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Pandemic Possibilities in Crip Time: Disrupting Social Work Field Education

Kaia M. Arrow
Ryerson University

Zachary Sera Grant
York University

Abstract

COVID-19 allows for new possibilities of entry into social work education by reconceptualizing professional time. Prior to the pandemic, students were often required to engage in learning at prescribed times, which did not consider the realities of disabled, queer, racialized, and othered "students." As a result of digital classroom learning and field practicums, COVID-19 has allowed for a queering of previously restrictive notions of time. Kafer (2013) called this flexible approach to time and its resultant expectations *crip time*. Building on Kafer's crip time, which centres disabled bodyminds above normative structures of time, we suggest that remote placement offers social work education an opportunity to explore new and radical approaches to recentring learning and justice within field practicums. Approaching student practicums from a disability-justice perspective, we argue, allows for more accessibility while challenging notions of professionalism and traditional student–supervisor dichotomies. Weaving together story and theory, we share the tensions elicited by applying crip time and critical approaches to professionalism within our research-based social work practicum. We share our experiences and offer a queered lens through which the social work practicum can be re-envisioned as a site of radical social work values, including disability justice.

Keywords: crip time, disability justice, professionalism, queering, bodyminds

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Introduction

Zac's (They/Them) Story

I never thought I would end up studying at university, let alone completing multiple post-secondary programs. I never particularly liked school. I will not lie; it was challenging and in my first few years I did not do overly well. Eventually, I found spaces and professors who shared some of my feelings and provided the flexibility I needed to be successful. Often, this flexibility came outside of traditional university channels. Yet there was one place where flexibility rarely existed—student practicums. It was not always clear from the beginning of the program, but by the time you had already completed half of your coursework, the discussion focused on finding a practicum and, often, any additional support or flexibility magically disappeared. My classmates and I would be left to find our own placements with little help and a great number of rules and regulations surrounding the how, when, and where. We were always told it had to be on specific days, but it was understood that you could work other days and times "if" the agency you worked for was accommodating. But this accommodation was better left unspoken. I was privileged when it came to finding my four different practicums. I knew social workers in the city who knew people who knew people and could strategically guide my applications. For some of my placements, my health was less of a concern and so did not interfere as much. I sought out flexible placement supervisors and for the most part was successful.

Out of pure fear that my accommodating placements might be taken away, I rarely spoke about them and tried to be vague about some of the days and hours I worked. While this worked for me and the agencies I was placed at, it could have gone terribly wrong. My stories of placement range from terrible to terrific. My largest complaint remains the exploitation of paying to work for free. For many of my classmates, their experiences were much, much, much worse.

I began co-supervising placement students almost a decade ago. Based on my own experiences of placement, I decided to be as upfront with my students as possible. I always wanted to know what their needs were and how they could be accommodated. I would be lying if I said it was always possible: I was still faced with the bureaucracy of both the educational institution they attended and my own place of employment. I would love to say that my supervisory approach made a difference, that I have developed a wonderful approach that can be followed, and that you too can foster anti-oppressive practicums! But despite my best efforts, I am sure my approach, like the lovely practicum manuals I have been asked to read by many academic institutions, would also fail at meeting the needs of the student and supervisor. As much as humans like to standardize procedures, you cannot standardize humanity or a learning experience.

So as you read this article, I would ask you all to hold onto the question, What is the purpose of a student practicum?

Kaia’s (She/Her) Story

In contrast to Zac, I knew I was going to university. It was an expectation I did not struggle with, although my academic history was mixed. I had good grades, but I was also a high-school dropout. I was a keen student, but the rigid expectations of schooling did not serve my disabled bodymind well. This article serves as the bookend for an eight-year marathon of an undergraduate degree, over half of it spent in deeply dehumanizing standoffs with accommodation centres and field-education offices. These interactions were infuriating but also exhausting and traumatizing.

Placement, in particular, was a major barrier. Though I have excelled in remote social work, including providing client-facing services from home, the field office insisted there was no way I would meet the course objectives in a distance placement and that no agency would want a student who could not come in. Three supervisors requesting me as a student were brushed aside. I was told, “We don’t want to graduate students like you.”

I worked to accept that I would not finish my degree if I was not allowed to do a remote placement. It was a tough prospect to consider: apart from my own hopes for myself, university education was what got my family to Canada. Disability has changed so many of my dreams, but this was not about my health and illness. I was fully capable of finishing my degree and practising social work with accommodations; the barrier here was ableism.

COVID-19 changed that. The remote placements the field office had felt were insufficient were now touted as excellent learning opportunities, great for your resumé post-graduation. I jumped at the opportunity to finish, all the while keenly aware of other disabled folk who were just as capable but had been denied the chance to finish school and practise social work because of ableism. Jocelyn Mondragon (@jocyofthedragons on Twitter) is one disability advocate who had been told that it was too difficult to provide partial online access to her social work classes (Now This, 2020). She dropped out of a New Orleans, Louisiana, school of social work a month before the university went fully online for COVID-19 (Now This, 2020). She is one of many disabled students who have been locked out of social work due to wilful inaccess.

The Academic Stuff

Field placements are a cornerstone in social work education. They claim to do the difficult task of preparing students for a field that reaches all sectors and populations. But for many, it has become less of a learning opportunity and more of a gauntlet for students to survive or fail. Students are expected to prove their professionalism and dedication to the field by giving 110% while providing hundreds of hours of unpaid labour (Canadian Association of Social Work Education [CASWE], 2021). Their work is often used to replace paid staff in cash-strapped agencies ("Working for you, me, we, us, and them," 2010), rather than to truly give students the chance to learn, fail, and try again in a supportive environment. This capitalist approach to productivity is not only unsustainable; it is ableist.

Disabled students and activists already spend a great deal of time in our day-to-day lives advocating for our rights and the rights of other disabled and chronically ill people. Fulfilling the pressure to be perfect or above-excellent students is often a way of dealing with internalized ableism while also combatting systemic beliefs that sick and disabled people are incapable (Brown, 2014). This only contributes to experiences of ableism among disabled students. While student placements themselves are used to meet labour demands of an underfunded system, which we argue needs to be addressed, we want to stress that for disabled students the unreasonable expectations placed upon us are a human-rights issue.

Our Placement Story

The COVID-19 pandemic turned everyone's lives and routines upside down, and in doing so, offered us the chance to re-examine our social work placement. To complete her Bachelor of Social Work, Kaia had only her placement left. Bogged down by inaccessibility and the effects of an energy-limiting chronic illness, she was resigned to leaving the degree unfinished, as prior to COVID-19 she had been told that she could not do her placement remotely.

Zac was approached by a faculty member at Kaia's school in hopes that they might be able to provide a student placement through the research project they were working on. While Zac had supervised students previous to COVID-19, they were unsure what a remote research placement might look like but were open to the possibilities the pandemic offered.

Kaia and Zac were eventually matched. Through honest conversations within the interview process and early in the placement, we agreed that since neither of us had navigated the supervisor–student relationship in this way before, we would take this opportunity to queer and question rigid concepts of time and professionalism by enacting radical social work values, applying crip-time and disability-justice values. Essentially, we decided to explore the possibilities of a pandemic placement.

Queering (Crip) Time

Pyne (2016) used "queer" to describe "a politicized identity and a movement demarcating itself from heteronormativity" (p. 55). Similarly, Massaquoi (2015) defined the queer subject as those who fall outside the norms of sexual identity and orientation or whose behaviour is oppositional to heterosexual norms. While we ourselves are queer, like LeFrançois (2013) we understand queer as reflexive, which allows us to constantly recreate or imagine our roles and identities, as something that is fluid rather than "closed and defined" (p. 109). "Queer theory offer[s] a (shifting) theoretical framework and (dynamic) methodology in order to trouble our discursive and embodied ways of knowing and being, with the ultimate goal of producing social change" (p. 109). For the purpose of this article, we have chosen to define queer as something more liminal—that which exists outside the norms of our subjectivities and dominant notions of sexual orientation and gender (Holman Jones & Adams, 2014). We have opened up queer as challenges and disruptions to "professional" norms and standards of "truth" and whiteness. Like Jose Muñoz (2009), we see queer as a politicized possibility of the future that is not yet conscious, but that allows for difference to belong within the collective.

Kafer's (2013) notion of crip time is an extension of the concept of queer temporality. Queer time offers a stretching, a twisting of both time and life paths in much the same way disability does. Queers and crips alike need "flex time not just expanded but exploded" (p. 107), with flexible starts and deadlines, hitting life milestones on alternative timelines, and new ways of thinking about time and our expectations of it. Kafer continued on to describe crip time:

> it requires re-imagining our notions of what can and should happen in time, or recognizing how expectations of "how long things take" are based on very particular minds or bodies. Rather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds. (p. 107)

Kafer referred to Halberstam's (2005) work on queer temporalities as a basis of crip time. Halberstam defined the AIDS epidemic as the beginning of queer time, as illness and death pushed queer people further out of normative narratives of time and into flux, though Kafer (2013) noted that this continues a long history of separating queerness from illness and disability. In Kaia's experience, COVID-19 forced mainstream communities into the crip time she already inhabited: asynchronous classes, delayed milestones, and rolling plans and uncertainty. Suddenly, everyone was having to adjust to living life from home, where plans were always tentative and based on factors outside our control—something already familiar to many sick and disabled people (Ebba, n.d.; Samuels, 2017; Samuels & Freeman, 2021). As Hubrig (2020) put it so well, pandemic time is crip time.

For Zac and Kaia, crip time has always been a burden of possibilities. Crip time exists outside of a colonial white time because, unlike whiteness and white time, crip time addresses issues of equity and institutional practices (Green et al., 2007). Before COVID-19, students were expected to complete their practicum within the constructs of white time, which for Kaia and her disability was going to mean a lack of accommodations and by default an inability to graduate from a program she had excelled at. In relation to white time, our need to live within crip time has been detrimental to meeting arbitrary milestones at the "appropriate" time. But living in crip time forces disabled folks to implement and respect personal boundaries, offering us the opportunity to learn (imperfectly) how to listen to our bodies and the limits they set for us (Cepeda, 2021). Like the pandemic, disability and sickness pushed us into these teachings—which in turn have opened up possibilities for what could be.

With COVID-19, placement, too, flexed. The Canadian Association for Social Work Education announced on March 30, 2020, that placements must immediately switch to remote learning plans and that the required hours would be reduced by 25% (CASWE, 2020). Both of these recommendations removed major barriers to disabled students like Kaia, who had long been seeking accommodations for flexible location and time. On the supervisory side, onerous evaluations were suddenly made optional, with simple checkboxes replacing the need to comment extensively on each student's progress. Trust began to replace surveillance, which once had been considered necessary to ensure a successful placement. Of course, this flexibility did not suit everyone, and the lack of involvement meant that formal negotiation of accommodations was forgotten. Happily, our shared interest in a transformative practicum meant that was not a barrier for us.

Disability Justice

Disability justice transcends access and inclusion, and moves toward a place of wholeness where disability is not brokenness to be fixed but part of a shared humanity (Sins Invalid, 2019). It rejects the medical model of disability, which positions impairment or illness as the source of all problems and cure as the solution (Oliver, 1990). Disability justice moves beyond the social model of disability, where barriers to inclusion are positioned as the problems that must be eliminated (Oliver, 1990). Rather, disability justice removes problems from the equation, focusing instead on the inherent worth and wholeness of every person in every bodymind (Mingus, 2011; Sins Invalid, 2019). Rather than focus on equal individual access to labour and society, disability justice works toward anti-capitalist interdependence and sustainable collective liberation, led by the most impacted (Mingus, 2011; Sins Invalid, 2019.). While this article is focused on social work placement and thus inextricably intertwined with capitalist ideas of labour and production, our goals included revisiting the placement as a site of learning rather than of work, replacing hierarchies of power with interdependence, and replacing exploitation with respect for each other's humanity and needs.

There is Always More to a Story

It is important to interject that this privilege or thoughtfulness around disability justice was created out of our own experiences as sick and disabled individuals. Our experiences had prepared us for what many able-bodied, neurotypical, and well individuals had not yet experienced but was our everyday crip reality (Ebba, n.d.). It is also important to note that while this was both of our experiences pre-COVID-19, it is not necessarily the experience of all sick and disabled individuals. Additionally, COVID-19 has exacerbated the isolation felt by many sick and disabled folks, particularly those in group homes and other institutions who have been forcibly separated from their friends, families, and caregivers (ARCH Disability Law Centre, 2020).

Our disabled, sick, queer, (for Zac) trans, and (for Kaia) racialized bodies negotiate power in particular ways. COVID-19, by forcing remote placement, was advantageous to us. We did not have to navigate tiring and expensive travel, donate to agencies out of our personal funds, buy new "professional" clothes, or struggle with whether to admit we could not afford to go out for lunch with our paid colleagues. As a student, Kaia was not forced to work out of Zac's professional space. In our past placements, we had found ourselves working from the boardroom table, the lunch table, the floor, a closet, and a literal children's desk. We were no longer being watched by our employer or supervisors when taking breaks, eating, or going to the washroom—free of being openly surveilled as sick (and trans or racialized) people within mostly white, able-bodied, and able-minded institutions. Kaia had long been using technology to build crip worlds from her bed: online placement was about more than accessibility; it was about bringing the mainstream into a rich online crip life that was often deemed undesirable, if not impossible (Hamraie & Fritsch, 2019).

Accessibility was easier to navigate because of our mutual dedication to accessibility and a lack of surveillance, but working from home also created new challenges. Work-life balance is more complex when you are home all the time. We were forced to share more of our home lives through video calls—which we have heard people say contributes to a shared humanity. But we are sick and disabled: our homes are queer to the non-disabled. Sickness and disability often coincide with poverty due to systemic oppression. We have found that employers like universities do not want to offer accommodations that seem too difficult or expensive. While many universities offered remote internet access and borrowed laptops, we, as people living with disabilities, already had these things—often paid for out of pocket and out of necessity, as pre-pandemic these supports were extremely hard to come by. We had already navigated the digital divide—alone.

Professionalism and White Time in Social Work Placement

We were continually told by numerous educational institutions that working 9-to-5 on weekdays was a requirement of placement. Contrast this to our evening or weekend or asynchronous university courses or to our employment. When Zac decided to return to school while still working full-time in the field, their workplace accommodated them by allowing for flexible hours outside of their regular work schedule. (Due to the realities of social work, it was not uncommon for Zac to work at any hour of the day or night.)

Our experiences highlighted how placement was held to a different "professional" standard than school or our paid labour. We were continually told that when we were in the "real world," social work agencies would largely operate during business hours (9-to-5) and therefore if we could not meet this simple reality, we were not cut out to be "professional social workers."

This is where our experiences differ. Kaia was continually told that flexibility could not be granted because social work must be practised in person and within the prescribed hours. Zac, who had been working within the field for a number of years and had experienced the necessity of flexible schedules, was provided more opportunities that would accommodate their current work schedule but still required them to take time off from their paid labour to complete placement largely within business hours.

Given that we both understood that paid social work existed in a variety of formats both within and outside the so-called traditional 9-to-5, why was the university so intent on forcing its students to find placements within these hours? Did Zac receive more accommodation because they were already working in the field and had direct experience working in different ways at different times? Did Zac's whiteness allow for more flexibility? Zac is often not perceived as disabled. Did the university perceive Zac as capable of working 9-to-5 if needed, so any flexibility was perceived as a bonus rather than a threat to professionalism itself? Gorman

(2013) found that white students tend to be more comfortable asking for accommodations. Both Kaia and Zac asked for accommodations centred around time, but there was a clear difference: Zac's accommodations centred around paid labour, and Kaia's centred around disability.

Living within the liminality of standardized western white time and crip time had always had its complications for Zac and Kaia; often the Human Rights Code was the only safety buffer between the two versions of time (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2018). However, when it came to student placement, it was clearly conveyed to us that western white professional time was the only time that would be adhered to. We found it odd and frustrating that our lived experience and human rights would be neglected for a construction of time that did not relate to our own personal and professional experiences.

Nanni (2012) reminded us that "clocks, it is often forgotten, do not keep the time, but a time" (p. 1), more specifically, eurocentric Greenwich Mean Time, established in 1884, which leaves everyone with a daily reminder of European expansion and colonization that is rarely questioned. For Rifkin (2017), adhering to standardized time symbolizes western modernity, with all other forms of time belonging to the "uncivilized" and existing in the past. Through this we have come to understand western professional time as white time (Mills, 2014). For Mills, white time requires us to understand a "white temporal imaginary, which serves to protect white racial privilege from the threatening encroachments of racial justice" (p. 27). White time is more encompassing than Marxist capitalist or bourgeoisie time because it includes discussion of race, which capitalist time neglects (p. 28). The current colonial understanding of time, like colonial history and the notion of man, are European ideas, according to Mills (2014):

> The capacity to utilize time becomes racialized…. White time becomes not merely a Euro-centred periodization, but a demarcator of the appropriate use of time, conceptions of daily rhythms of work and leisure, as opposed to the general misuse of time Europeans found elsewhere. (p. 31)

But the field of social work must also recognize that professional time is not only exclusionary white time. It is able-bodied and neurotypical time; it is heterosexual time; it is cis-gender time; it is not and cannot be "othered" time.

The Rationalization of Group Privilege Through the Use of Time

Chapman and Withers (2019) traced the colonial legacy of professional social work through the stories that have been told about social work. These histories largely focused on the accomplishments of white female social workers and came at the expense of Black, Indigenous, and other racialized individuals who also engaged in either formal social work or social working. Zerubavel called this process "societal norms of remembrance that tell us what we should remember and what we should essentially forget" (2003, as cited in Mills, 2014, pp. 4–5). This forgetting allows the enactment of colonial violence to continue. Forgetting allows white, colonial processes to be normalized so that they become nothing more than the way things are done, lacking the memory of how things have also been and removing the possibility for things to be different. Working 9-to-5 is taken for granted as the way professions operate, but this professional time rarely benefits the service users we interact with or social workers who themselves fall outside of the normative white, cis, female social worker. The social-working societal norms of remembrance foster white time and serve to exclude disabled and othered workers from the profession.

If professional time is understood as white time, what then is the purpose of a student placement?

White time operates through equality (each receives the same support), but as critical social workers we understand that equality only benefits some. Equity (each receives as they need) meets more needs, but a transformative approach to time would benefit the most. If placements were to operate outside of white time, or in more equitable and social justice–oriented approaches, practicums would exist within a queer temporality.

It is an open yet often unspoken secret that members of “helping professions” are under intense pressure to provide unpaid labour to make up for the underfunding of services. The non-profit industrial complex exhorts service providers to push our limits (“Working for you, me, we, us, and them,” 2010). In our experiences, this means that stories around our clients’ unmet needs feed into narratives like “If you don’t do this unpaid, you don’t care about the people it will affect.”

The non-profit industrial complex encompasses the ways funders (states, owners, foundations, etc.) control and direct social movements, dissent, and organizing through non-profits, especially by distracting with feel-good charitable acts while structuring non-profits to maintain the racial capitalist status quo (INCITE!, n.d.; “Working for you, me, we, us, and them,” 2010).

Funders are often companies and governments providing donations that offset the effects of their own capitalist pursuits (“Working for you, me, we, us, and them,” 2010). Social work agencies replicate the push for profit in how they wring employees of every drop they have—not only by perpetuating the value of the self as productivity but also by defining workers as good or dedicated enough based on how much unpaid labour they provide.

Social work students are ripe for that exploitation and descent into Berlant’s (2007) slow death,1 which describes the physical and emotional wearing out of a population under the never-ending pressures of capitalism. Not only are their identities and careers rooted in how much they produce for the agencies but also their sense of themselves as good people (Chapman & Withers, 2019). Students are pushed to give all that they have and more for agencies to prove their worth and their willingness.

This is incredibly destructive for all students, but especially sick, Mad, and disabled students. Not all disabled students can prove their worth and willingness by pouring their all into a placement: disabled folks must carefully calculate and leave resources in reserve for our daily lives. Kaia knows this intimately: she took medical leave from her Bachelor of Social Work several years ago, when increasing and unrealistic demands put a significant strain on her well-being.

For some, that may be evidence that students who are disabled in particular ways are not cut out for social work. Kafer (2013) talked about “disabled futures” or “crip futurity” (p. 2): so often, others imagine a utopian future where disability is not integrated but eliminated. If

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[1] While we find Berlant’s slow death useful for this paper, we do not agree with the fatphobia present in Berlant’s article. We direct readers to Crawford’s “Slender Trouble” (2017)

the goal is to make the field of social work obsolete, does that include eliminating disability? Or phrased differently, often progressive social workers state that their goal is to aim for the eradication of social problems and by default the social workers who address those problems, but does that progressive vision include interdependence for all people, including disabled folks? While we would love to imagine that these social workers are implying that an eradication of social workers would lead to a society that embraces a disability-justice framework, gatekeeping legislation from our own regulatory body, the Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers (OCSWSSW) prompts us to believe otherwise.

Recently, in Ontario, OCSWSSW (2018) changed its policies to require registrants to disclose disabilities "that could affect their ability to practise in a safe manner" (paras. 1–3). They also make vague threats that if the college disagrees with the worker's self-assessment, there will be additional punishment for failing to disclose (OCSWSSW, 2018). Wrapped up in that policy is the assumption that disability means a worker is more likely to be "unfit" to practise (Chapman et al., 2016). While not all registered social workers agree with this change in policy, it leaves us wondering if true disabled futures can include social work practice and if social work practice can be transformed to include disability justice.

Theory And Change in a Disability-Justice Placement

Social Work Needs Disabled Workers

COVID-19 gave Kaia the opportunity to finish the placement she had dropped many years before, as working from home was now finally an option, not just for disabled students but for workers everywhere. It was frustrating that the accommodation she had been denied was now de rigueur, not only the only option but touted as a fantastic learning experience that would provide valuable transferable skills.

Our Disability-Justice Placement

Deciding to implement a disability justice–oriented placement was one thing, but figuring out how those changes might look was an ongoing process. Some of these priorities were obvious right away; others showed up over time:

- Making disability mentionable, creating a space where we could openly and honestly talk about our capacities and limitations
- Breaking down the power differential, which led to more honesty and also promoted an environment where we were both learning from each other
- Questioning professionalism, essential to disrupting the idea that disability and its effects are unprofessional
- Working in crip time, our guide in prioritizing our bodyminds and considering what we could flex

These goals led to changes like this:

- Communicating how much we could flex, e.g., "Okay, I can get this done realistically in four days, but ideally I'd have seven days."
- Openly sharing expectations and capacity, e.g., "You don't need to ask to take time off, but do let me know."

- Explicitly positioning Zac as learning from Kaia, and not just the student learning from the supervisor
- Zac also setting learning goals for the placement, a process that is only required of the student
- Creating learning goals that extended beyond this placement, that encompassed Kaia's future vocational goals
- Stating that learning involves being able to make mistakes on both sides, including in our implementation of a disability-justice placement
- Focusing supervision on not just the projects but questions and mutual discussion of the issues involved
- Setting project goals as milestones rather than hours
- Prioritizing what needed to be done at all

Embracing Crip Time and Our Bodyminds

If crip time is about listening to your bodymind and "bending the clock" to it, just learning how to listen to our bodies was a challenge (Kafer, 2013, p. 107). Kaia assigned limits to herself about how much she could flex time. In part, her thought process was about ensuring she was not overloading the next week, but it was also a sense of how far she felt she could push the bounds of propriety before getting in trouble. Samuels (2017) talked about the unspoken and explicit limits to how sick a person is allowed to be. Those who are lucky enough to have sick days know how often they are permitted to be sick, as if we can tell our bodyminds to ration out illness. Placement students, of course, have no sick days: if they do end up missing days due to illness or disability, each hour must be made up, including during a pandemic. They are intended to be young fodder for the gears of the non-profit industrial complex. As if youth means it is impossible to be ill or disabled (Samuels, 2017). Workers are not intended to conserve energy for the next week, not under capitalism (Halberstam, 2005).

Part of "propriety" for Kaia was the sense that it was unprofessional to be publicly disabled. It took years for her to believe that accommodations were her right, even at work. Disability accommodations are depoliticized; they become a sign of a nice person but not a true need (Kafer, 2013; "Working for you, me, we, us, and them," 2010). Agencies and institutions are not people. They do not need to be nice and thus often act as if accommodations are optional: a favour, not a responsibility.

For disabled folk like us, accommodations are political. They are enshrined in laws that are incredibly difficult to enforce, in systems we often cannot access. In our experiences we are either "not cut out for this" or we are in every photo, token minorities trotted out to plump up a diversity that does not exist. Those of us who can get through without accommodations are *good disableds*, grateful and compliant. In comparison, those of us who require accommodations are often seen as *bad disableds*. When we are bad disableds, daring to advocate for the accommodations we are legally entitled to, it is explicitly conveyed to us that it would be preferable if we were to disappear into our homes, unseen and non-existent as far as governments and workplaces are concerned.

As literary scholar Gina Zurowski said on the podcast Secret Feminist Agenda, “sometimes people use the word ‘hope’ when they mean ‘wish’” (McGregor, 2020, 17:21). Social work agencies and institutions wish their organizations were anti-ableist and anti-racist but often do not put the work into bringing that wish into the realm of possibility.

Crip time and disability often require one to accept a level of uncertainty that would have been unbearable before we became sick and disabled. Modern-day work is a constant push to eliminate uncertainty at the cost of everyone’s lives, choices, and bodies. Standardization, made material in flowcharts and checklists, cuts away thought, uncertainty, and, above all, messy humanity.

That messy humanity and uncertainty became part of the global experience with COVID-19 as it had become part of the queer experience during the AIDS crisis. There was a push and pull: pressure to produce as usual, tugging against the visceral truth that “as usual” no longer exists. For us, that same tension lives in our bodies, less acquiescent than they once were to the demands of capitalism and the non-profit industrial complex. Crip time in crip bodies is a way to speak back to rigid, white professional time, especially in the midst of worldwide illness.

Legacy of Problematic Radical Roots

Increasing professionalization in social work is often praised as a kind of “civilizing” force—a narrative from the field's assimilationist roots, in settlement houses across the continent where wealthy white women taught poor brown families how to aspire to whiteness (Chapman & Withers, 2019). With professionalization comes power, from governments that place social workers in colonial structures and from funders that forbid them from changing oppressive systems. They are the ultimate short-term solution for white colonial capitalism (“Working for you, me, we, us, and them,” 2010). The field has slipped even further away from meeting people’s needs, and toward the quest for legitimacy and power from the very structures that oppress those they serve (Goldstein, 1990).

But social work has more than its white history. Though not often told, social work’s history is also heavily rooted in grassroots movements of queer-sick-Black-Brown-Indigenous-disabled-Mad-undocumented-immigrant-trans-non-binary-poor-colonized-underhoused-broke-old-teen-refugee-incarcerated-separated-femme-survivors who have and continue to work inside and outside of our systems (Chapman & Withers, 2019). These roots are not free from a mottled past either, but the values of wholeness, interdependence, and anti-colonialism, anti-capitalism, and collective liberation are ones we share.

These are the roots we tended to and cultivated in our placement.

Disrupting the Bounds of Professionalism in Placement

The pursuit of social justice is one of the core values and principles of the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW, 2005). Working with crip time required us to build an equitable relationship within which trust was a fundamental requirement. It had to be possible and polite to negotiate flexibility and its effect on our workload—including flexibility with the work itself. In a disability justice–oriented world, there would be backup for each role as capacities wax and wane (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2020). As a tiny team of two, we were each other’s backup, and that required a lot of honesty, vulnerability, and trust.

That vulnerability was frightening. Being honest about Kaia's capabilities has often invited doubt and dismissiveness, especially within social work. Supervisors have approached her disabilities as an inconvenient challenge; something they could encourage her into getting over so she was a "better" team player and could become an inspirational success story: the Super Crip. The Super Crip is a representation of a good disabled, one who attempts to meet the unrelenting colonial construct of the able-bodied and able-minded and, in doing so, gains some of the privileges of being abled through their heroism (Clare, 2004). Those tokens of privilege come at a cost—for Kaia, the cost is unseen days lost to pain and fatigue. Should the illusion of the Super Crip be broken, so will the illusion of privilege afforded to the Super Crip who flounders.

The idea that a disability ought to be "gotten over" before one can be a valued member of the team is rooted in eugenics (Kafer, 2013; Mingus, 2015). The goal is to eliminate the effect of the disability in the workplace (both for clients and workers), not to eliminate barriers within the workplace itself. Discourses of "fitness to practice" and which disabled lives are worth accommodating are especially relevant during a pandemic, when disabled folk have been forcibly removed from life-sustaining equipment and badgered into signing pre-emptive "Do not resuscitate" orders (Alexiou, 2020; Shapiro, 2021). It is crucial to begin to imagine futures in which disabled people are valued rather than fake utopias in which we do not exist.

Part of what we had to change was making illness and disability mentionable. We dismissed notions of professionalism around "bringing personal issues into the workplace." Disrupting professionalism was necessary to maintain an open and equitable working relationship, where both of us were staving off the slow death of perpetual productivity regardless of our health (Berlant, 2007; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2020; Soja, 2010, as cited in What′s Special Justice?, n.d.). That honesty made listening to our bodyminds an imperative rather than a "nice thing to do." We had to recognize each other's humanity, inherent worth, and abilities to resist the depoliticization and responsibilization of disability. Our focus moved from what we could not do to what we needed to nurture our capabilities: what we needed to get the job done in ways that did not use our bodies as collateral damage.

Mutual accountability played a huge part in learning to listen to our bodyminds. Like most people (especially femmes of colour), Kaia was taught to wring every drop of capacity out of herself for work, leaving nothing for herself. But thinking about how Zac might prompt her to prioritize her health over the project was a good reminder both within the placement and in her daily life. We had to constantly relearn letting go of the internalized ableism and capitalist notions of worth to get through not only the placement but the pandemic (Hubrig, 2020).

Within the non-profit industrial complex, team players are more often individuals driven to destruction for the agency rather than persons working together to support each other. Disability justice demands that workers take time to reflect on what a team really is: are we holding each other up or using each other as collateral damage?

Burk's (2011) concept of accountable communities gave us a strong foundation outside the rigidity of professionalism and punitive activist spaces. There is no guidebook for running a social work placement rooted in disability justice, disengaged from white professional time. It was imperative that we built both community capacity (within our larger research and institutional communities) and individual capacity for accountability and repair, as learning inevitably includes unlearning and mistakes.

Building an accountable community with our teams made transforming our placement more possible. This meant finding disability justice–oriented individuals within our educational institutions and engaging in critical reflexive praxis as a research team. We could trust each other to hold our humanity, worth, and dignity at the centre of our placement, for ourselves and for each other. That made it much more possible to flex and adjust with crip time and to learn in our crip bodyminds.

Our commitment to a disability-justice practicum worked for us but was far from perfect. Rather than continuing to navigate how disabled, racialized, trans, and other marginalized individuals can fit into the professionalization of social work, we would argue for a move toward deprofessionalization—“the restructuring of the ‘helping’ practices of social work back under the control of communities themselves” (Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong, 2019, p. 447). This has long been happening in groups neglected or harmed by social work: community members band together and quietly transform the colonial roots of social services into tailor-made programs, built by the community to strengthen the community. We have been privileged to take part in these grassroots movements, both within and without social work.

A Call to Action for Disabled Futures in Social Work

Making disability mentionable, respecting each other’s experiences, communicating openly, and being accountable for errors led to a radically different student–supervisor relationship. This was made possible because both supervisor and student were already working from the margins of social work and had built supportive, justice-oriented communities for ourselves within it. Incorporating crip time had a huge snowball effect, including practising listening to our bodyminds, disengaging from professionalism, examining white time, and learning to prioritize tasks and our health both within the placement and outside it.

We made several large, fundamental changes to how we approached a disability-justice placement in a pandemic, including allowing for crip time and building an interdependent working relationship of equitable power and trust. We had to critically examine and question what we believed about professionalism, power, and social work practice and take only what mattered to us. The actual changes were quite small: talk to each other, flex on time, prioritize our bodyminds, and focus on learning. Yet the theoretical and practical changes cannot be done without each other; there is no point in having supervisor and student communicate openly if there is not trust and a more equal footing from which to be honest. There is no point making space for crip time if you do not question why flexibility and disability were not considered an option in the first place.

Zurowski said, “I don’t have space for people to hope to be shielded from our shared realities” (McGregor, 2020, 15:59). Social change work is about addressing root causes of exploitation and violence, not uplifting individual stories of success (Kivel, 2000, as cited in “Working for you, me, we, us, and them,” 2010). Too often, disabled, racialized, and otherwise marginalized social workers are expected to survive in oppressive systems, rather than the systems addressing why our survival is in question at all.

The placement that spurred the writing of this article was a first foray into how exploitative social work field education can be made more justice-oriented, and initiatives like this must be expanded into the field at large, including as we all adjust after COVID-19. Disability is not a disqualifier for social work. Professionalism and time are colonial constructs (Nanni, 2012; Rifkin, 2017). So with this in mind, what is the purpose of social work student placements? Freire (1993) reminded us that “education as the exercise of domination stimulates the credulity of students, with the ideological intent (often not perceived by educators) of indoctrinating them to adapt to the world of oppression” (p. 5).

For us, placement should not be a space to further indoctrinate students into hegemonic professionalism nor should it be rooted in oppressive colonial and ableist violence. It should be a space that meets the needs of the students while encouraging mutual learning from all parties, including the practicum supervisor. We see a practicum as a space that can allow for a move away from the domination of education and toward genuine learning. A space where the liminality of not yet worker, not only student can be embraced as a site of freedom and exploration. It must be a place where students do not need to fight for accommodations. For us, what a practicum has traditionally been and what the pandemic allowed it to be is full of possibility.

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Author Note

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Kaia M. Arrow. Email: arrowKM7@gmail.com