

Alt Text: Feminist Technoscience Meets Crip Authorship

Louise Hickman

University of Cambridge

lh761@cam.ac.uk

Mara Mills

New York University

mmills@nyu.edu

David Serlin

University of California, San Diego

dserlin@ucsd.edu

Abstract

From the very beginning, questions of accessibility and disability authorship were imagined as integral to the journal that became *Catalyst*. On the occasion of *Catalyst's* tenth anniversary, Mara Mills initiated a conversation between herself and two other members of the journal's first editorial team, Louise Hickman and David Serlin, to reflect on the way that feminist disability studies, as an interdisciplinary field, and accessibility features, such as alt text, were incorporated into the journal's emerging editorial ethos.

Keywords

Accessibility, alt text, disability, crip studies

From the very beginning, questions of accessibility and disability authorship were imagined as integral to the journal that became *Catalyst*. On the occasion of *Catalyst's* tenth anniversary, Mara Mills initiated a conversation between herself and two other members of the journal's first editorial team to reflect on the way that feminist disability studies, as an interdisciplinary field, and accessibility

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features, such as alt text, were incorporated into the journal's emerging editorial ethos. What follows is an edited transcript of a teleconference conversation between Mills (New York), Louise Hickman (London), and David Serlin (Rome), held on July 3, 2025.

Mara Mills (MM): Looking back through my *Catalyst* correspondence, I see that disability studies was a pillar of the journal from the outset—from the very first planning meetings in 2012 and 2013. *Catalyst* was a born-digital journal, and we were also a born-disability studies journal. And that was so unusual for science and technology studies at the time, because STS lagged behind English, history, and many other humanities fields in taking up the insights of disability scholarship and activism. David, I think *Artificial Parts, Practical Lives*—the book you edited in 2002 with Katherine Ott and Stephen Mihm—was such a spur for people working on tech, medicine, and science to consider disability perspectives. And then a decade later, you, Lisa Cartwright, and Rachel Lee—all working on disability or chronic illness in some regard—were part of the steering committee meeting I attended at Emory University in 2013 to start imagining a feminist STS journal. But I don't know the backstory to that 2013 meeting...

David Serlin (DS): Well, all of this started because around 2012 the journal *Configurations* approached Lisa Cartwright and asked if she would like to be involved in putting together a proposal to take over the administration of the journal and at the same time think about how to reshape or reinvent it. It was already a great journal, with more of a focus on literary and historical studies of science and medicine, but the editorial board said, "We can't do it anymore, and we need a new institutional affiliation. Would you like to take it up at UC San Diego?"

Lisa knew that I had about a decade of experience as a member of the editorial collective of the *Radical History Review*, so she asked me if I was interested in joining her in making *Configurations* into something we wanted to see—namely, a feminist STS journal—and anchor it at our home institution. Little by little, we realized that the journal already had a clear identity. So Lisa said, "What if we were to start something brand new and build it from scratch?" At that point, Lisa brought Deboleena Roy and Elizabeth Wilson at Emory University into our conversations and we all started brainstorming ideas. Our colleagues at UC San Diego, like Brian Goldfarb, had a great deal of experience designing and building platforms to create born-digital scholarship online.

I'm condensing a lot of detail, but things started to happen quickly over the next two years. Lisa is a seasoned pro at successfully applying for funding, so we got some money from our academic senate to hire grad students as research assistants who could then serve as managing and technical support. That's how early in the process we were able to bring on grad students, like Monika Sengul-Jones, Cristina

Visperas, and Poyao Huang, to serve in those vital roles while we mentored them through the process. Meanwhile, we began crafting a mission statement.

Deboleena, Elizabeth, Lisa, and I have similar training and interests even though our respective works are quite different from one another. But all of us agreed that we wanted to build a feminist technoscience journal informed by important modes of contemporary scholarly and activist work as well as artistic practice. And we wanted to foreground disability studies, and feminist disability studies even more specifically, both at the level of content as well as at the infrastructural level in terms of editorial policy. Not that we would only focus on disability per se, but that disability studies should be integral to our intellectual and political vision.

MM: Absolutely. I dug up the program from the first steering committee meeting and saw that it was attended by you and Lisa, Rachel Lee, Banu Subramaniam, M. Murphy, Elizabeth Wilson, me—and Rob Mitchell was also there as a sort of fellow traveler. So many of us were working in disability and chronic illness studies, among our other fields.

One of the first items on our agenda was to discuss the focus of the journal, and one of the initial desired topics was already disability studies. We came up with a list of possible titles, *Catalyst* being one, and “feminist technoscience” anchoring the subtitle. We also talked about our publishing model: Should it be university-affiliated? Would we have to pay fees to a university press or other publisher, and would our readers have to pay fees to access the journal? We decided against all of that. We decided to go hard with the feminist collective model, bootstrapping the new journal into an online and open access format.

DS: Yes, it came from our own publishing experiences as individuals but also those that were in our broader networks as collaborators. Lisa had been working with Alex Juhasz and Ann Balsamo, who were all running FemTechNet, a feminist model of non-hierarchical collaborative work that was a good model for how to conceive of a project like *Catalyst*. The *Radical History Review (RHR)* was also an important model. The *RHR* prides itself on being an editorial collective. There is no editor-in-chief. Instead, it has two rotating co-chairs who help facilitate the work of the collective. There’s a managing editor for administrative purposes, but otherwise it’s an editorial body where everyone shares the labor, making it possible for grad students and junior and senior scholars to work toward common goals without the kinds of hierarchies that often calcify in academic projects.

I shared the *RHR*’s approach with Lisa and the emerging steering committee for *Catalyst*. I said, “I don’t know how we’re going to do this if we’re scattered across the continent and in a few separate countries, because it’s hard enough to do this together in one room. (This was when the best video tool we had for video

conferencing was Skype.) But let's see if we can do it collectively, with all labor shared and responsibility shared by everyone to the extent that they can." As senior scholars, many of us often took the lead in, say, editing a manuscript. That was a way to get the work done without exploiting the often-uncompensated labor of grad students and untenured faculty. But in terms of setting policy or making decisions or brainstorming ideas, we held firm to a horizontal model of shared governance.

MM: I was a relatively new assistant professor at the time! But I think I was an outlier. Louise, what were your recollections of the early days of *Catalyst*, when you were first brought on board?

Louise Hickman (LH): I came on board for the first time with Monika and Cristina. We were actually taking a course together on FemTechNet with Lisa Cartwright and Liz Losh, which later turned into a conference that took place at UC San Diego. Through this course and subsequent conference, we were already thinking more critically about access-building and disability studies in feminist networks, and this very much acted as a springboard for thinking about the accessibility of the *Catalyst* journal.

Not long after this, in the run-up to launching the first issue, Lisa set up the Catalyst Lab in the Structural and Material Engineering Building at UC San Diego. Those who were in this lab came from wide backgrounds, including science studies, visual arts, communication, history, and more. The lab served as a central space for many disability studies scholars passing through, including Cassandra Hartblay, Petra Koppers, and Neil Marcus. On the feminist STS side, Lucy Suchman and Natasha Myers visited, too. With the many overlaps between disability studies and technoscience, we could think about access in more expansive ways and even more collaboratively, too. Joan Donovan was a graduate student in sociology and science studies at the time, and her work still informs how I approach developing policies for accessible infrastructures.

MM: Working remotely from New York, and feverishly emailing with all of you in San Diego, I missed out on that part of the history! I never entered the Catalyst Lab or participated directly in FemTechNet. I'm glad you're materializing some of the broader *Catalyst* "thought collective" and collaborators. Even though the journal has moved hubs and changed lead editorial teams every few years, I think the UC San Diego milieu still infuses the form of the journal ten years later, in part because you have this legendary multi-departmental Science Studies Program that is not at all typical for STS. In particular, so many scholars in the Department of Communication working in the field of disability studies—beyond David and Lisa, people like Patrick Anderson and Brian Goldfarb and Carol Padden. And just

the UC ethos. Maybe this is nostalgia from my undergrad days at UC Santa Cruz, but that sense of STS as always feminist STS.

LH: Yeah, I just wanted to add that you had just completed your retreat at UC Irvine.

MM: Oh my gosh. That's right! That was the UCHRI [University of California Humanities Research Institute] critical disability studies working group in fall 2010. I applied for it when I was a postdoc, before I started at NYU, and it was organized by Georgina Kleege, Catherine Kudlick, Susan Schweik, Patrick Anderson, and Darrin Martin, among others. They had designed it to be a hybrid residency for access purposes, which was totally new to the UCHRI at the time. And at the end of the year, we received a UCIRA [University of California Institute for Research in the Arts] grant—funding to hold a graduate student summer school and artist residency on the theme of arts access, especially creative description, at Irvine in 2012. And then the following year, maybe because of these UC collaborations, I was roped in to be part of this new journal we eventually called *Catalyst*.

LH: The legacy of the UCIRA project lived on through thinking more deeply about description. It was around this time that Rosemarie Garland-Thomson published a review of the field called “Disability Studies: A Field Emerged,” which signalled a shift in disability studies and STS. Mel Chen had just published *Animacies*. The field had opened up in these new, exciting ways for feminist STS, and this fed into the culture of the Catalyst Lab.

DS: In that way *Catalyst* is so clearly linked to the legacies of feminist collective work: You've got to do the work yourself. You've got to make shit happen, even create your own infrastructure, because it's not going to happen any other way.

MM: I forgot how long it took before the journal launched its first issue in 2015. That little steering committee grew into a bigger editorial collective, and a much bigger advisory board. And then the collective spent two years building all of the infrastructure for the journal. It was such a heroic amount of work for those of you at UC San Diego. Every single piece of the infrastructure! Monika Sengul-Jones in particular working on the Open Journal System (OJS) platform and how to leverage it for accessibility. We also had to figure out what the sections of the journal would be, and how to manifest our ambitious plan to include multimedia works and roundtable conversations alongside peer-reviewed journal articles. And we had to figure out what our peer-review process and guidelines would be. I remember creating so much paperwork as part of the second lead editor team with you, David, starting in 2016—and Harris Kornstein, who was then a graduate student Research Assistant based in my department at NYU, Media, Culture, and Communication. Creating so many online and PDF forms for authors to fill out...

DS: None of those things existed yet.

MM: And most of us are not exactly bureaucratically minded.

DS: No, no, that's not our strong suit.

MM: No citation guidelines. We spent a lot of time debating citation guidelines. And how to raise money for copy editors. We did a lot of the copy editing ourselves before we had enough funding to hire professional copy editors. And our open access policy. We decided we wanted to be open access to let authors be in charge of their own copyright. We wouldn't own it. Louise, you pointed out to me the other day that *Catalyst* always had a crip authorship approach to the publication process (see Mills and Sanchez 2023).

DS: I was going to ask Louise, when did we adopt alt text as technology, and how did we come to see it as not only a tool of access but part of the ethos of the journal?

LH: It's interesting, back in 2015, alt text was not the norm as it is now with the growth of social media. Actually, if I remember right, the invite to contribute alt text was a point of friction at times. It was difficult to convince some authors to provide alt text for images, and there was resistance for describing more technical images that fell outside the scope of describing artwork. We had many conversations in the lab itself on the authorship of alt text, including copyright and who should complete the labor of description when there is refusal. Encouraging authors to describe their own work was a form of access-building central to the journal. But as grad students at the time, we couldn't take on the labor of describing images for other authors.

DS: I think a really important point is that we tried to communicate clearly that our commitment to alt text was not just as a convenience for the many people who may want to gain access to the journal in a non-conventional way. It was more philosophical than that. It was actually a central part of the journal's ethos. We want you, as a prospective author, to create alt text not as an optional addition but as a kind of publishing intervention, something central to where we want to go as a journal. It's where the field needs to go.

MM: When the editorial board voted on being open access, without a print component, we partly made that decision for global accessibility purposes. We wanted people around the world to be able to read the journal, even if they weren't affiliated with a university, or if their university couldn't afford subscription fees. But simultaneously with that economic access piece, the team at the Catalyst Lab was thinking about how to make the issues we published as

accessible as possible. This was not that common back then. So we created style guidelines for authors, which are still on the website. Namely, asking authors to include captions, descriptions, or alt text, depending on what media they were including in their articles. NYU Press now has very similar guidelines, for instance, but I don't think it was that common in 2015.

But we also worked on an accessibility mission statement for *Catalyst*, which is something like a manifesto that also still sits on our website. In fact it's on our home page, front and center. When you click on "About the Journal," the accessibility mission statement appears right below a description of the journal's focus and scope. I can't think of any other STS journal that has accessibility on their home page as part of their mission. We were calling attention to infrastructure as form and content in STS, and access as an ongoing, iterative, and creative part of that infrastructure. Louise, I would love to hear more about the collective access ethos in the lab, and how you all were thinking of access as a creative and critical part of our publication from the very beginning.

DS: It doesn't hurt that Louise was developing a dissertation at the time that examined live captioning through the lenses of critical disability studies and feminist labor practices.

MM: Access wasn't just an add-on: it was a critical STS question. That was one of the propositions the journal was enacting.

LH: I think so, the [accessibility statement](#) is different from most that exist online. The statement was a collaborative effort between Cristina, Monika, and me. We spent a lot of time debating what a feminist access statement could look like for the journal. There is the mechanics of access, which Monika worked on. We also discuss at length how to invite authors to submit their alt text and the process of how this was submitted on the backend.

There is this line from the statement, which reads, "Demands are political and do not lend themselves to easy and definite closure." As a team we recognize we didn't want to start out with narrow definition of what accessibility looks like, especially in the field of STS. How do we account for collaborative work? (Which again is central to capacity building needed for access.)

How do we account for collaborative work, which again is central to capacity building needed for access. There was an impulse to make the mechanism of access-building more visible for those interacting with the journal rather than existing in the background. Lilly Irani was essential to thinking about issues of labor practices as well and was a frequent visitor to the lab, too.

In the last line of the statement, there was a deliberate attempt to position access as an ongoing project; we thought this was really important for the journal to carry forward. This was not a project that was a one-off, but can be a part of our practice through all of our work. The last line reads, “These invitations mean that, for *Catalyst*, access will remain an ongoing project, a reflexive, collaborative, and distributed effort in digital and disability design.”

DS: Access is like democracy—it doesn’t have an endpoint. You need to keep reviewing and renewing it. (Unfortunately, we are living in a historical moment where that’s painfully true.) But, Louise, I looked at my notes just now and I highlighted those exact words you just read, and underneath I wrote in red pen, “This is a crip methodology.” Or maybe the seeds of what we can call a crip method. Mara, you might not remember this, but in 2012 or 2013 Joe Dumit asked us to put together a panel for the STS Summer Camp he was organizing for graduate students and faculty in the UC system. Our panel was called “How Your STS Project Is a Disability Project.” That probably made its way into this mix of ideas well.

MM: But this access statement—I didn’t realize that Monika, Cristina, and Louise had drafted it! I remember all of us editing it, but I never knew who first drafted it. Even from my position within the journal, so much labor is not apparent. Thank you, Lou.

DS: Yes, it’s so good and clear, and it really sets the tone. With the exception of *Disability Studies Quarterly*, I can’t think of another journal that was committed to thinking about access as this kind of iterative project, one that’s always questioning itself and is never just satisfied with the laundry list of boxes to check off.

There was another similarly ambitious access statement, and I don’t know who wrote it, but it was about visuality and disability, and about translating visual work into disability accessible work through our website. If we’re going to be in dialogue with visual artists and to make space for that dialogue, we need to participate in a way that’s accessible. It means restructuring how we approach this thing called “access” as a creative opportunity; something experimental, following Donna Haraway’s idea of serious play. I don’t want to diminish the importance of achieving accessibility in very practical ways. But we were trying to find ways to say to Author X, you really need to be thinking about how to make your work accessible, not just because it’s mandated by publishing conventions or ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) requirements, but because it’s ethically the right thing to do. You need to be thinking ahead of the curve because there are readers or visitors to the website who will engage with your work in ways you can’t predict.

MM: David, I love that you're conjuring our lost access statements. We do have Google Doc upon Google Doc, which shockingly still seem to be alive twelve years later. Pages and pages of crowdsourced thoughts and theories of access that didn't make it onto the website.

LH: David, you just touched on this as a mode of translation, and because I think this is something that Lisa would repeatedly say in response to when we were thinking about when authors started to submit. Quite often when you're in disability studies, you're invited to translate for others, right? The burden is placed on the scholar in the new or unfamiliar field to do that work. So shifting or questioning that kind of dynamic—asking who is responsible for translation and why—is an important part of this story as well.

DS: Yes, Lisa was instrumental in keeping our eyes on the prize. And also that we can and should question what journals do. As members of an editorial or publishing collective, we can admit that we don't have all of the answers about how to make work accessible or how to incorporate disability as an editorial practice. We're figuring it out, too. We never want to think we have landed on a final answer because access needs will always change. Instead, we want to ask more questions and grow our work together dialogically, organically, as part of a larger process.

MM: Well, in our access mission statement we invite prospective authors to imagine all the ways access could be a fundamental aspect of representing their work. We urge them to go beyond our access guidelines. We also invite readers to provide input and critique about our journal's practices of publication and archiving.

DS: "At *Catalyst*, accessibility constitutes both an aim and intellectual concern."

MM: Yes, that's exactly it. And in addition to this theoretical work, I just want to flag that Louise and others did a ton of very practical accessibility testing for the pilot version of the *Catalyst* website. We had to do so much user testing before we launched in 2015. Louise, do you remember that process?

LH: I do not remember any of that bit! But I remember emailing Monika. I remember being on the site with her, but otherwise I have no idea.

MM: I found an email thread where someone, maybe Monika, had created mock web pages for the different sections of the journal. We were asking people who, for instance, relied on captions or used screen readers to test these pages and give us feedback. So we had a demo table of contents in HTML and PDF, an example image gallery on SlideShare. Oh, and we also had an example video on Vimeo, and there weren't automatic captions then, so we were using this other platform

called Amara to generate the captions. I mean, that's what we were dealing with to get the journal off the ground. And then we had example audio, and at that point we were using SoundCloud. I think we've changed that. Georgina Kleege is one of the people who tested these demo pages, using a screen reader, and it was really helpful because she found discrepancies between our PDF and HTML versions at the time. She also found that our early captions weren't very readable, and she asked us to tell authors to incorporate descriptions of images in the body of their texts. We then iteratively revised the site. That was slow, practical work.

We also encouraged a wide range of disability STS submissions to the journal. And from the beginning, when we received special issue proposals from adjacent fields like medical anthropology or sociology of medicine, we listed disability studies among the subfields in the calls for papers. But disability also threads through our special sections that focus on war, borders, race and technoscience—and vice versa. Some of our special sections do have an overt disability focus, like "[Autoimmunities in the Wake of COVID-19](#)," or "[Chemical Entanglements](#)," "[Crip Technoscience](#)," and "[Illness Narratives](#)." I guess the other big thing we have done is bring chronic illness studies into closer conversation with disability studies. There was so much friction between those fields in the 1990s. It's easy to forget that.

DS: In terms of bringing disability studies into conversation with STS, I remember the pleasure of working with Beza Merid and Tamara Kneese, who were the guest co-editors for the "Illness Narratives" issue. I remember meeting them in 2015 when I gave a talk at NYU, and they said, "We want to propose an issue that brings together narrative form, disability, and technoscience." There weren't a lot of publications that would support those intersections, so a lot of junior scholars and graduate students, like Beza and Tamara, saw *Catalyst* as a new opportunity to bring those intersections together.

LH: I want to add that Aimi Hamraie's and Kelly Fritsch's "[Crip Technoscience Manifesto](#)" was ground-shifting and has crossed over into so many areas of our work. I have recently seen the manifesto cited in the new V&A show on *Design and Disability*, curated by Natalie Kane (Kane and Liebeskind, 2025). The show has integrated the ethos of manifesto to draw attention to crip design practices in museums. Again, as Mara has already pointed out, the journal and the manifesto together allowed for different types of engagement, with the inclusion of Alice Wong's and Kevin Gotkin's work.

DS: Louise, you beat me to the punch. It's always thrilling to see where the "Crip Technoscience Manifesto" gets cited—not just among academics but among, for instance, artists and activists and curators who write about or do work in DIY or maker culture.

I also want to recognize the "[Transplant Medicine](#)" issue, which has received a lot of attention. Kelly Fritsch, one of the editors of that issue, brought a crip technoscience perspective to help contributors move beyond the conventional spaces within history of medicine. The editors brought transplants into conversation with trans-species and cross-species hybridities and critical thinking through feminist technoscience and feminist disability lenses. I'm very proud of the journal for addressing themes or topics that a generation ago might have been shaped by conventional approaches to science and medicine.

MM: David, I remember when we were cycling off being lead editors in 2017. At that point, we had already accepted the proposal to co-edit a "Crip Technoscience" special issue with Aimi and Kelly. It was so awesome to work with them, and with you, on that issue, which not surprisingly included a wider range of formats than usual for contributions, with activist authors like Louise mentioned as well as academics. Crip technoscience gave a name to the work we were doing as a journal of feminist technoscience in conversation with disability studies. It did much more than that, but it also gave us a sort of shorthand for explaining what *Catalyst* was often about.

DS: I think that's true. "Crip technoscience" became a way of weaving many threads together. The coining of the term *cripistemology* in critical disability studies about a dozen years ago also brought many strands of this kind of thinking together as well. Both terms are ways of reclaiming disabled subjectivities and the experience of disabled embodiment. I think it was in 2014 that Robert McRuer and Merri Lisa Johnson published that issue of the *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* on the theme of "cripistemology."

I think Robert once said that cripistemology was a kind of rapprochement with the medical model of disability. But I think it's more than that. That's why it and crip technoscience, which are distinct terms but which have interesting and overlapping genealogies, seem to be such good shorthand for what has attracted so many scholars and artists to *Catalyst*.

MM: The Cripistemologies conference that preceded the journal issue was hosted at NYU in 2013 by the Department of Social and Cultural Analysis—where you did your Ph.D., David—and by the then-emerging Center for Disability Studies. And now the center is one of the *Catalyst* co-sponsors, which provides support for research assistance during the summer months and help with copy editing. These are some of the NYU roots of the journal.

DS: I am so glad we are remembering this history. And the more that I think about it, the more I see how cripistemology is a kind of glue that holds so many of these things together. It goes back to the point about our commitment to access. It

goes back to the point about translation and taking seriously the idea of keeping the varied subjectivities of readers and visitors in mind. And engaging with disabled subjectivity not just as something to accommodate but as a generative, proactive force. Those are so key to the kinds of projects that *Catalyst* wanted to solicit from the very beginning: not just those that show how feminist technoscience and disability studies intersect but those that show how feminist technoscience and disability studies give us the tools, the vocabulary, for making embodied experience, bodily vulnerability, and the centrality of subjectivity the basis for reimagining critical theory, artistic practice, and social justice.

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Author Bios

Louise Hickman is a research associate at the Minderoo Centre for Technology and Democracy at the University of Cambridge. Louise is the PI of *Algorithmic Kitchen: Recipes for Disability-led Health*, a Wellcome-funded project that explores disability-led approaches to health data and care infrastructures.

Mara Mills is Associate Professor and Ph.D. Director of Media, Culture, and Communication at New York University and one of the founding editors of *Catalyst*. She is also a co-founder and director of the NYU Center for Disability Studies.

David Serlin is Professor of Communication and Science Studies at UC San Diego and one of the founding editors of *Catalyst*. His latest book is *Window Shopping with Helen Keller: Architecture and Disability in Modern Culture* (University of Chicago Press, 2025).