie's professors, who "were willing to make accommodations and were very supportive." Worried about losing her assistantship and therefore the funding she needed to live, she "needed them at that time to be so generous about deadlines, understanding about withdrawal, compassionate about concerns, interested in making sure that [she]

had the funds [she] needed to survive." Rather than require her to withdraw from her classes completely, Josie's professors provided the space and understanding for her to heal, develop strategies for self-care, catch up on work at a later time, and just *be*. In her own words:

> "I withdrew from two classes, but kept kind of going to do classes with the understanding that I would attend, but not do any coursework or any reading. I would just attend lectures, and I would not have to submit papers until later. So those are all things I was able to accomplish when I was feeling a little bit better and had a better understanding of how to manage my symptoms."

Though these accommodations may seem obvious, like the least her professors could do, they came with a level of care attuned to her emotional wellbeing and economic standing. Truly caring for someone means providing accommodations not just because one is legally required to do so, but also because it's what is needed for a person to thrive.

This example, of Josie's professors providing the accommodations she needed to continue in the program, served the additional purpose of enabling her to maintain any pre-existing peer relationships with other grad students in her courses or to develop any that might have emerged. Such phenomena reflect what access and care can look like in an interdependent system attuned to the intra-active elements that make up the graduate school experience. Rather than expect

143

her to take a leave of absence or push herself beyond her limits, these professors

helped ensure that Josie maintained contact with the crucial intra-actions that

sustained her academic success and wellbeing. Weakened or lapsed relationships

might have precluded her progress if and when she returned to the program

following her disability leave.

While it has been the case that folks have had to work harder to maintain

these connections during the COVID-19 pandemic, making the effort—when

possible and encouraged—goes a long way toward promoting grad student

thriving. Zoe's cohort, for example, implemented a vast array of social activities,

instituting "a community aspect where [they] try to have a lot of group chats"

geared toward the different milestones and events encountered during graduate

school. Group text conversations and virtual Zoom hangouts accompanied the

annual Conference on College Composition and Communication and the projects

they composed as part of their progress through their program.

Also implemented during the pandemic, this time by Zoe's department,

were "self-care events" like the ones she described as follows: "there were Saturday

cooking ones, and one of them I got to do a cooking demo, and we didn't talk

about what—we talked about school, but we weren't working on stuff. It was more

just like, let's just make food and have a good time." Because her program

encouraged social practices rooted in care and community, she felt more supported

than she might have otherwise. However, such support invariably depends upon

144

and intra-acts with other ecological elements, who/that would ideally harbor similar priorities designed to nurture and sustain. Zoe noted that some of her professors expected her to attend virtual meetings and class sessions on Fridays, which before the pandemic had been designated days off from work.

Networks of Care

As a pre-cursor to this dissertation project, I published an article in *Xchanges*, an online, open-access, interdisciplinary journal promoting discourse on topics central to rhetoric, technical communication, and writing across the curriculum. The particular issue in which I was published was oriented as a "symposium on the status of graduate study in rhetoric and composition," and I used the space to articulate my growing focus on what I refer to as "networks of care." Graduate students have a "collective responsibility" to call into question problematic oppressive and disabling work environments and productivity expectations, forging new "rhetorics of care" grounded in more than healthy eating and yoga practice (2020).

Based upon the analyses in this chapter and my own observations, I have identified the following interpersonal relationships as key to graduate students' networks of care within academic assemblages:

- peer-to-peer, colleague, or cohort relationships;
- relationships with one's advisor(s);

- connections with other faculty who are not a student's research advisor but who nonetheless can support students;

- staff relationships;

- and connections with one's own students.

This last category differs from the others in that undergraduate students don't provide direct support or help to their graduate instructors. Educators have a unique duty to their students to construct caring environments that promote mental health and seek to redress institutional harm, but it's also the case that students themselves contribute to the formation of a collaborative and sustaining classroom environment. Personal connections can absolutely flourish in such a space, making the work of education that much more consequential[37].

What might it look like for programs to formally encourage the building of meaningful relationships? In the following mini-chapter, my conclusion, I reflect on the definitions of care that best lend themselves to academic environments. Here, though, I offer a few ideas, some potential practices and orientations graduate programs and departments might encourage, either on a formal level or on the part of the faculty and staff who work with graduate students:

- Dedicated days or weeks set aside to support mental health care, family time, engagement with hobbies, and/or other important recreational

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[37] I discuss such relationships at greater length in a forthcoming book chapter describing what I refer to as *Mad pedagogy*, or the centering of mental health conversations in one's teaching.

activities—like travel (to visit with family or not), creative writing or personal projects, and attending to any other needs that arise. I can imagine some folks objecting, "that's what summers are for," but the fifteen-week-sprint of the semester, for those on semester timelines, can feel arduous, overwhelming, unforgiving. Besides, many students need to work over the summer, either teaching or through outside employment, to make ends meet.

- **Optional** social gatherings, including ones to which students can bring their families, should they desire to do so. It can be rewarding to interact with faculty, staff, and peers—or sometimes just peers—in a casual, informal setting, though opportunities for collaboration should be presented to graduate students outside such spaces as well. Not everyone is able to or interested in attending such events, and some people find the presence of alcohol problematic. These are not reasons to be denied opportunities for growth and development.

- Accommodations beyond what is required by the ADA when students experience disability, acute illness, bereavement, or other events that complicate program progress. This can mean flexibility with due dates, pass/fail course options, forgiveness for absences, digital accessibility through remote participation, or assistance with teaching obligations. The COVID-19 pandemic has illustrated the value of such practices.

147

- Academic credit for collaborative work, co-mentorship, and other relationship-oriented endeavors.

I have additional thoughts I'd *like* to be able to promote, but I'm unsure about their viability. For example, graduate students deserve better compensation and benefits for longer periods of time than most currently receive, but individual departments don't hold the power to implement more equitable pay practices. In many ways, graduate school is a transitional period, a gateway toward other careers and experiences, but it is also a *job*, and education is a human right. Essentially, I wish to change the fundamental operations of our country vis-à-vis education and capitalism, but such work exists beyond the scope of this project.

Finally, what might it look like for graduate students to take part in determining their program trajectory? Beyond coursework, how might they co-develop curricula and milestones? Some of this already occurs with the creation of the exam reading list, but I would be interested in exploring different genres for, say, completing comprehensive exams or composing dissertations. Such assignments likewise enter into intra-actions with students, influencing mental health and wellbeing in their own right. More time needs to be spent exploring the ramifications of scholarly practices beyond offering platitudes about how difficult graduate school can be or promoting coping strategies that don't address the core issues making it difficult in the first place.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Because academic work in the humanities has faced unprecedented challenges in the last 10-20 years (Braidotti, 2019), and especially since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, it has become necessary to take a step back and think about the purposes, rewards, and practicalities of graduate study in humanities disciplines. To begin with, humanities programs are not unique in facing increasing constraints in the form of budget cuts as universities march ever forward to hyper-capitalist control. However, many of our disciplines receive volatile scrutiny or rejection in a way science disciplines have not experienced until relatively recently thanks to the widespread anti-intellectual movement that both catalyzed and is continually supported by Donald Trump's rise to the White House. We see anti-vaccine movements and robust conspiracy theories surrounding COVID-19, with many folks across the United States arguing back in defense of science. Practitioners of science now face scrutiny in the way humanities instructors and creators have done for many decades, including facing pushback from those same science disciplines for not being "rigorous" enough or for placing too high an emphasis on narrative and storytelling, and other practices not readily accepted as adequate methodologies.

Just as funding paradigms and curricular requirements shift further away from necessary education in fields such as English, history, and gender studies, among many others, the American government, conservative politicians, and those who support the present establishment reject scientific recommendations on mask-wearing and social distancing. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), for example, has come under fire in recent months for its response to COVID-19 and the information it disseminates, at times seeming to promote information counter to accepted scientific practice.

Some may find my equation of the current battle over scientific legitimacy with conservatives' refusal to fund many public humanities and liberal arts programs nonsensical or specious, but I suggest that a loss of the creations and methods in our disciplines proves similarly detrimental in terms of mental health and critical thinking. Indeed, humanities scholars and scientists have much to learn from one another, as will be explored through new materialist methodologies that often incorporate ontologies and practices from diverse disciplines. COVID-19 likewise provides a useful case study for thinking through the issues specific to the humanities, particularly as many of our fields have begun rethinking our purposes, goals, and ontological orientations. Thus, in addition to facing scrutiny from others regarding the usefulness of our university courses in favor of preparing students for careers in "more lucrative" or "more valuable" fields, we experience surveillance from within. It seems humanities disciplines are continually revising themselves, in

theory, if not in practice—neoliberal bureaucratic expectations do not allow for the radical restructuring of our programs.

Rosi Braidotti (2019) provides needed guidance in thinking about revising the humanities as a whole. Throughout her opus, Braidotti reflects upon the posthuman world in which we live, thinking through our connections, both harmful and generative, with the living world around us. In her words:

> "My argument is that today the critical posthumanities are emerging as post-disciplinary discursive fronts not only around the edges of the classical disciplines but also as offshoots of the established 'studies'. . . . driven by nomadic, embedded, embodied and technologically-mediated subjects and by complex assemblages of human and non-human, planetary and cosmic, given and manufactured forces. This zoe-centred framework is further enhanced by the analyses of power relations and the social forms of exclusion and dominations perpetuated by the current world order of 'bio-piracy', necro-politics, and systemic dispossession."

I quote these words at length to facilitate an extended look into the trans-disciplinary possibilities of our positions in the academy, if only we can find ways to promote holistic inquiry and, I argue, caring connections within the assemblages within which we find ourselves.

Specifically, Braidotti's framework offers the potential "to move outwards, towards extra-disciplinary encounters with issues and events in the real world. In so doing [the critical posthumanities] also re-assert their institutional power and renew their profiles." Scholars across the country already do much of this work; the trick is finding ways to legitimize such labor in university institutions. Following Braidotti's line of thinking, one way of doing so is rethinking how we conceptualize ourselves by moving beyond graduate education solely for the sake of producing tenure-track faculty.

Not everyone who attends graduate school has the same fortunate experiences I've had. Of course, much of this is mitigated by supportive and understanding exam committees, for those fortunate enough to have them, as I was. But not everyone is so blessed; I happen to personally know a few former graduate students, brilliant in their own rights, who had to pivot their career trajectory, thanks to advisors and committees who didn't respect the challenge of the situation and expected perfect performance. While I didn't obtain enough data through my research to ascertain the frequency of such a phenomenon, these anecdotes reveal the very real stakes embedded in the candidacy process. Some folks, by virtue of personality or disability, simply won't be able to perform well under this kind of pressure, despite being otherwise wonderful scholars and instructors. Failing them, pushing them out of the industry, does a disservice to academia as a whole.

Importantly, too, the abbreviated time span in which many humanities graduate students are expected to compose coherent essays simply does not allow for generative inquiry. While the argument may be made that exam circumstances are so specific that a student need not feel compelled to launch an awe-inspiring argument, the fact remains that the intense pressure of the milestone makes it difficult for many folks to appreciate that fact. Again, with their desired futures on the line, they feel compelled, as with other facets of academe, to excel.

As previously discussed, disability studies scholars highlight the significance of "crip time," the differential amount of time it takes disabled people to complete tasks with time frames specified and normalized by the non-disabled. Candidacy exams, at least when organized according to the strict guidelines discussed in this section, simply do not encourage bodyminds to move at a pace natural to them. Certain disability services accommodations exist, such as a break period during oral exams and potentially extra days to compose written exams, but I can't say whether these are offered by all universities or whether graduate students feel comfortable or even able to register with their school's disability office. Many institutions require "proof" of disability, which can be difficult to obtain, let alone define. And there remains a stigma around openly identifying as disabled or seeking help with what many graduate students feel they expected to do on their own. Thus, crip time remains wholly divorced from exam time, academic time. And certainly, programmatic milestones were not designed with disabled people in

153

mind, as disabled people have historically been regarded as non-academic and non-intellectual.

The Importance of Care in Academic Assemblages

Throughout this dissertation, I have taken the importance of *care* as a given. Though I could devote several pages to a discussion of care and how it is mobilized in various disciplines—including feminist studies, healthcare scholarship, crip theories, and the social sciences—I'd argue that an everyday definition will suffice. Simply put, communities thrive when folks *care about one another*. When we prioritize emotional wellbeing, workplace safety, anti-racist commitments, and personal needs and interests, people have greater capacity to focus on their work and the things that matter to them. This is not to suggest that anyone should be expected to *like* everyone they encounter or work with; such an expectation would prove counter-productive to the goals outlined in this project. Instead, I argue that explicitly centering care networks and prioritizing the fostering of meaningful relationships represent one route toward the enactment of educational justice.

The editors of *Presumed Incompetent II* highlight "the importance of building community, mentoring the next generation, and developing intersectional alliances in order to challenge the oppressive practices that have inflicted so much harm on our communities" (Niemann et al., 2020, p. 9). It is my hope that this

154

project embodies such priorities, particularly as I work through the practices I seek to employ throughout my academic career, the communities I wish to co-create, and the ambient environments I'd like to facilitate for myself and my fellow scholars. The present work is but the beginning.

Future Research Questions & Concluding Remarks

This work reflects only one stage of my exploration of academic trauma and the restorative tactics grounded in methodologies of care and attunement. In the future, I would be interested in exploring lingering effects of this pain. Following graduate school, whether a person obtains a terminal degree or withdraws before completion, how do folks fare mentally? Is clinical treatment necessary? How do people cope? Do they regard themselves as living in or with "crisis"? These are a few questions I'd love to see answered, particularly as I continue my scholarly work beyond my doctoral program. To that end, I'd have to get a little more creative with my recruiting strategies, as the usual listserv communication wouldn't reach folks no longer involved in academic employment.

It would also be interesting to see continued research charting the highs and lows of folks' mental health experiences during their tenure in humanities graduate programs to tune intervention strategies more finely. Such work might take the form of site-specific ethnography, or a sustained study of a single program with the goal of implementing caring potentialities. The precise nature of this

endeavor remains to be seen, but ideally, it would build upon the stated goals, needs, hopes, desires, stories, and bodyminds of the graduate students enrolled in the program and would evolve over time to critically sustain new cohorts. Such longitudinal work seems predicated on my ability to obtain faculty employment in a department supporting a graduate program, so its viability remains to be seen. In any case, I would value the chance to connect with graduate students in the service of constructing equitable and accessible programs or of offering support during the education process.

No matter the focus I adopt, I will need to extend my data beyond graduate students. For example, it would be useful to understand bureaucratic pressures faced by department leaders and administrators, as well as factors influencing the curricular decisions they make. As someone without faculty background, I've only experienced academia through the perspective of a student, and therefore my understanding is limited. Toward the goal of expanding my corpus, I will require the viewpoints of professors, department chairs, deans, and other decision-making figures within the university. Methodologically, I could set up such study in a manner similar to that employed for this dissertation project: distribution of surveys across disciplinary or job-specific listservs followed by select interviews with interested participants. Such research would further my understanding of the roles of care and capacity in graduate education, in that I would be able to develop

insights into program administration practices mindful of student capacity and the value of caring for others.

Ultimately, I seek to continue exploring the different intra-actions that make up the academic ecologies in which graduate students—and faculty, staff, and undergraduate students—take part. How do folks internalize capitalist discourses while ensconced in university spaces? What best promotes digital accessibility, and how might we harness digital resources to promote mental wellbeing and academic success? What does it mean to foster scholarly community with non-human actants? How can questions of "care," "capacity," and "agency" be best mobilized in academic spaces to promote wellbeing and meaningful scholarly work?

These are questions I've only begun to consider; likely, they will shift to reflect more immediate priorities as I move through the next phases of my career. The projects I've outlined in this section will serve as the starting points for my future research—rough drafts, or initial brainstorms, if you will. Whatever the case may be, wherever I may end up, I will bring with me my inclination toward care. This dissertation project represents my commitment to the academy as a site of growth and potential, despite its many flaws. I still very much believe in the possibility of individual and collective community as a small, yet potent form of academic activism, and I will carry the lessons forged through this work into my future projects and working relationships.

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158

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Appendix: Data Collection Timeline and Details on Methods

1. Composed research questions (May 2020)

2. Submitted IRB application (September 2020)

    o IRB approved (October 2020)

3. Created Qualtrics survey (October 2020)

4. Sent Qualtrics survey to disciplinary listservs (November 2020)

    o Data collected through December 2020 and January 2021

    o Survey sent out again to different listservs during February 2021

5. Exported survey responses to Excel spreadsheet (January 2021)

    o This felt like an intuitive first step because I found it difficult to
       picture the data all together in Qualtrics. Seeing everything laid out
       in a spreadsheet helped me get a better sense of the responses each
       question elicited across the data as a whole. This was a great first step
       for starting to think about emerging patterns and consider my initial
       responses to the data. For example, I took the time to pause and skim
       through respondents' answers, considering what remarks I might
       have anticipated and which ones genuinely surprised me. I felt while
       pondering these responses that I was beginning to generate a picture

of the respondents' experiences in graduate school—and, most importantly, graduate school during COVID.

6. Copied qualitative responses into separate Google Docs: one document per question, containing all responses (January 2021)

    o   This move was necessary to home in further on individual survey questions and the responses I received to them. Taking a closer look at the data, I read through respondents' answers much more carefully than I had during the previous step. This constituted my first time really "sitting" with the data.

7. Completed initial coding of qualitative responses (January 2021)

    o   During the same session that I completed the previous step, I applied the open-coding process as described by Geisler and Swartz [or Glaser & Straus or whoever], reading through all the data and marking elements in each response that stood out to me for one reason or another. Reasons for apparent relevance included: response details I might have expected given my own experience as a graduate student in the humanities, response details that surprised me, elements that I noticed repeating across responses (or elements that seemed to have something in common with elements in other responses), patterns emerging in the data, and sections that seemed important based upon previous engagement with salient literature. I

marked these elements by highlighting them and leaving comments directly in each Google document. Each comment briefly detailed the reason I found the element relevant. For example, I noticed several respondents indicating exercise as integral to their mental health coping strategies, so I highlighted each reference to a specific physical activity and marked it as a form of exercise.

8. Continued coding: focused coding (February 2021)

   o I'd taken note of the patterns in the elements I separated out as somehow relevant in the previous step and begun to organize them into categories, listed below. To generate these categories, I considered what larger themes each pattern might be suggesting, particularly within the context of my research questions and interests. For example, it makes more sense for the purposes of my project to have a category that encompasses all strategies used to improve or maintain mental health rather than focus in on them as discrete categories of their own. Irrelevant to my research are the specific exercise activities respondents engage in; I care more that they are engaging in activities specifically geared toward mental health in the first place.

9. Selected survey participants to contact and scheduled interviews (March 2021)

- While determining which respondents would make good candidates for interviews, I initially focused on demographic data, wanting to chat with folks who don't necessarily fit into the "traditional" graduate student mold. The more I think about it, however, the more I realize there are lots of folks enrolled in graduate programs who don't fit that mold. Considering all the queer, BIPOC, and/or disabled folks I've met in grad school, I don't know if there's a "typical" grad student—though, either way, universities still expect so many of us to behave in certain ways that don't always, or often, mesh with who we are.

10. Cleaned up interview transcripts and began coding data (April 2021)

- I ultimately ended up with three interviews. This felt like a natural stopping point, given that each interview elicited rich insights. Thanks to the power of Zoom, which automatically generates written transcripts for recorded sessions, I didn't have to undertake the labor of transcribing these meetings myself. Instead, I cleaned them up for personal legibility and began coding the data in a process similar to that outlined above for the survey responses.

11. Focused coding of interview data (May 2021)

12. Began writing formal analyses based on research memos composed throughout the preceding months (June 2021-August 2021)

13. Drafted dissertation (September 2021-March 2022)