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Open Access Meets Critical Disability Studies

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Three cheers for *Intégral's* pivot into a fully open access online format. Hooray for a simple, clean, and intuitive website design with adjustable text size. Hooray for downloadable .pdfs that are not sequestered behind paywalls and passwords. Hooray for the conversation that is possible when more people are invited to join it. I'm quite sure *Intégral's* changes will be impactful. I think immediately of independent scholars—former students taking a gap year, trailing spouses, post-funding graduate students laboring to complete dissertations, adjunct lecturers. I imagine trying to produce scholarship, perhaps under financial and psychological duress, while not having access to the sources I use every day: library database subscriptions, borrowing privileges, or the institutional funding that makes even basic research possible. *Intégral's* changes make scholarly work less contingent in an age where cash-strapped universities look for ways to make human scholarly labor ever more contingent.

One doesn't have to think long about open access to realize its importance and yet, there remains a genuine difficulty in truly guaranteeing full access for all bodies at all times. The concept of access is, as Bess Williamson quips, "easy to define and comprehend but difficult to create" (2015, 14). Colloquially, if we think about access at all, we often think about physical access to restrooms, entrances to architectural spaces, and basic public infrastructure like transit and sidewalks. This is due in no small part to the legal notions of "accessible" enshrined in the Americans with Disabilities Act. The law's standards—mandates for widths of doorways and heights of sinks—descend from architectural design standards meant to (minimally) accommodate returning physically disabled World War II soldiers and reabsorb them as productive postwar citizens (Williamson 2019, 17–68). Our contemporary concept of "accessible" is conditioned by the histories of disabled, white, middle-class men, and by the current realities of wheelchair users. Despite the visibility of physical difference, infrastructure remains by and large barrier-filled. On my campus alone, I think of the pressing lack of accessible restrooms, the unstable cobblestone sidewalks, the malfunctioning elevators and out-of-service door openers, and buildings' obscure accessible side entrances. These conditions demand that disabled users devote substantial resources to accommodating themselves by using extra time, extra care in planning, and their own insider knowledge to navigate a built environment that still caters to able bodies.

Access, as an aspiration, is much bigger than the still-incomplete project of creating physical accessibility. A fuller definition of access, as Williamson presses, implies "the power, opportunity, permission, or right to come into contact with someone or something" (2015, 14). Williamson's broader definition exposes power relationships, attending in particular to the *who* in barrier-access questions. Who is excluded, who has permission? Who has opportunity, and who decides? Attending to these questions exposes the degree to which access is policed to ensure that those without permission—those without the right to access—remain outside. This "boundary work," in sociological terms, establishes group identity by exclusion (Gieryn 1983). Institutions often justify their exclusions on economic terms, as if there is only one kind of capital, but such boundary work also creates social capital. When certain users are denied opportunity or permission, while others in different circumstances are granted it, gate-keepers reinforce the security of belongingness. Such security is connected to actual resources, but is also a matter of social identity and self-belief: I am deserving, this space or resource is for me, I belong here. Boundary work around

access—who has it, who lacks it—lays bare the power dynamics of social hegemonies. In the words of Aimi Hamraie, "the built world is inseparable from social attitudes, discriminatory systems, and knowledge" (2017, 3). We can locate the revolutionary potential of online open access here too, bearing the power dynamics of an ableist society in mind. *Intégral's* online open-access format ostensibly offers permission to all bodies—that is, all bodies with a device and an internet connection—which, mind you, is still not all, but is substantially better than the boundaries reified by institutional paywalls. By asking access questions, we have the opportunity to confront and dismantle the power dynamics of permission, exclusion, and belonging.

So online open access is an opportunity, but also not a panacea. We should continue to bear in mind the relative invisibility of disability in comparison to more visible or institutionally acknowledged differences of race, gender, and class. Despite our best efforts, the challenges faced by disabled people—whose disabilities vary widely in kind and degree and require different kinds of support—often remain outside of the frame of inclusion. Too often, disability is an afterthought, an unfortunate personal circumstance to be accommodated *post-hoc*, if at all. Classes and most of our other professional activities are still aimed toward a bell curve, with verbal, socially aware, and psychologically resilient students and faculty members in mind (Dolmage 2017, Price 2011). Meanwhile, vulnerabilities pile up for our students and colleagues, who are confronting first generation anxieties, mental health challenges, and racial or sexual discrimination, whilst managing stress of school, stress of money, and stress of bodily difference. Theories of intersectionality highlight the co-occurrence of these forms of exclusion (Kafer 2013). As we know, those with disabilities become even more vulnerable if they are racial minorities and if they are lacking access to economic security, a situation that is far too common. Furthermore, lack of access to stable, secure employment in racism-free spaces creates disabling conditions, e.g., "debility," even amongst otherwise abled or unimpaired bodies (Puar 2017). Given the coincidence of these challenges, it is important to think capaciously about access, to organically plan for difference *of many sorts*, and—especially since we work in spaces of education and knowledge production—to open doors as widely as possible. Exclusion occurs across multiple axes, so those opening access must strive to eliminate barriers that exclude based on these different factors.

This striving after universal access is utopic in both senses—it conjures a hopeful fantasy of egalitarianism and diversity, but at the same time, it is as impossible as the fictitious feminist and sci-fi utopias of late-20th-century literature. As scholars in critical disability studies remind us, universal design or open access does not create seamless access for all bodies at all times. This is in part because barriers are different for those with physical disability, mental health challenges, cognitive disability, autism, deafness, and blindness. Further, universal design and access initiatives are often "disability neutral" (Hamraie 2017, 12). The specific needs of disabled populations are often diluted or made invisible as they are combined with broader ethical imperatives to design features like curb cuts "for the good of all." We often have the impression that accessible design is common-sensical, that it is simply synonymous with "good design," and that it benefits all users equally. What we don't often admit when we are striving is that we have probably lost sight of the most vulnerable. There is no frictionless "all."

As Aimi Hamraie advocates, we must analyze the ways that "the very notions of accessibility, inclusion, all, and lifespan are contested, historically contingent, and value-laden" (2017, 9). Concepts like universal design and open access for all are ideological propositions, not pure ethical stances. In the present world, inclusive design shores up a capitalist power structure, aiming to build an "all" of productive citizens who can labor, drive an economy as consumers, and accumulate enough wealth to eliminate their reliance on a social safety net (Hamraie 2017, 10–11). Open access invites "all" to participate in a small slice of institutional scholarly discourse that remains, in several ways, hegemonic and exclusionary. There may be no formula for both including disabled bodies in the frame and protecting them from capitalist exploitation. I take up this more cynical perspective only to point out that we need to look broadly at the many forms of exclusion created by our institutions and our behaviors and ask critically and repeatedly about what the barriers to access are.

The social model of disability says that *impairments* (defined as mind-body differences) become *disabilities* when bodies meet environments that exclude full participation. In the social model, access is not a responsibility of individual bodies—not a problem to be solved by individuals—but a process to be addressed in social spaces. Access needs to be created iteratively by governments, institutions, organizations, leaders—even music theory journals. While it is naïve to assume there is one universal design, or one plan for access that will guarantee an egalitarian right, we can begin by perpetually interrogating what "open access" means. Access to what? Open for whom?

Music theory has long been on the vanguard with flagship open-access publications like *Music Theory Online* and *SMT-V* that aim toward democratizing access to academic music theory. Likewise, publications such as *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy* and *Engaging Students* capital-

ize upon web-based communities and open access, centralizing connections between students, high school music teachers, private instructors, and academic music theorists. *Intégral*'s move to open access builds upon this impulse to broaden the *who*, and I hope the *what*, of music theory. Open access gives us the opportunity to do more democratizing: to engage in conversation with scholars without affiliations or PhDs, and to include non-canonical repertoires as well as non-canonical modes of inquiry. Open access allows us not only to perform academic inquiry in public spaces, but to expand our idea of what it means to "theorize" music and who can do so.

We should start taking seriously the idea that musical knowledge and insight (e.g., music theory) is produced from within many different kinds of embodiment and experience, not all of them interdependent upon PhD-level academic training. It is time to take seriously the insights produced by autistic and Deaf bodies and more (Bakan 2018, Dell'Antonio and Grace 2016, DiBernardo Jones 2016, Holmes 2017, Maler 2016). Music, as a cultural product, is shared and valued by many or most—bodies with or without disabilities, with or without academic credentials, with or without institutional support. An open access *Intégral* offers an opportunity to double down on the idea—already in evidence in YouTube tutorials, Slate.com pieces, and video game conferences—that the category "music theorists" might include anyone who thinks seriously about music and how it works (O'Hara 2019, Grasso 2019).

Faye Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp remind us that disability is "a future that ultimately includes all of us" (2015, 1). As anthropologists, they not only quantitively document how many people have a disability—to count who may be eligible for government benefits, individualized education plans, or medical care—but also attend to the question of whether disability is present in spheres of cultural production. Are the lives of disabled peoples incorporated into artworks, literature, music, and scholarly production? How can disability count as a way of being? These are questions that I hope the field of music theory will continue to ask, as it opens up its boundaries and validates participation from many kinds of hearers and thinkers.[1]

Just because we cannot solve all the problems, we should not shrink from solving one of the problems. Changes such as *Intégral's* move to online open access are meaningful. We can make tangible progress toward a future in which everyone counts. We've never arrived, but we can always keep looking for ways to open spaces and resources to more people. Bravo to *Intégral* for its move to open access, and to our collective, continued efforts to build more inclusive and more participatory discourse in music theory.

[1] Joseph Straus's talk "Music Theory's Therapeutic Imperative and the Tyranny of the Normal" at the 2019 Society for Music Theory plenary session on November 9, 2019 speaks in further detail on ways be critical of the ableism present in much of the field. A recording of the entire plenary livestream is available at https://youtu.be/ZSOFpwDIZCA?t=7444, and the session's transcript will be published in an upcoming volume of *Music Theory Spectrum*.

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