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# Accessible Academic Publishing

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A few years ago, a friend completing her first book called me in a panic. She asked if her editor would cancel her contract if she missed her deadline for the revised manuscript. "No," I responded. "Just ask for an extension." A few weeks later, I received another call. Would her contract be withdrawn if one of the chapters turned out differently from how the proposal described it? At this point, I sat her down. "You're misunderstanding the relationship between you and your editor," I said. "He isn't your probation officer. He's your colleague." I explained that her editor had invested significant time and resources into getting her manuscript to this stage. He wanted to see it in print as much as she did. Moreover, she would continue to have a relationship with him long after her book came out. Even if she didn't work with him for her next book, he would ask her to review manuscripts and recommend up-and-coming authors he should be soliciting. "He needs you as much as you need him."

Authors and editors work symbiotically in shaping a field. They play different roles, but they each perform tasks needed by any academic discipline. Although many pretenure faculty imagine editors as mythical gatekeepers who make or break careers, our relationships with them are much more collaborative than we initially think. Getting the attention of an editor, developing an "elevator pitch," submitting a prospectus, responding to reader reports, signing a contract, attending to revisions, and managing every other step of publishing a book can be mystifying to early-career scholars. This is made more daunting by how high the stakes are when a book plays a significant part in one's job security. On the other side, though, editors invest equally in cultivating relationships with us. They want to acquire manuscripts that will become worthy books. These books will wind up in college and university libraries and in the personal collections of faculty and students. They might win awards or garner other recognition for the press. The professional advancement of editors is as tied to their track record with books as ours is. Authors provide crucial labor to editors once we have cut our teeth writing our own book. As peer reviewers, we give specialist feedback on manuscripts and guide revisions for authors. After a book is published, we might assign it in our classes. If we serve as a series editor at a press, we take a more active role in bringing authors and manuscripts to editors' attention. If we

do a stint on our university's press board, we provide the final stamp of approval on book projects. Faculty and press editors work together.

The publishing process at university presses isn't perfect. The elevation of the book as the gold standard for presenting long-form work in most humanities fields contributes to an inequitable situation caused by uneven levels of resourcing. Research budgets, teaching loads, and opportunities for sabbatical leave, which vary widely from one institution to the next, affect the ability of individual faculty to write books. However, in the midst of these conditions, some of us in the field of disability studies would like to make publishing a book more accessible, and we interpret the word *accessible* in ways that are broad ranging. This chapter describes the birth of the book series Dis/Color at Temple University Press, which showcases titles that bridge the fields of critical ethnic studies and disability studies. Its founding in 2019 was a joint effort among three disability studies scholars who serve as the series editors and four acquisitions editors who, at various points in its development, handled the project from inception to proposal to actualization. This chapter also locates our process in a larger set of institutional concerns regarding the status of the book. Our attempts to make publishing more accessible are not a panacea for challenges such as the decline of tenure-track jobs, the increase of publishing expectations, and the casualization of labor in academia. Nevertheless, I imagine that modest changes, when made in a variety of places, might provide some respite and joy in a profession that could always use more of those things.

In September 2012, a senior scholar in a field adjacent to mine reached out. I had met her several years before when I was a finalist for a position at her institution, which I didn't wind up getting. She was the chair of that search committee, and she and I have kept in touch ever since. I consider her an informal mentor. She expressed her concern that, lately, I seemed frustrated and unenthused about my career path, which didn't seem to square with the excitement I should be feeling about the publication of my first book. She asked for details. I explained the situation. She expressed empathy, shared her own stories, and affirmed that institutional cultures can be very demoralizing. Then she presented a solution. "Build something that reminds you of why you got into this profession." Among the suggestions she presented was starting a book series at a press.

At the time, there were only two book series devoted solely to disability studies, Corporealities at the University of Michigan Press and The History of Disability at New York University Press. The former was founded by David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, and it was influential in providing early visibility for books in the field, such as the series editors' own *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. The latter was founded by the late Paul Longmore and Lauri Umansky, and it published seven books from 2001 to 2014 (it stopped acquiring new projects after Longmore died in 2010). Cultural Front at New York University Press was another key player in the field. As disability

studies expanded, four more series would emerge: Literary Disability Studies at Palgrave Macmillan, founded by David Bolt, Elizabeth Donaldson, and Julia Miele Rodas; Disability Histories at the University of Illinois Press, founded by Kim Nielsen and Michael Rembis; Crip at New York University Press, founded by Michael Bérubé, Robert McRuer, and Ellen Samuels; and Anima at Duke University Press, founded by Mel Chen and Jasbir Puar. At Temple University Press, I consulted with Janet Francendese, the editor with whom I worked on my first book, about her interest in a series that would bridge the fields of critical ethnic studies and disability studies. She voiced enthusiasm. On the cusp of retirement, Janet urged her successor to follow up with me. In the meantime, I asked Julie Minich if she would like to partner with me. Janet's replacement, Sara Jo Cohen, suggested that, given the interdisciplinarity of the field, we might find a social scientist to balance out Julie's and my training in literary studies. Nirmala Erevelles joined us in this capacity.

Getting a book series off the ground can be a long process. Both Julie and I were untenured when Dis/Color existed only as an idea. We waited until the time-consuming process of filing for promotion at our respective institutions was over. We had several conversations with, at any given time, the acquisitions editor whose portfolio in which Dis/Color would be housed. These interactions sometimes took place at conferences and sometimes happened over a phone call. After Sara Jo Cohen's departure from Temple, Sarah Munroe took over. Sarah worked closely with us in making a case to the press board for Dis/Color's relevance at a time when work in disability studies that engaged race was increasing in popularity. The late Chris Bell may have observed in his essay "Introducing White Disability Studies: A Modest Proposal" (2006) that the foundational scholarship had left the field's whiteness uninterrogated, thus presuming its universality. A decade later, however, much had changed. We saw Dis/Color as an opportunity to create an institutional platform for this burgeoning area of research.

The process of writing a proposal for a new book series is similar to that of writing a proposal for a book. We summarized its scope, located it in prevailing trends, and made an argument for how it would move the field forward. As with proposals for books, the series proposal also contained a section where we described existing series that might overlap and explained how we would avoid duplication. Another section noted book manuscripts in progress as potential titles we could solicit. We compiled this list by attending conferences to learn about new work and asking our disability studies colleagues about recent graduate students they had advised. Finally, we included an overview of the audience and market we envisioned. Once submitted, it was distributed to several external reviewers in much the same way a book manuscript would be read by external specialists. We used the feedback from these reader reports to hone the proposal further before it went before the press board for final approval.

From the beginning, the series editors believed very strongly that the concept of "access" should be interpreted expansively. In this day and age of the ebook, where software can transform written material into audio, access for people with low vision and blind people is fairly easy. Because of advances in technology, any press can make books accessible in this way. However, we also wanted to expand the reach of disability studies scholarship to readers who might not ordinarily read books from a university press. To be sure, not every book will have a trade audience, and not all research needs to court one in order to legitimize itself. But given that the fields in which Dis/Color is located have their origins in community-based movements, we wanted at least some of the books in the series to appeal to readers outside the academy. In general, all scholars might try writing for an audience like this occasionally, even if this writing doesn't take the form of a book.

Our commitment to access extends to authors as well. We have agreed to prioritize work by first-time authors who are junior faculty, non-tenure-track faculty, faculty at institutions that downplay the monograph in their tenure and promotion structure, and independent scholars. There is a lot of valuable research being done outside the usual contexts, and we wanted to give it a platform. This doesn't mean we discourage proposals from authors who fall outside these categories. For instance, the second book published in Dis/Color is by a senior scholar at a research university. What matters most to us is the quality and fit of the work. If it comes from an author whose position in the academy is not secure or an author whose voice is not usually amplified, we take special interest in reading the manuscript and marshaling it through the rigorous peer-review process for which Temple University Press is known.

Also, we must remember that publishing has presented barriers for many disabled people. First, people with physical, sensory, intellectual, or psychosocial impairments have historically been limited in their access to formal education. Second, biases—conscious or not—on the part of gatekeepers associated with publishing may cause book projects authored by disabled people to be overlooked. Third, authors who might need to work at a different pace may find themselves shut out because of the untenability of expectations about productivity. These absences in the publishing record are a multigenerational gap that will take many years to correct. The solutions need to be holistic, with many different players addressing the issue at different levels. The series editors and Shaun Vigil, the acquisitions editor who currently oversees Dis/Color, have agreed to abide by what Ellen Samuels calls "crip time" when communicating with authors about deadlines. The nonnormative temporality many disabled people inhabit "forces us to take breaks, even when we don't want to, even when we want to keep going, to move ahead" (Samuels 2017). Authors with unpredictable bodies and minds or those who are caregivers for people with unpredictable bodies and minds often can't anticipate the timing of a project's completion. We understand

that deadlines may be missed, extensions should be granted, and flexibility needs to be built into any process of accessible publishing.

As of this writing in November 2022, Dis/Color has published three books, pushed two more into production, and signed advance contracts for two more projects. Several more proposals and manuscripts are in various stages of review. I love the genre of the monograph. It is schematic, but the form illuminates more than it constricts. The joy lies in seeing what authors do with it: how they seduce me, surprise me, frustrate me, unsettle me, make me hungry, make me think, make me laugh, and leave me spent. The experience of writing a book resembles reading one, except multiplied by several hundred times. However, my love is troubled by an undercurrent of guilt because of the unsustainability of academic publishing. It feels like loving a gas-guzzling SUV.

In 2002, Stephen Greenblatt alerted the humanities to this crisis. The requirement to publish a monograph for tenure, Greenblatt observed, had surged in recent years. Meanwhile, university library budgets nationwide have diminished. These opposing trajectories have placed the humanities on a path to disaster as presses scale back acquisitions in response to decreasing book sales. Junior faculty left scrambling for a publisher, Greenblatt warned, would suffer the direst consequences. His open letter to the Modern Language Association resonated with many people. From the vantage point of authors, the institutional elevation of the monograph actually contributes to its distortion as a generic form. As David Perry argues, when we turn books into mandatory professional benchmarks, we warp their purpose as sustained, long-form contributions to a field (Perry 2015). Taking my earlier metaphor further, I say that when we buy SUVs for cruising on highways, we forget they were meant for slow approaches over rough terrain. The truth is, research in the humanities can take many shapes. The form of the book suits some types, but others may be better served otherwise. These means may include a cluster of related articles, art shows and exhibition catalogs, consultations for museums or interpretive centers, webpages and other digital projects, performances, podcasts, documentaries, smartphone apps, or many other possibilities.

What has happened in the two decades since Greenblatt issued his open letter? For a while, there was no movement to solve the humanities publishing crisis even as some ways of alleviating the pinch emerged, such as the American Literatures Initiative, a Mellon-funded project that provides subventions to several university presses to offset the cost of books by first-time authors. The problem Greenblatt observed actually became worse for a while. Some research universities began demanding two books for tenure as they jockeyed for position in the rankings game, and some teaching colleges that did not previously require one had yielded to mission creep. This was not surprising. After all, academia is risk averse. Most faculty and administrators succeeded in this profession by following the well-trodden path instead of venturing into the unknown. However,

this is all changing. A recent article in *Inside Higher Ed* by Charles Watkinson, director of the University of Michigan Press, and Melissa Pitts, director of the University of British Columbia Press, provides an overview of what presses are now doing to support research that takes nonmonograph forms. This includes launching peer-reviewed podcasts and other audio texts, designing platforms for collaboration with community partners, and providing infrastructure for open-source publications (Watkinson and Pitts 2021). Because presses are taking the lead in creating alternate ways to package knowledge, the hope is that department chairs and deans, who might need the legitimizing factor of a university press, would be more willing to regard these options as on a par with books.

This brings us to our role as faculty in these transformations given that, as I mentioned at the beginning, we work collaboratively with press editors. We need to think and act broad-mindedly when reading the work of our colleagues if prevailing attitudes about the monograph are expected to change. If you serve on the committee that keeps your department's guidelines for tenure and promotion up to date, consider adding language that recognizes research contributions across a wide range of formats. This may be easier in an interdisciplinary department, but even the most staunchly book-celebrating departments like English and history will notice if they see a critical mass of their colleagues from across the way making changes. If you encounter compelling and masterful specimens of nonmonograph projects, reference them when department chairs and deans ask for concrete examples. Like-minded faculty can set new standards by pursuing innovative research themselves. For instance, a candidate for promotion to associate professor whose file I recently read as an external reviewer had played it safe with the usual first monograph revised from a dissertation. For future research, though, they proposed and provided evidence of work underway for a large-scale digital humanities project in lieu of another book. Now tenured and in a position to inspire others, this scholar will be especially well suited to head these efforts at their own institution.

The takeaways I want my readers to have are, *first*, don't be intimidated by acquisitions editors at presses. As authors, we understand that getting their attention is a necessary first step in publishing a book, but we should also recognize that they are eyeing us as future collaborators, too, and equally invested in establishing connections with us. *Second*, consider pitching books for a broad audience. Realistically, most university press books won't have the reach of a true trade title, but packaging your work so it can speak to nonspecialists is one way to democratize access to our research. *Third*, if you are in a position to become part of the editorial process, consider giving voice to authors not normally prioritized in university press publishing. Accommodate crip time in setting and extending deadlines. *Fourth*, understand that, although the monograph still performs a valuable function, it is not the only way to showcase knowledge. If you

have a role in deciding how your institution evaluates candidates for tenure and promotion, speak up in favor of innovative ways of disseminating research.

These suggestions won't remove every access barrier associated with the economies of professional capital linked to university press publishing. The primacy of the monograph will take a long time to abate, given how slowly change takes place in academia. The presence of one book series at one press that operates with the foregoing set of ethics will only scratch at the surface of academia's inequalities. However, I hope that making the work we do transparent will inspire others with power to act according to their capacities. As recent examples from other presses show, we are far from being the only ones working to democratize the creation and consumption of knowledge.

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