

Panel Discussion: Collective Disability Justice Focused Tech with Ren Loren Britton, Pernilla Philip & Robel Afeworki Abay

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Ren

(Slide: Image of film work, Coalition Bouquet: 504 Sit-In, caption on image reads “to us all”.)

Many many thank yous for the sweet introduction & it is a joy to be here with my dear colleagues.

In the 504 Sit-In, the activist organizations Mission Rebels, Black Panthers, American Coalition of Citizens with Disabilities and the Center for Independent Living Activists — came together to perform a sit-in to get the 504 regulation signed. This regulation paved the way for the landmark passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. The 504 regulation prohibited discrimination against disabled people in programs receiving federal funding including libraries, transportation, schools and digital/analogous bureaucracy. This act becomes relevant here in Europe as there is not yet a similar act offering the same kinds of protections. Something that German disability justice activists like Raúl Krauthausen has remarked: he wishes Germany would adopt.

(Slide: Image of film work, Coalition Bouquet: 504 Sit-In, caption on image reads “wheelchair ramps and grab bars”.)

During this sit-in, disabled activists inside of the occupied building in San Francisco prototyped a fridge on the spot using an air conditioning unit and a cardboard box to keep medicine cool for protesters. This is a story I tell in my recent film called Coalition Bouquet: 504 Sit-In, stills from this film are on the screen, it rehearses this story through the metaphor of bouquets. Working with bouquets I’m affirming that not everything needs to last forever to be meaningful.

(Slide: Image of film work, Coalition Bouquet: 504 Sit-In, caption on image reads “and leave space for everyone”.)

In this work and in our panel today we are critically questioning what gets to be called technology, what counts as technological creativity. Together we are wondering what kind of technovernacular creativity (like this cardboard box turned into a fridge) can be signified as a technology cracking open space for communities focused on intersectional, anti-racist, pro queer and disability justice authorship and interventions into techno-worlds -

shifting the terms of who is an expert in technological imagination, worlding and development.

(Slide: Statements from below on it: Everyday we can rehearse ordinary everyday resistances against ableism, racism and common disposessions, fueling a counterpublics of the common and producing the world otherwise.)

In my work as an artist and a researcher, tooling up against fascism is about intersectional anti-ableism and disability justice. My work is currently investigating the ways that people and communities can, in everyday ways, attend to producing relations and the world otherwise. I follow Polish feminist scholar Ewa Majewska, British-Australian feminist killjoy scholar Sara Ahmed and BIPoC (which stands for Black, Indigenous and People of Color) disability justice collective SINS INVALID who all articulate in various modes about the everyday: each of these scholars and contexts affirm rehearsal and refusal as part of an ongoing resistance against the violent common. This is a formulation that acknowledges that what is common in this moment is rising fascism, loss of rights and ongoing dispossession for many. However, the commons can also be otherwise: our everyday resistances casts the common that we can all be part of — our common, where we have the possibility of flourishing in and with disability justice technoworlds. A disability justice technoworld that celebrates and makes space for disabled and non normative bodies and minds.

(Slide: Statements from below on it: In anti-ableist community we center care for all of us. We work across and otherwise with language, we are slower or faster depending on needs, we move with our community - not individually, we resist and subvert racist institutional powers and we accept that we are not perfect and we are not trying to be. We unlearn the ableism all around and in us.)

In anti-ableist and pro queer worlding we do things differently: we center care for all of us, we work across languages, we are slower or faster depending on needs, we move with our community rather than individually, we resist and subvert racist institutional powers and we accept that we are not perfect and we are not trying to be. We are not relating ourselves to a non-disabled neurotypical norm, we are allowing our bodyminds to be - to just be - and we do that increasingly - getting so in tune with ourselves that we can rehearse a different way of being together in relation to all of the overlapping violences around us.

(Slide: Still from the video: Unforgetting as Caring: Braille N' Speak, FTM International #45, Zenith Hearing Aid by Ren Loren Britton & Iz Paehr)

On Wednesday this week I led the workshop, Indexing and Prototyping Trans*Crip Tech. In this workshop we spoke about who has agency in worlding with technology. We shared about the reality that the technoscientific cannon is filled with artefacts made by and for non disabled community that came from our innovations to start with.

In the video work that I made with Iz Paehr called “Unforgetting as Caring: Braille N' Speak, FTM International #45, Zenith Hearing Aid” we researched Braille N' Speak. This handheld computer, designed in 1987, registered Braille inputs are registered to take notes that are then read back aloud to its users - it is what we would call a small handheld

computer. In the technoscientific cannon, the milestone of the so called “first handheld computer” is registered with IBM’s ‘Simon Personal Communicator’ in 1994, some seven years later. The Braille N’ Speak, because it was a technology made by and for disabled community, has been erased from technoscientific history.

This structuring of linear time and inscribing of corporate big tech timelines as singular and definitive (following white cis humanist heteronormative frameworks) is what we troubled in our workshop. Together we shifted the frame of reference to consider what technologies and hacks have made possibility and connection in our trans*crip community.

Disabled and trans* hir- his- herstories are rife with loss due to epistemicide: the willful suppressing of ways of knowing. When we make things, often, the life conditions we are within do not allow us to hold onto them, to document them, to get them into archives, to carry them with us and to shift who feels like they have agency over technological development. What if instead of us all feeling like we are powerless in the face of big tech and the extraction that it perpetuates, all of us understood ourselves as agents of technological invention? This workshop moved towards recentering our agency by valuing our practices of cript technoscientific hacking and trans* community invention as agential moves within technoscience.

(Slide: Images of various vernacular technologies from trans*crip community as mentioned below.)

In the workshop we worked on prototyping technologies that we wish we could have and indexing the technologies on Github on a repository called ‘Indexing TransCrip Tech’. Some of the technologies that we included into the index are the ‘Braille N’ Speak’ - which shifts the timeline in favor of Blind community who have been using handheld computers for a long time. We included Breast Plates from Transvestia and Top Surgery Calendar Organizing Pads - that shift assumptions of cis-normativity by adding or removing breasts as needed, and by hacking and strategically using medical infrastructures to get our needs met. And the Cardboard Box Fridge from the 504 Sit-In that shifts agency into the hands of those — who in a collective protest action — have prototyped on the spot with the materials at hand, making a vernacular (community & site specific) technology to keep medicine cool and to keep us together.

These are all vernacular technological practices: learning by doing, responding to necessity, building from skills we already have and can learn together, and centering our experiences as ones we can hack and move from.

(Slide: The work Mining Meisspelling is shown.)

This series of shifts speaks to the kind of shifts that I am making in my artistic research work and my recent installation: Mining Meisspelling. Relating to community specific and linguistic technological practices, Mining Meisspelling engages with the fact that I am dyslexic and moves away from dyslexia as a pathologized difference towards dyslexia as magical way of handling words and expressing things. The red squiggly line that appears under “misspelled” words is freed from algorithmically noting correction and instead is free to dance in this installation as a line celebrating neurodivergent ways of being in the world.

When recentering neurodiversity as a powerful way of being in the world, misspelling becomes magic. Suddenly, dyslexia can be seen as a rearrangement of words away from the normative, 'correct' way of speaking English. Dyslexia refuses normative spelling and the ways that spelling standardization has followed the development of computing through the production of 'one world', where there is only one 'correct' way to spell something, one category each data point has to be slotted into.

(Slide: The work Mining Meisspelling is shown.)

This production of the 'one way/one world' that dyslexia refuses — reminds that neurodivergent and disabled experience is always aligned with anti-colonial ways of moving through the world. My experience of 'correction' in this way is structured by the ways that there must be a one way, a one world, the 'correct' way - a colonial norm. Dyslexia exposes the power structures that produce the need for correction. Are we 'corrected' for our difference? Or are we celebrated and allowed just to be?

Many perspectives of one correct world are exemplified in proclamations such as the end of spelling errors - as suggested by an article in the New Criterion from last year. It proclaims, all spelling problems in the English language are now 'fixed' because of spell check. Spell check, an algorithmically powered application removes vernacular (situated, cultural and specific) modes and methods of articulation.

(Slide: The work Mining Meisspelling is shown.)

In this installation, playing with the aesthetics of access, I thought of the work as an exploded access copy - like the one you might be reading to follow my input - where the language dances across the pages and aligns some of the times, and escapes into nonalignment at other times. This spatialization of language I thought of as being akin to dyslexia, where the words float around get caught correctly or incorrectly on the page.

Normative ways of spelking, speeling, splaying of—articulating become questioned as another mode of colonial control that AI technologies further. In the installation, I recount the history of the Levenstein-Demereau Algorithm, a string algorithm that operates much like Large Language Models do in Chat GPT and Midjourney. In this work I suggest that this algorithm would be better put to use if it was looking for the magic in language - rather than the paradigms of correction that condition its use.

~~(Slide: The work Mining Meisspelling is shown.)~~

Audre Lorde famously proclaimed that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house". Mining Meisspelling suggests investigating the ways in which we might choose to speak the language of the tool less and less well so that we can find ways of speaking with machines rather than as machines. To do that, I practiced with spell check as a common technology that most engage yet rarely investigate — to consider the technical normativities it re-inscribes through its use.

To sum up what refuses simple quantification. In these moments I shared with you my research of Coalition Storytelling with the work Coalition Bouquet: 504 Sit-In, telling

stories around on the spot collective vernacular technological inventions. I shared about the troubles and possibilities of naming, prototyping and holding space for trans*crip indexing and invention with the workshop “Indexing and Prototyping Trans*Crip Tech” from this week. And shared about this last work Mining Meisspelling engaging with the poetics of speaking with machines less and less well — away from ~~paradigms~~ of standardization that closely follow paradigms of pathologization and continue colonial and ableist continuums.

Collective Disability Justice Tech in my practice emerges as a praxis of recentering who has agency, equipping ourselves with hir-stories of our collective successes and engaging on the spot technical invention as a rehearsal of our world as possible.

And with that I'll pass it along to my dear colleague, Pernilla.

Pernilla

There are many ways of chronic illness that to each person lives in their own way. In my practice I take a starting point from my own lived experience as a person with type 1 diabetes. I focus in on the collective aspects of finding solutions together.

Approaches to chronic illness may depend on how and where you live, medical insurance, relation to your medical team, language barriers, the color of a person's skin, economic and environmental factors, to name a few. It's essentially a mix of choices and privileges.

But however you manage diabetes, we can all agree that it is a data focused illness. An array of devices is available that both gather and process data.

Many of us who started questioning the use of our data, soon discovered that our devices are locked, and run under the military term “black-box technology”.

These cages render some functions unavailable, and demands ongoing approval from users in order to function.

You probably ask why these boxes are locked in the first place. The general consensus is that it is a solution aimed at safety. I will get back to what safety means for me, and the importance of addressing who is being kept safe, while recognizing that safety is also a feeling.

Together, hackers and coders volunteer their time and attention to write code that open up these boxes and publish it online. This open-source project helped me to open up my insulin pump. With this, I am able to adjust settings, alarms, and the communication between the devices in ways that is not possible with the official system. Running this open-source code on my phone was a relief, as it automatized some functions that previously was not possible.

But it was also a frictional experience that came in various forms, many of them speaking to my confidence, my fears and the questioning of what official treatment actually means.

Even though DIY medical tech sounds like something you do alone, and in some ways, it is: after downloading I take full responsibility for building and running this system at my own risk. However, many of us experience it as more than that. The code, updates, tutorials, forums, ways of feedbacking are all places of support. Connecting to others who are also navigating ways to be with their illness, in search for ways to live with agency and how we can do that together. Code that others wrote, that helps many of us to a slightly smoother life.

This installation titled The Care Unit, is an attempt to unite, and to invite into what it can feel like when leaning into technology. Being with technology, whether it be the code that is informing my blood glucose levels, the blankets that is keeping me warm, or even as basic as a bed to sleep in. I wanted to show that intimate feeling, the lost search for safety, and some of the ways that I depend on technology.

At the same time, I wonder who feels welcome into the world of DIY medical management? Let's ask ourselves who actually has the time to do this kind of work? As a result of structural inequalities, open-source hacking communities are often very white and violently aligned with patriarchal and masculinist attitudes. There seems to be a kind of coder-confidence that some take to more easily than others.

Of course, there are many ways to be an expert and many brilliant approaches to engaging with DIY medical tools—ones that are both playful and useful. Places that allow us all to be experts together.

About five years ago when I started integrating this open-source system into my medical treatment, it seemed as if I was leaving a kind of safe-place, to go into a wildly unstable alternative. I encountered a belief that technology that is approved for therapy by government organizations, are well tested and therefore "safe".

But when I look at my needs and the needs of many other chronically ill and disabled people, I struggle to see such a dichotomy. Our needs are not always met and if they are, tomorrow might be different.

So, I wonder what is safety and for who? The idea that proprietary systems are smooth and free of friction are simply not the reality for many of us. Safety cannot be standardized. Open-source projects are often framed as open-source solutions. But let's also recognize the vulnerabilities and labor involved in creating them. The work of hackers and early users has paved the way for others, often out of necessity rather than choice.

And safety is not just a matter of compliance or approval—it is also a feeling. For me, safety isn't found in staying within the rigidity of proprietary systems, nor in the illusion of frictionless care. Instead, it comes from staying connected to others. Maybe that's what makes me feel safe. Or at least, a little bit safer.

Slide 1

Thanks everyone for being here today. My name is Robel and I am a black queer disability justice activist with relatively long dread locks and few piercings. I am an autistic black unicorn, sociologist, scholar of disability studies and critical race theory.

Slide 2

Disability Justice is an emancipatory global movement of disabled people of colour, Trans*, queer, poverty class folks, and all brilliance from the margins. Coming from a diverse community together across visible and hidden disabilities, race, ethnicity, age, religion, gender, sexual orientation, citizenship and economic status, Disability Justice Collective was developed in 2005 by Patty Berne, Mia Mingus, Stacey Milbern, and Leroy F.

This slide contains photos of 3 books on the topic of disability justice
These are some of the books who helped me to understand how, race, gender, and disability have always been inherently interconnected, even when white disability movements but also anti-racist movements tend to ignore this interconnectedness.

Slide 3

These intersectional struggles build the 10 core principles of disability justice as displayed on the slide...

These principles of disability justice developed by Sins Invalid, a disability justice-based performance project that incubates and celebrates artists with disabilities, centring artists of colour and LGBTQ+ / gender-variant artists as communities who have been historically marginalised (Invalid, 2019).

Unfortunately, I won't be able to go through them now due to limited time but I brought it so you have heard about it

Slide 4

Some examples of practical implementation of intersectional disability justice could be

- Developing transformative, intersectional disability justice sustainably in our lecture, everyday life, trainings, and activism
- Working towards community wellbeing, inclusive, and accessible structures and technologies
- Reflection for our own personal journey of critical engagement with racialised and gendered technoableism

Slide 5

This slide shows the ways in which racism, classism, sexism, colonialism, heterosexism, and ableism are inherently connected to one another

Intersectional disability justice is an emerging framework beginning to gain attention in disability, social, and climate justice-oriented movements.

It helps us to deepen our understanding of disability and to implement accessible and inclusive practices in our workplace and everyday life by demonstrating transformative and intersectional principles.

In 2022 my colleague Constanze Schwärzer-Dutta who is also autistic and myself co-founded the network IDJ, to establish Disability Justice in Germany with a strong focus on intersectionality of disability, gender, race, class, etc. This means that analyzing social relations is complex and many forms of oppression like ableism, racism, sexism, and classism might be present and active at the same time in a person's life.

Slide 6

What we have understood as technologies have always been designed by and for white able-bodied cis-male citizens. So, there is a need to untangle the interplay of racialised and gendered Technoableism

Many racialized disabled scholars have been unapologetically challenging the practices of dominance for years, as also stated by Ren in their insightful presentation. I would also like to really recommend you to visit their Instagram account to get to know more about their transformative work crip/**transfeminist technoscience**

On this slide there are 3 more photos of books displayed from Ruha Benjamin that highlight the inherent interconnections between race and technology

Ruha Benjamin is one of these scholars who thinks towards viral justice and advocate for imagining the interconnected of race and technology

Similarly, Aimi Hamraie addresses issues of disability and Technoableism in their work and book BUILDING ACCESS

However, the interplay of race, disability and technology has been overlooked in sociology and disability studies. Therefore, my second monograph name also Intersectional Disability Justice to be published by the end of the year with Routledge aims to fill this gap.

Thanks for listening!