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Anne Dalke

Bryn Mawr College, adalke@brynmawr.edu

Clare Mullaney

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**On Being Transminded:
Disabling Achievement, Enabling Exchange**

Anne Dalke (Term Professor of English and Gender Studies,
Bryn Mawr College, adalke@brymawr.edu) and
Clare Mullaney (Graduate Student in English,
University of Pennsylvania, claremul@sas.upenn.edu)

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Abstract

We write collaboratively, as a recent graduate and long-time faculty member of a small women's liberal arts college, about the mental health costs of adhering to a feminist narrative of achievement that insists upon independence and resiliency. As we explore the destabilizing potential of an alternative feminist project, one that invites different temporalities in which dis/ability emerges and may be addressed, we work with disability less as an identity than as a generative methodology, a form of relation and exchange. Mapping our own college as a specific, local site for the disabling tradition of "challenging women," we move to larger disciplinary and undisciplining questions about the stigma of mental disabilities, traversing the tensions between institutionalizing disability studies and the field's promise of destabilizing the constrictions of normativity.

I. "Unbecoming Women"

"If we refuse to become women, what happens to feminism?"
—Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*

During the 1900-01 academic year a student using the initials E.T.D. published a short story in Bryn Mawr College's bi-weekly magazine, the *Fortnightly Philistine*. Entitled "The Crime," the narrative focuses on the experiences of a second-semester senior struggling unsuccessfully with the stresses and pressures of academic life. Apprehensive about the concluding assessments of her college career, she comes to embody such a state of fearful extremity that she is unable to complete her work. Although she proclaims that "I am in perfect possession of my senses. Nervous, yes; very nervous, very melancholy but not mad, no, no!" the story ends when "the unfortunate Senior, who had been an exceptionally good student...dashed her head against the corner of the table and expired, raving mad" (4).

We open our project with this story because it so acutely dramatizes our central theme: the dynamic relationship between intellectual achievement and mental disability. "The Crime," which riffs on Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart," is explicit in its portrayal of a young woman's mind under pressure, so fearful of her inability to meet Bryn Mawr's standards of academic accomplishment that she eventually does violence to herself. We use the term "disabling achievement" to name

this nexus of anxiety surrounding intellectual performance: it is our description of the mechanisms whereby aiming for achievement can have the “crosswise,” or “transverse,” effect of generating disablement. Because we believe that insistent emphasis on advancement, progress, and futurity—as well as institutional focus on preparing students to meet these demands—disables us all, we begin to craft here a space in which the structures of cultural achievement need not disable. We re-envision an institution in which no one need gain intellectually at the cost either of her own mental health, or of another’s loss or failure. We end with a particular focus on the disabling quality of those time-pressures that structure, animate and strangle academic life. Throughout, we traverse the tensions between institutionalizing disability studies and the field’s promise of destabilizing the constrictions of normativity (cf. Snyder and Mitchell 192).

The 100-year-old story of “The Crime” serves both as dramatic backdrop and historical scaffolding for the disabling dimensions of women’s higher education. The scene we set at our home institution extends into multiple larger, intersecting discourses of mental dis/ability, feminism, education, and queer studies. Fifteen years before “The Crime” was published, the founders of Bryn Mawr College had addressed head-on a particularly disabling understanding of “women’s nature.” Early proponents of the College were challenged by a contemporary belief about the distinctive frailness of female bodies, a view championed most ardently by Edward Clarke, a Harvard Medical School professor who began his study of *Sex in Education; or, A Fair Chance for the Girls* with a description of “closed bodily systems,” which contained “only finite amounts of energy”: “Studying...for young developing women...pulled blood, nourishment and energy away from reproductive organs...in the fragile and critical stages of maturation” (quoted in Grubb and Houghton). Concerned that excessive study would divert a young woman’s finite energy supply from her reproductive capacities, inhibiting and threatening the health of generations to come, Clarke argued that only by avoiding college studies could a young woman “retain uninjured health and a future secure from neuralgia, uterine disease, hysteria, and other derangements of the nervous system” (41-42).

The second president of Bryn Mawr, M. Carey Thomas, whose vision was definitive in shaping the College’s mission, spoke of being “haunted...by the clanging chains of that gloomy little specter, Dr. Edward H. Clarke's *Sex in education* [sic]” (69). In a 1908 address celebrating Bryn Mawr’s “experiment” of offering women rigorous intellectual engagement that would not adversely affect their minds or bodies, Thomas proclaimed that the

passionate desire of women of my generation for higher education was accompanied throughout its course by the awful doubt, felt by women themselves as well as by men, as to whether women as a sex were physically and mentally fit for it....We were told that their brains were too light, their foreheads too small, their reasoning powers too defected, their emotions too easily worked upon to make good students. None of these things has proved true. Perhaps the most wonderful thing of all to have come true is the wholly unexpected, but altogether delightful, mental ability shown by women college

students. (64, 70)

Thomas countered Clarke's description of women's fragile biological structures by taking a stand against the social convention of intellectual isolation: young women, she claimed, had been "crushed by the American environment," not "enabled by circumstances to use their powers" because they had been "cut off from essential association with other scholars" (Horowitz). Although Thomas imagined an intellectual community in which such isolation would be reduced, one of the ironic outcomes of her vision has been the current perpetuation of what we see as isolating academic practices.

It is our hope to intervene, here, in the disturbing dynamics set in motion by the scholarly ambition and attainment of women. We use E.T.D.'s story, in the context of Bryn Mawr's founding, as paradigmatic of an ongoing, uneasy relationship between women's education and mental health, as we attempt to further refigure the relationship among individuals and institutions, personal narratives and larger theoretical claims. Our project is thus an extension of Thomas's, which took a stand against Clarke's vision of the female body as a closed system, in order to explore the possibilities that might lie in more open networks.

Although expressed in different language, disquietude about "feeble minds" is as prevalent in the early twenty-first century as it was in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth. We no longer call unsettled minds "hysteric," but describe them instead with a range of DSM diagnoses, including "anxiety," "depression," "bipolar disorder," "OCD," "anorexia" and "bulimia." In "Revisiting the Corpus of the Madwoman," Elizabeth Donaldson argues that it is impossible to reconcile such "medical discourses of mental illness, which describe the symbolic failure of the self-determined individual," with "the competing discourses of democratic citizenship, in which will and self are imagined as inviolable" (107).

The conflict Donaldson identifies between the individual and the communal, between medical diagnoses and their social implications, is also highlighted in our recent fundraising campaign, "Challenging Women: Investing in the Future of Bryn Mawr." In its review of the contemporary challenges "which Bryn Mawr must be able to prepare its students to meet"—

to continue to advance as women in science; lead in the arts and humanities; prepare effectively for life in an increasingly global environment; build strong, diverse communities; use technology for teaching and learning; and *strive for balance between academics and other aspects of a modern, healthy life* (*Alumnae Bulletin*, emphasis added)

—the language of the campaign bears witness, particularly in this last clause, to the continued uneasy relationship between academic achievement and health.

This dynamic is beginning to garner attention in the field of disability studies. Several years ago, Catherine Kudlick wrote a short article challenging the "normative ideas" underlying our conceptions of "academic competence," and questioning the "unhealthy forms of intellectual conformity" they entail (164-165). Margaret Price's 2011 *Mad at School* was the first book-length

scholarly text, however, “to broaden the field of DS and...the field’s long-standing emphasis on sensory impairments,” by focusing on mental disability in the particular context of the academy (5). Price argues that “academic discourse,” in its appreciation of rationality and reason, “operates not just to omit, but to abhor mental disability—to reject it, to stifle and expel it” (8). Drawing on her assessment of the ways in which educational institutions like Bryn Mawr continue to promote a profound distinction between intellectual work and mental disability, we suggest that they are instead dialectical, each constituting and negating the other.

Sharing both M. Carey Thomas’s commitment to the academic achievement of women, and E.T.D.’s fears about the costs such achievement entails, we attempt here to open up possibilities both for enabling women and “disabling,” or “undoing,” what the category of “achieving women” entails. In advocating for a more open and collective system, we both resist Edward Clarke’s closed one and welcome all forms of mental variety. In an era when the classification “woman” is under interrogation, and when women, however defined, can find their education at almost any academic institution, we suggest ways in which single-sex institutions like Bryn Mawr might better respond to the particularities of, as well as to the increasingly diverse and complex interactions within and among, their student bodies. From the particular location of feminist disability studies, we add to the ongoing deconstruction of “the unity of the category of *woman*” a range of questions about feminist valorizations of “individualistic autonomy” (Garland-Thomson 16, 34).

Bryn Mawr students call themselves “Mawrtyrs,” as a punning expression both of their undying devotion to their academic work, and of the profound ethics of this allegiance. In this essay, we call for a shift from “mawrtyr-dom” to a more open-minded, open-hearted way of thinking about intellectual work. To signal that shift, we employ a polygeneric form of writing, juxtaposing personal narratives with theory drawn from disability and queer studies. Using all of these voices to probe and ponder the others, we portray a messier world than the one described in Bryn Mawr’s *Alumnae Bulletin*, one that replaces the binary constrictions of healthy and sick, sane and insane, with a more hybrid form: disarrayed, cluttered, toggling between disablement and enablement.

The protagonist of “The Crime,” unable to be a “complete master of herself,” fails to muster the characteristics needed to excel in a demanding academic environment. The leakiness and instability inherent in her madness, the “trickling, horrid drops” of ink that consume her “boiling brain,” stand in contrast to the “stolid” buildings of the College (2), which represent the sharply defined demands of academia that she cannot meet. Her unsteady movement enacts a form of “maddening” that results in disaster. We advocate, here, another version of her “waffling” and “wobbling,” one with a different, and more socially useful, result. If we can resist “walling off” disability, we might prompt instead a form of interdependency defined by mutual vulnerability—and mutual desire.

In “The Crime,” the protagonist’s “horror of the appliances of study grew” until she had “a look of feverish intellectuality” that “no mere fleshly seeker of marks could rival” (3). “An exceptionally good student” (4) is thus “maddened” by the intersection of the College’s demands with her own desires to achieve them. Although her ostensible “crime” is that of stealing others’ ink (in order

to forestall the dreaded final exam), her larger fault is her failure to meet the institution's expectations of academic performance. Perhaps an even larger "crime"—*etymologically: "fault," or "cry of distress"* (Harper)—is that of the College, which places those rigorous demands on her. A hundred years later, the "mad pride" movement speaks to this dynamic by stressing the fruitful potential of mental variety and difference, and advocating, thereby, movement across presumed categories of disablement.

II. Dis-labeling madness

"What if, like queerness, we began to preface disability less as an identity than an intensely generative methodology—a form of relation...an exchange embodied in the very crevices of breakage, the borderlines between abled-bodied and disabled worlds?" —Clare Mullaney, "Brandy Snaps and Battlefields"

Like gay and lesbian liberation movements, which appropriated the once-abjected term "queer" for a new, proud self-identification, "mad pride" is a growing civil rights movement that aims at showcasing difference by re-signifying the term "mad," which has long been saturated in stigma. Efforts to gain justice for "madness" have since spread throughout the world. "International Mad Pride Day" is now scheduled yearly on July 14, because, in the storming of the Bastille, prisoners detained for being "mad" were freed ("July is Mad Pride Month").

Multiple groups celebrate "mad pride." The Icarus Project challenges the distinct psychiatric divisions between "sane" and "insane" by commemorating the unusual and "spectacular" ways in which "information and emotion" are processed by those bearing the "dangerous gifts" of "mental illness" (Icarus, Jost). MindFreedom also queries the social framing of difference, by using "sanism"—discrimination against those labeled as having a mental illness—as a new point of analysis. Replacing "disabled" with "dis-labeled," this group refuses to medicalize what they describe as "symptoms of life." The organization's president, David Oaks, points out that the term "mad" derives from the roots "*mei*," meaning "to change," and "*mutuus*," "done in exchange." Because these are also the roots for "motion" (Oaks), this etymological derivation helps celebrants of "mad pride" to mobilize madness: rather than a fixed, stable category, it signifies a state of variability.

Our work follows the trajectory laid out by MindFreedom. It draws as well on Bethany Stevens' interrogations of "transability," and on Judith Halberstam's use of the term "transgendered" to move beyond both "uniqueness" and "unilateral oppression, and beyond the binary division of flexibility or rigidity" (21). We offer here the kindred term "transminded" to suggest ways in which "mad" and "sane," long trapped in polarized mind states, might better be understood as related, variable, and productive mental activities. "Transminded" encompasses the inherent stretchiness of mental dis/ability, and suggests the ways in which its shape willfully molds both to and against others. We hope that this new term—not situated in psychiatry, more pliable than "neurodiversity"—works to queer the trope of madness: "transminded" is defined by expansion, rather than lack or impairment. It evokes multiplicity and diversity, as in Kate Millett's description

of living with manic-depressive disorder:

We do not lose our minds, even “mad” we are neither insane nor sick. Reason gives way to fantasy—both are mental activities, both productive. The mind goes on working, speaking a different language, making its own perceptions, designs, symmetrical or asymmetrical; it works....Why not hear voices? So what? (315)

Those voices are not always tolerable, of course, and the experience of hearing them not always productive. We hope to alter the conventional valuing of “productivity,” however, in our call for “transmindedness,” a hybrid state that yields novel connections and perspectives. Building on the history in feminist disability studies of an ever-complexifying identity-based politics (cf. Garland-Thomson, Hall, Wendell), we nudge the field towards a methodology (*choose here your favored term to embody the act of querying normative assumptions*) for “queering,” “cripping,” or “maddening” what it means to be an intellectual woman in the early twenty-first century. In doing so, we move from nouns and their modifiers—“*queer womyn*,” “*disabled activist*,” “*madwoman*,” “*smart lady*”—to verbs, from bounded identities to conditioned, and ever-conditional, actions.

Multiple scholars in disability studies have prepared the way for us here, by unsettling fixed identity categories. Robert McRuer’s “crippin,” which replaces “cultures of upward redistribution” with “an accessible world” (71), has been helpful to our thinking about replacing current conceptions of women’s academic achievement, which are measured against the failures of those who do not conform. Lennard Davis’s call for “The End of Identity Politics” has also been particularly productive for, and clarifying of, the feminist disability work we have been doing at Bryn Mawr. The states of “dependency and interdependence” Davis describes (241) accord well with our sense of “maddening” as moving, fragmenting and splintering; we draw on his de-stabilizing project as a way of thinking differently about—*queering, crippling, maddening*—what it means to “identify.”

Leaking beyond conventional patterns and schemas of being, “madness” forges a non-linear trajectory, an un-straight path. We turn now to describe how re-thinking madness within a more flexible frame has helped us to refigure, and reimagine, achievement and disablement at Bryn Mawr.

III. Exploring Alternative Feminisms

“We are all nonstandard.”

—Lennard Davis, “The End of Identity Politics”

We have nurtured several “transminded” initiatives on our campus over the course of the past few years, each one shifting our understanding of “madness” from an anchored category to a more open, mutable one. Anne first began to engage this dance of disabling achievement in a small Faculty Working Group on Assessment, where a year-long conversation about varieties of academic appraisal and evaluation led to an appreciation of the wide diversity of our students, and multiple discussions about how better to recognize and evaluate their work. Slowly this

conversation shifted to imagining educational structures that might allow more space not only for the various modes of student achievement, but also for life's interruptions and challenges.

Because a recent study of the “campus climate” had made it clear that the portfolio of the ideal Bryn Mawr woman—an ambitious, capable and high-achieving student—emphatically excluded mental illness (and with it multiple, valuable forms of human and academic expression), we began to explore the possibility of bringing a discussion of student mental health to the faculty floor. The Advisory Council to the Faculty Chair thought the topic important—but also dangerous enough that it need to be handled with extreme care.

The prospect of a faculty-wide discussion evoked a range of fears: of naming the problem, of being called to be responsive to and responsible for it, and of making some serious mistakes in trying to respond. In the initial stages of our conversation, the Advisory Council conceptualized “mental illness” as a distinctly medicalized category, encompassing a small number of students whose conditions threaten our shared academic work. Concerned that faculty “don’t like uncertainty,” and did not feel competent to deal with the range of student needs and challenges, the Council proposed that a panel of mental health professionals might advise faculty how to “deal with this kind of diversity,” and so guide our thinking about strategies of inclusion.

It was challenging even to label this topic: saying that we wanted to “address the mental health needs” of our students already framed the conversation as being about a medical problem. Over the course of our planning discussions, however, the Advisory Council became eager to facilitate a process that might help the campus move beyond the paradigm of trying to “fix” those students who are challenged by our classrooms. The productive large-group conversation that eventually ensued in late March 2012 was not framed by the topics of “illness” and “disability,” but presented rather as one in a sequence of discussions about “meeting the needs of our diverse student body.”

Those who teach in classrooms were joined in this conversation by athletics faculty, deans, and staff members from the Health Center and Office of Public Safety. A member of the Graduate School of Social Work prepared us for the conversation by sharing some statistics and offering three frameworks to help us begin thinking specifically about mental illness: we could understand it as a medical issue, the result of biological malfunctioning; as a social construction that serves to maintain the status quo (Ray McDermott and Hervé Varenne argue that the culture of schooling creates particular syndromes that then need accommodation); or as “desire-based,” a formulation that replaces the language of “damage” and deficit” with the complexity, contradiction, and self-determination of lived lives (Tuck 413).

We began with writing and then speaking in small groups, before gathering together for a wide-ranging discussion reflecting on what the institution rewards, and at what cost: how to begin talking about ways in which the culture at Bryn Mawr contributes to mental health problems for everyone on campus, *including staff and faculty*? The distinct identities of the “mentally ill” and the “healthy” began to blur as we considered structures that might better enable us all.

Margaret Price explains that discussions like these often fall into two clearly divided camps, with those personally affected by issues of mental disability set against those concerned with "falling standards" and maintenance of the academy's drive for "able-mindedness" ("Killer Dichotomies"). Our intervention in that distinction meant naming the dialectic in which each "camp" undergirds, and so defines, the other. "Protecting standards" predicates achievement on the existence of a population who cannot meet those goals; advocating for the "disabled" sets that distinct identity against those who are "enabled." Both acts of "exclusion" are caught within what Lennard Davis identifies as the "larger system of regulation and signification" which disables us all (240)—a system that Bryn Mawr faculty and staff will continue to interrogate in the months and years ahead.

Multiple student activities are also aimed at ending the culture of silence and shame surrounding mental illness on campus. This is a particular focus of Active Minds, a national organization, founded in 2000, which now has chapters on over three hundred college campuses. In the spring of 2010, when Clare first began serving as one of the co-presidents of Bryn Mawr's chapter, we could not seem to build up our membership, and our events were poorly attended. We imagined a dynamic and interactive community that could replace the normative public discourse about strength and autonomy with discussions about shared vulnerability, but we were finding it very difficult to talk openly about feeling weak, frustrated, vulnerable, tired, *irrational*. It seemed to us difficult, if not impossible, to create "mad spaces" amidst the Bryn Mawr culture of achievement.

Bryn Mawr is mostly welcoming to those who are gender variant: a range of identities are explored and celebrated, among friends, in courses and student groups; organizations pertaining to bodily variety, gender identity and sexuality have a large presence on campus. Active Minds had been trying for several years to promote a similarly inclusive environment for all types of minds, but mental illness carries a particular stigma at Bryn Mawr, serving as the shadow side of the strong, independent, and productive women the students are striving to be. Although gender variance may destabilize the traditional notion of a "women's college," it does not threaten the image of the "intellectual sister" that is so essential to Bryn Mawr's vision of itself and others' vision of it. Raising questions about the mental health costs of this intellectual work complicates this vision tremendously—although we are arguing here that doing so can offer a richer, more creative version of what an "intellectual sister" might mean.

In keeping with the character of Bryn Mawr, where intellectual work is so highly valued, we began connecting activist objectives with more theoretical ones. With Anne as our faculty advisor, we formed a network linking the "top-down" organization of "Active Minds" with the "bottom-up" structure of "The Slippery Brain Sodality," a group composed of individuals with "brains that change states frequently/rapidly," who were rethinking existing approaches to stigmatization, cultural dependence, and the very basic contrast of "health" with "illness." We also created a documentary entitled "Stomping Out Stigma," featuring students and faculty talking about their experiences with mental illness on Bryn Mawr's campus. Modeling our video after the "Pink Glove Dance," a YouTube sensation created to raise awareness of breast cancer,

we asked each of our participants to wear a silver crown, as they danced in their dorm rooms and shimmied in their offices, physical education classes, and gymnastic practices.

We followed the campus premiere of the documentary with a panel discussion that explicitly aimed to break down the conventional distinctions separating the personal from the theoretical, and mental health from mental illness. The panelists included Anne; another professor who specializes in film studies, and has lived with depression; and two psychologists from our on-campus Child Study Institute. Our conversation centered around the unhealthy demands for performance to which Bryn Mawr holds its students, and the high standards to which these student “Mawrtys” hold themselves. We discussed the widespread student culture of “passing” as abled and achieving. One student described the professors as “another species” of “accomplishment and achievement,” who were unable to understand her struggles. We challenged the divisions separating those who achieve from those who fail, the capable from the incapable, the mentally fit from the mentally ill, acknowledging that all of us operate on a spectrum of difficulty and possibility.

Our most successful venture in this regard was an event, suggested by our national organization, called “Post Secret.” Placing a blank index card in each student’s mailbox, asking her to write, draw, or “craft” a secret, we collected over two hundred responses for display in the student center. We were heartened to learn, from a survey we conducted later, that many students felt grateful to have suppressed, often shameful, experiences pulled to the surface, to see what they knew reflected in the words of someone else. In contrast to the closed system of Edward Clarke, our Post Secret project figured an open structure that highlighted multiple forms of mental variety. Each postcard was detached from the person who wrote it, intermingled on the display board with secrets of very different types. The link between behavior and identity was thus disrupted, as was the hierarchy of importance governing the relationship of different secrets to one another. Stories of severe mental illness appeared next to sillier tales; the network of secrets was utterly horizontal in its distribution.



[A black poster board, featuring an arrangement of post secrets, in many different shapes and colors, on display in Bryn Mawr’s campus center.]

The aesthetic form we created, with postcards separate yet connected, was that of a collage. Halberstam terms this mode “self shattering,” because it models the depth of interdependence and “interbeing” in individual trajectories, and so challenges the “deeply disabling” mode of the self-sufficient individual (136, 139). By connecting all parts, we featured a collective representation, which may have made individual authors of the postcards feel less vulnerable: they could see that these were perturbations they did not have to absorb on their own. The scattered world we put on display illustrated, too, what we mean by the act of “maddening”: unsettling the distinctiveness of dis/ability.

Our understanding of what we accomplished in this project is still incomplete, as are the possibilities that might be opened up by its further iterations. For instance, a student in Anne’s Non-Fictional Prose class, who posed some questions on-line about the viability of the Post Secret initiative, queried the degree to which “anonymity allows the truth, or facts, to become clear.” She troubled in particular the “truth claims” of the display: “I wonder how many of these are true, how many are exaggerated truths for the sake of public recognition/publication”? (FatCatRex). Transforming a “closed system” of shameful secrets into an open form of posting is a means of advocating extension and claiming lateral space. But what other dangers—and possibilities—lie in open networks?

We have learned a lot from our several years working with Active Minds, both about the strong fears that animate any conversations around questions of mental difference and dis/ability on campus, and about our own preferences for activism with a clear theoretical base, which both understands why it is acting, and is savvy about the limitations of that action. We have also recognized our particular investment in forms of activism that refuse to privilege the needs of one group over those of another, and signal as well the instability of any category that we might use to separate ourselves from others. We acknowledge, too, the fluidity of the categories we have used to separate parts of ourselves from other parts: the “capable” from the “mad,” the “achieving” from the “failing,” the enabling from that which disables.

Our largely practical discussions with faculty, as well as our advocacy activities on campus, have certainly complicated the project of disability studies at Bryn Mawr, where it has become much more than a mere call for accessibility: not a one-way request, but rather a multiply-positioned, “transminded” exchange. We are now dreaming together about a more capacious vision of what it might mean for us to create a shared community out of these multiple interacting parts. The cross-disciplinary approach we see emerging is that of community intent on expanding itself, combining creative, literary, educational, political, psychological, sociological, and scientific perspectives.

Some of the actions we envision have a pragmatic dimension: establishing chapters of Active Minds on each of the five “sister” campuses (Bryn Mawr, Barnard, Wellesley, Smith, and Mount Holyoke), with representatives convening each year to discuss past events and plan future ones; reaching out to the first-semester students who are facing the challenge of leaving home; creating a website for this population that not only lists the symptoms of various disorders, and valuable resources for treatment, but also information about the fluidity of identity, as described

by disability studies, crip studies, and mad pride activists. We imagine more on-campus events like “The Female Orgasm Project” co-sponsored by Active Minds and Rainbow Alliance (an LGBTQ advocacy group), which showcased the usefulness of conceptualizing our identities as multiple and positively intersecting (“*orgasms are good for mental health!*”).

Other projects might focus on larger, perhaps-surprising questions, such as the disabling quality of our current conceptions of time. In accord with such possibilities, we turn now to speculate on the degree to which all preoccupation with achievement—itsself dependent on futurity—is inherently disabling.

IV. Unbinding Time

“Life + art is a boisterous communion/communication with the dead. It is a boxing match with time” —Jeanette Winterson, *Why Be Happy When You Can Be Normal?*



Matt Johnson, "The Shape of Time," 2009.

[A tire, looped and twisted in a shape resembling a three-dimensional figure-eight, sits on a concrete surface. Each loop intersects with the other, forming a three-pointed structure.]

“What does time look like? I think of two hammocks, one an individual human can feel on the body, and one vast....Universe as hammock? The holding and the mesh and mold ability seem key.” —Alice Lesnick, E-mail

Consider, for a moment (*what is a moment?*), these three images—one visual, two verbal—each replacing the inexorable “train track” of linear time, and its anxious measurement in school settings, with the possibility of communicating with the past (and future?). Visualize, for a moment (*what is a moment?*), the enabling vision of a “loopy” universe. Or of one molded to us and holding us up. Or—even better—moldable *by us* to (better) sustain us all. Re-visualize, for a moment (*what is a moment?*), the time in which we are teaching and learning, not only as sequential but also as iterative, not only as measured but also as experienced, not only as outer but also as inner. Imagine, for a moment (*what is that moment?*), a form of education that is less driven by the clock, less bound by the conventional rituals of school time (cf. Cambone 517).

“Timing clearly enters into the measurement of educational achievement...”

through the numerous forms of timed testing in which performance is evaluated in relation to material grasped in a specific segment of time....the quality of reflection is conditioned by its temporal organization, and so, too, is the quality of imagination” —Hope Jensen Leichter, “A Note on Time and Education”

A review of the past several decades of publications in *Teachers' College Record* turns up very few articles that acknowledge, as Hope Leichter did in 1980, the way in which “all educational experience...is organized in time.” Leichter’s observations, that the “assumptions about time and timing” that “pervade educational theory and practice” “often remain unexamined,” and “alternative modes of temporal organization ignored” (360), remain as true now as they were when she conducted her study over thirty years ago.

The adoption of business values and practices in educational administration has been extensively documented in Raymond Callahan’s classic study of *Education and the Cult of Efficiency*, which denounces the latter as an “inadequate and inappropriate basis for establishing sound educational policy” (viii), and accordingly recommends changing the nature of graduate work in educational administration. Our own very compatible intervention involves re-thinking the role of standard “time” in education writ large.

U.S. educators long ago turned to factories as a model for designing schools (Oakes and Lipton 6, 22); the newly technologized, standardized, and purportedly “objective” testing regime has more recently given rise to subject-specific chunks of time, administered to students in age- and ability-specific groupings (Oakes and Lipton, Ravitch). In now bringing this particular—and *profoundly disabling*—dimension of educational practice into focus, we challenge the belief that the purpose of education is to turn out children at a standard pace, with a measurable set of skills. Current education policies such as No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top demonstrate the persistence and intensification of narrowly quantifiable learning and measurable results. These days, the only learning that counts is countable. The drumbeat of “time on task” and measurable achievement locks students into a system in which one very particular kind of productivity is maximized (Anyon). These procedures are of course not limited to K-12 institutions. Ellen Samuels explains, for instance, that graduate student education at the University of California at Berkeley “is structured by an administrative construct called, with no hint of irony, ‘normative time,’ referring ‘to the amount of time it takes ideally for a student in a particular discipline to complete a doctoral degree.’” Alison Kafer has also more recently challenged the normative and normalizing expectations of pace and schedule by evoking a “resistant orientation” to “productivity, accomplishment, efficiency” (40).

We join Samuels and Kafer in our argument that the heavy drivers of time and a narrowly productive status quo fail to match the complex world we learn and live in.

In 1931

--eighty-one years ago--

Salvador Dali etched his final strokes on *La persistència de la memòria...*

And so we recommend some alterations in educational practice—as well as in discursive form (you'll begin to notice now a few of our poetic experiments, interspersed in this text, in slightly smaller font, in hopes of interrupting the “flow” of things....)

"What would academia look like if we built in more interstices, more time when 'nothing' happened?" —Margaret Price, "Ways to Move"

"...the aim is to slow down...truly theoretical reflection is possible only if thinking decelerates...finding anomalies, paradoxes, and conundrums in an otherwise smooth-looking stream of ideas" —Timothy Morton, Ecology Without Nature

“Slowing down,” learning to teach and learn in what Thomas Berry calls more “comprehensive dimensions of space and time” (123-137),

...the three withering clocks were thought
are thought
to be a symbol of the unconscious,
its violent collapse between
time
and
space...

we here interrogate the “time-bound”: our academic attachment to conventional understandings and measurements of time, and of its concomitant anxieties. In educational practice, suspending modern temporality

...the arrows begin to waver;
7:55 grows
annular...

means questioning our attachment to the clearly demarcated limits of conventional, linear time, which moves only—and *quickly!*—in one direction, in order to be measured, and to enable us to measure ourselves against one another.

no longer fixed and pointed,
but adaptable,
molten...

Our work with Bryn Mawr’s Active Minds has made it clear to us that such time-based measures of achievement are problematic, as is our attachment to an understanding of time that undergirds such measurements.

...saturated within this liquifying temporality
the Coast of Catalgonia
droops....

We need a more relaxed, *hammock-like* way of thinking about what happens in educational practice, one in which the shared time we occupy in classrooms gives “space” to a more capacious sense of phenomenological time, one in which past, present and future are intertwined.

Joseph Cambone, one of the few educational researchers who has written about the effect of time in school reform, observes that “time is largely a collective subjectivity—an agreed-upon convention that allows us to structure our lives temporally” (513). We need to place ourselves in the same place at the same time; we need to be “on time” so we can be together “in time.” Given the extent of such arrangements, “to restructure people’s time,” as Cambone acknowledges, “is actually to restructure their thinking and being” (514).

Re-structuring our shared subjectivity in this way would involve “re-doing” our conception of time in ways that acknowledge what we all know, but continually forget: that the most profound experiences of our educational lives happen “outside” measured time, moving freely across the dimensions we conventionally distinguish as “past” and “future.”

...the horizon caves in and our sense of futurity softens to a miry
evanesce & v a p o r ...

Reading texts written hundreds of years ago, or speculating about future possibilities, we continually cross the borders of the conventional rituals of school time, those “strong boundaries” of the socio-temporal that demarcate “the beginning and endings of periods, school days, and school years” (Cambone 517).

...time, like the melting Camembert cheese that inspired Dali’s art, becomes s p o i l e d ...

Cambone asserts that such boundaries “cannot be transgressed without incident” (517). It is our counter-assertion that the most profound academic work is actually *constituted* by such transgressions, emerging through temporal leaps, beyond standards, beyond measured expectations.

“The point is to go against the grain of dominant, normative ideas....the only ethical option...is critical and self-critical....the guiding slogan is: ‘not afraid of nonidentity’”—Morton, *Ecology Without Nature*

“So I read on. And I read on, past my own geography and history, past the founding stories....The great writers were not remote.... Time is not constant and one minute is not the same length as another”
—Winterson, *Why Be Happy When You Can Be Normal?*

Many disability studies scholars include time in their systematic “cripping” of normative assumptions about human experience. “Crip time” has several different meanings: the term has been used to describe “pre-programmed” time, the sort of scheduling that seems entirely

overwritten “with other people’s voices” (McDonald). It has also been used, contrariwise, and much more extensively, to signal interventions into such programming: accommodations, “a flexible standard for punctuality,” the need for “extra time” (“Crip Time”)—although negotiating such accommodations is always “tricky against the normative ebbs and flows of legitimated knowledge production” (Borderdweller).

The concept of “crip time” could also conceivably be used in a third sense, to identify the possibility—the profound *need*—for some time that (as the anonymous reviewer of this essay observed) is “just plain wasted...sometime we are just ‘doing time’—in depression, in illness, in times when there is nothing really beyond surviving to do.” Although the field of disability studies has evoked, and advocated for, the variability of “crip time,” it has not wrestled directly (so far as we know) with this notion of wasting time. Like the women’s movement, and the women’s colleges like Bryn Mawr that emerged from it, the disability movement seems particularly, and somewhat paradoxically, invested in a narrative of “overcoming” particular impairments, in order to be taken seriously in the academy. The field hasn’t yet offered us, we think, the tools we need to interrupt the narrative of academic achievement, to find a space where nothing happens, to discover gaps in which normative time is ruptured, suspended.

And so we gesture, here, toward some of those possibilities that lie in empty and “unproductive” time.

...do the gossamer clocks meld or resist?

protest
or conform?...

“Does the demonstration of coherence indicate a stronger mind?”
—Margaret Price, *Mad at School*

Does getting your work in on time indicate a stronger mind?
(Or: *why is punctuality so important?*)

Margaret Price has conducted an extensive analysis of the ways in which the academy’s structuring of itself around schedules—placing importance on appointments, deadlines, the completion of timed tasks—excludes and discriminates against those with mental disabilities; she shows how the demands of academia can exacerbate symptoms which may be manageable in a less stressful environment. It is relatively easy for a college to imagine accommodating physical disabilities, Price argues, but much harder for a place that prides itself on mental accomplishment to envision accommodating mental diversity and difference—to adjust, in particular, to the altered *pacing* that differently minded minds might require.

As an alternative to current time-based arrangements, Halberstam advocates other temporal models. Her concept of “queer time”—the outcome of “imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices,” of “non-normative logics and organizations” of activity—invites us to

imagine “other logics of location, movement, and identification,” to mark out “willfully eccentric modes of being” (1, 6; cf. Samuels).

...do we construe, from this canvas, a disorientation or a consoled contentment?
 ...is it a mercurial shifting that whittles this indefinite journey?...

Our own interrogating—*querying, queering, crippling, maddening*—of educational time accepts Halberstam’s bid to re-conceptualize what time looks-and-feels like. Of particular use in our attempts to make the academy more welcoming of difference, and more able to acknowledge multiple modes of failure and achievement, is Halberstam’s proposition that we step out of “the logic of capital accumulation” (7), to live and work “on the edges of logics of...production” (10).

In 1873, Edward Clarke was concerned that the education of young women would inhibit and threaten the health of generations to come.

...is what is lost in time gained in
 an intransigent
 standstill?...

In this decade, Halberstam is inviting another generation of young women to break away from “repro-time,” to embrace alternative logics that don’t simply *reproduce* what has been done before. She thus addresses the two-fold fears of Edward Clarke, that educated women might fail to bear both biological and intellectual fruit. In imagining an education system that does not reproduce old-fashioned understandings of time, and thereby reproduce old divisions among various kinds of “mindedness,” we also attempt to correct both of Clarke’s “mis-conceptions.”

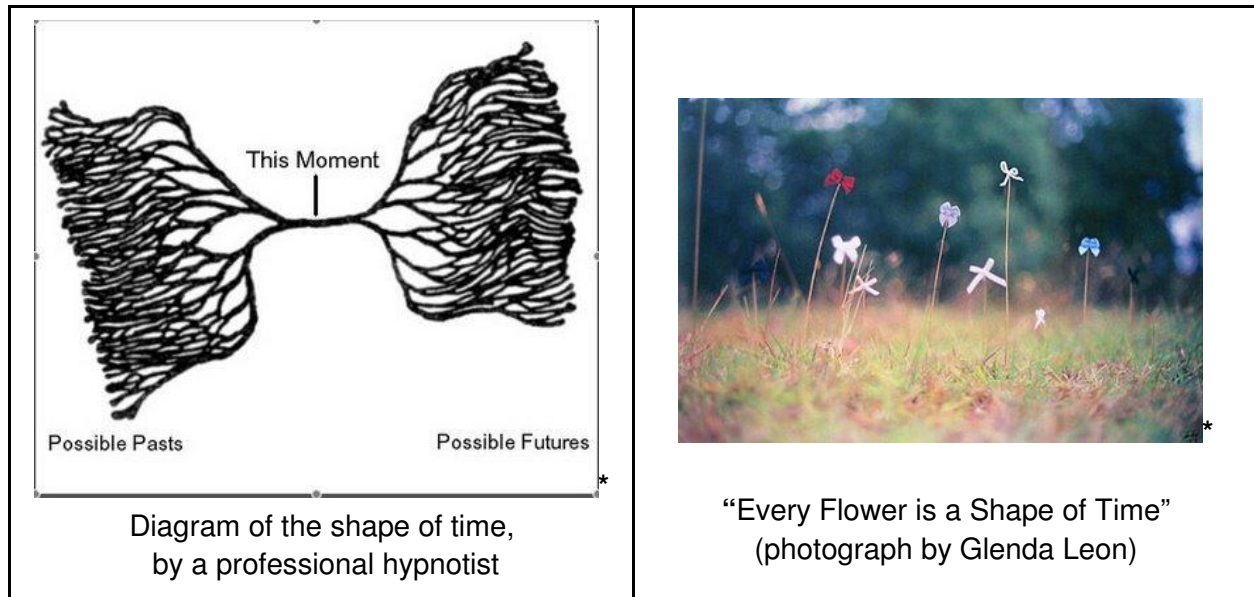
...angular rocks give way to curved conditionings...

We imagine a form of schooled time marked less by tests needing to be passed “in time” and “on time” than by an understanding that we are all “held up by” a hammock-like, loopy, iterative structure.

*Can we imagine a college semester that isn’t
 organized according to conventional temporal logics?*

Can we imagine academic time that isn’t organized by semesters?

Schooling restructured in such time might involve a “spiral curriculum,” fostering re-examination of a subject “in different forms at different stages” (Leichter 368). Or perhaps, following Gray and Grey, it will evoke “some other shapes”:



[A pair of images: the left one features two clusters of strings, one labeled “possible pasts,” the other “possible futures”; these are bound together by a single thread labeled “this moment.” The right image shows a field containing small differently-shaped flowers, some looking like bows, others like pinwheels.]

In sharp contrast to Edward Clarke’s characterization of the “closed bodily systems” of nineteenth-century women, which contained “only finite amounts of energy,” we’ve been experimenting here with very different representations: of the fluid “self” of the contemporary woman, of her relationship to others in an academic environment, and of the various forms her prose—*our* prose—might take. We have been trying out what might emerge if we break through the barriers crucial to keeping a system “closed.”

...drip drop,
tick tock...

We have played here with the possibilities opened up by “maddening,” or “montaging,” academic writing, interrupting the conventional, sequential form of argumentation with images, snips of poetry, and quotations, not woven seamlessly into the whole, but rather creating “holes” within it.

Being “transminded,” to our minds, not only refuses the binary of mental health and illness, acknowledging the mutability of a spectrum of identities, the shifting “self,”

...a dissolving persistency
a phase ensconced in variance and
contradiction...

but also invites different forms of “composition” than the conventional representations of “coherence” (cf. McRuer, Price, *Mad at School*).

"I live life in slow motion. The world I live in is one where my thoughts are as quick as anyone's, my movements are weak and erratic, and my talk is slower than a snail in quicksand.... I communicate at the rate of 450 words an hour compared to your 150 words in a minute—twenty times as slow. A slow world would be my heaven. I am forced to live in your world, a fast hard one.... I need to speed up, or you need to slow down."—Anne McDonald

We have moved from a fictional story about a young woman, maddened over 100 years ago by her efforts to complete her studies at Bryn Mawr, to an alternative tale that re-positions our apprehensions about productivity and achievement within larger temporal arrangements. Edward Clarke was concerned both that women's intellectual work would be insufficient, and that it would interrupt their ability to reproduce. In the founding of Bryn Mawr, M. Carey Thomas and her cohorts countered that anxious narrative. Now, in a time when it is still a challenge for women to have children and academic careers, we again attempt to re-write that story, querying the disabling effect of temporal demands, in search of a quirkier temporality in which we might all flourish. This more pliant time might include a range of unexpectedly "stretchy" forms: surely more lenient deadlines, but perhaps also more defined structures, for flexible minds that need tighter bounds. For some of us, more open, exploratory configurations would provide finer spaces for flourishing; for others, clearer access to what is needed, and more transparency about expectations, might provide the necessary "mesh," a much-needed "hammock."

Setting "madness" in motion has meant our moving words and images around on the page, in demonstration of an open, and "open-minded," system. Beyond this essay,

...dream in undefinable moments,
 inclusive instants,
 slivered seconds...

time as a hammock, inherently stretch-y like the "transmind," offers us dilation, heterogeneity, resistance to rhetoric. "Achievement," in a world so conceived, needn't imply completion; it might instead gesture, as we do here, towards what is incomplete, even uncomplete-able....

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