



#LiberatingWebinars: Disability Justice and Access-Centered Pedagogy in the Pandemic

Transcript for Autistic Women & Nonbinary Network webinar
with Aimi Hamraie and Mimi Khúc
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LYDIA X.Z. BROWN: My name is Lydia X.Z. Brown, and I am AWN's Director of Policy, Advocacy and External Affairs. Today I am especially excited to introduce our special guests, Aimi Hamraie and Mimi Khúc, who will be talking about Disability Justice and Access-Centered Pedagogy in the Pandemic. First, we have Aimi, who is Associate Professor of Medicine Health, and Society and American Studies at Vanderbilt University where they direct the Critical Design Lab. They are Co-Founder of the Nashville Mutual Aid Collective.

LYDIA: Next we have Mimi Khúc. Mimi is a writer, scholar and teacher of things unwell, and the Scholar, Artist, and Activist in Residence in Disability Studies at Georgetown University. She's the Managing Editor of the Asian American Literary Review and the Guest Editor of Open in Emergency: A Special Issue on Asian American Mental Health. She is very slowly working on several book projects, including a manifesto on contingency in Asian American studies and essays on mental health, the arts, and the university. But mostly she spends her time baking as access and care for herself and loved ones.

LYDIA: This is Lydia and as a reminder, as we begin this conversation, you can access closed captions by clicking the button that says "CC" at the bottom of the screen. And you can either click to "view subtitle" or "open full transcript." To avoid having the chat box and the captions conflict with each other, you can open chat in its own window or you can display the chat permanently in the right-hand side bar, or you can elect to "view full transcript" of the captions that are currently on display.

LYDIA: I'm a young East Asian person with short black hair and glasses, wearing a blue collared shirt and grey jacket, in front of two windows of blinds and a plant that is so far alive and does not appear to be in any danger of my notorious plant-killing abilities. I will turn it over to our guests, thank you.

AIMI HAMRAIE: Thank you so much, Lydia. It's so great to be here. This is Aimi Hamraie speaking. I appear on your screen as an olive-skinned Iranian transmasculine person. I have short dark curly hair and rectangular glasses. I'm wearing a gold cable knit sweater and blue shirt in a yellow room. I'm joining you from the original homelands of the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Shawnee, and Yuchi peoples in Nashville, Tennessee.

MIMI KHÚC: Hi, I'm Mimi Khúc. I am a youngish olive-skinned person with short black hair. I'm Vietnamese American, Asian American, femme-ish. In my background are a lot of colorful books. Occasionally a cat appears as well. I'm calling in from the Maryland, D.C. area. And I'm super happy to be here to talk about access-centered pedagogy, something I love to talk and think about. And I'm excited to talk about it with Aimi, in particular.



AIMI: I'm so excited to talk to you, Mimi. You and I have known each other for a couple of years now. You came to Vanderbilt where I teach a few times. And I learned about your work through Open in Emergency, which is this amazing collection of objects and writing. I teach with it every semester so it's really an honor to continue to be in conversation with you.

MIMI: I think I missed you the first time. I think you were out of town the first time I went to visit Vanderbilt, and I met with a bunch of your students that time. The second time I hung out with you and ate burgers and that was super fun. I think we talked a lot of pedagogy and access stuff as we were hanging out. Apparently that's what we do for fun. I'm happy to do this professionally as well. [laughs]

AIMI: Yeah, definitely. And one thing I remember about that conversation was that we were talking about what it means to do kind of “weird” work in the academy, and work that is artistic or drawing on artistic influences, and how to bring that into teaching. You're someone I always think of as doing that in ways that challenge all the structures in the academy. So I'm really grateful for everything you teach. And yeah, I'm really excited to keep talking to you about this. [Cross-talk: Mimi thanks Aimi] Should we start talking about, maybe just about Disability Justice and access? Would that feel good?

MIMI: Ok, sure.

AIMI: What do those terms mean to you?

MIMI: I teach in the Disability Studies program now, which is new for me. I come out of, first, a Religious Studies background, but then an Asian American Studies background and have taught primarily Asian American Studies courses with a focus on mental health. When I first began teaching, I was not that familiar with Disability Justice and Disability Studies yet, so I wasn't using those terms or those frames specifically.

MIMI: As I became more familiar with those terms, I realized I was doing things that resonate deeply with Disability Justice, or align themselves with Disability Justice principles. And now that I teach in a Disability Studies program, those terms are more at the forefront and I'm very happy to explain those terms to students.

MIMI: Students seem very familiar, at least at Georgetown where I teach, with the language of “accommodations.” Some students go to the disability center or services unit and ask for accommodations for particular documented disabilities. That gives them certain kinds of structures that are supposed to support them in their learning. Some examples, like time and a half on exams or more flexible attendance policies, certain kinds of leave, alternative assignments. All my students are familiar with that.

MIMI: They are not familiar with the term “access” usually. They're not familiar with Disability Justice principles more broadly. When I think about those terms and how I want to talk to my students about it, I explain access to them right at the beginning, in my syllabus, because I say this class values access, wants to create access for everybody as much as



possible, it's access-centered.

MIMI: That's the language of this program that we're doing right now, using access-centered. I explain that by saying I want to support full participation for everybody in the class in whatever ways that they need. What are your needs so that you can participate in this class as much as you want to and how do we figure out structures to support that kind of participation? And that, for me, is how I think about access.

[Pause]

AIMI: That's great. I love that. I love the way that you're drawing distinctions between these different models and approaches. That's been something that's really important in my work too. In my academic work, I wrote a book that was the history of accessibility in the US [ed. note: *Building Access: Universal Design and the Politics of Disability*], specifically about the Universal Design movement and how it was relating to disability activism.

AIMI: Something that came up for me, something really surprising, is that our legal codes for buildings and best practices around accessibility that came out of the 50s, 60s and 70s, were not reflecting a justice-centered idea about disability at all. They were coming from rehabilitation people. They were really focused on “let’s give people access so they can become more productive workers and join society as ‘normal’ people.” And they were really focused on white disabled people and doing things that white people could access in the Jim Crow era: buy houses, attend college, and stuff like that. That is still very much codified in ADA even though there are non-white-centered movements of disabled people and all these different ways of thinking about disability that are not just about bodily experience or difference from the norm.

AIMI: So I was grateful... I want to say it was 10 or 12 years ago when I was a graduate student—I’d come into disability identity years before that—but meeting the Disability Justice movement as it was first growing and meeting Mia Mingus and Stacey [Park] Milbern, and learning about Disability Justice organizing, and doing that in the context of the Occupy movement... thinking about how Disability Justice is this framework that does the stuff that Disability Rights should have done in the first place, which is: challenge capitalism and the values that are assigned to disabled bodies, and say that access should be this collective project and movements should be led by multiply marginalized disabled people.

AIMI: And we shouldn't go around saying we're making everything accessible to all people because that's not true, ever, and if we're not thinking intersectionally about access—we may be like, “Oh, here’s this wheelchair ramp that goes to this university but the university is totally racially segregated” and that is not access for all people. In that sort of thing where one model of access is sticking to codes, checklists, and standards, it's also good to know historically that that has led to a very white-centered politics of access.

AIMI: So I'm really grateful for Disability Justice and all the language that comes out of that. You know, Mia Mingus talking about Access Intimacy, for example. Access is a way we build relationships and trust and it's not just something that we can produce out of nowhere.



AIMI: Or India Harville, who coined the term Access-Centered Movement. I think India Harville coined that term—I need to learn a little bit more about that. Access-Centered Movement is taking up the way that exercise classes or yoga or whatever traditionally would say “We’re going to have this class that will be available to everyone but without making them accessible.” So it forces us to think about access for whom? And what does access mean? And how the resources get devoted to certain forms of access. Like all those kinds of questions are very top of mind for me. As I’m also working on pedagogy and questions about: how do we learn? How do we present information? And stuff like that.

MIMI: Thank you so much for that. That makes me think that, for my students, some of what is challenging for them—and ultimately, mind blowing to them—is thinking about the way that ableism shows up. So disability justice to frame ableism, and the ways that I think are hard for them to see or have become naturalized and hard to unpack, is: what kinds of bodies are normalized? What kinds of minds are normalized, and what kinds are pathologized? And what gets punished for being different?

MIMI: And that rehabilitation, you were talking about, this desire for normalizing oneself in order to achieve belonging or achieve the things we’re supposed to achieve, like being able to work. Productivity as the gauge for our self-worth and our worth as a “contributing member of society.” And all those ways we measure ourselves against those standards. That pathologizing—the accommodations model, Disability Rights model—doesn’t actually unpack the kinds of meanings assigned to all these different kinds of bodies, and who gets left behind because of those meanings assigned to them. And how do we actually learn all of that and actually create inclusivity by valuing bodies in very different ways.

AIMI: Yeah, absolutely. That’s such a good thing to pick up on. Disability Rights didn’t have an explicit framework for depathologizing disability.

AIMI: This reminds me. I read a paper by—I’m forgetting the person’s name but I will send it to Lydia. It just came out, this person is a disabled law professor and they wrote this paper about how the Reasonable Accommodations process under ADA, how medicalizing it is—because you have to provide doctor’s notes just to get access. And doctors are not trained to be, to use India Harville’s language, “Access-Centered.” They are trained to diagnose pathology and so then you end up not being able to get access.

AIMI: This has happened to me before. I was trying to make an access accommodations request as a faculty member, for a diagnosis I had for years previous. I had to go to a new person, explain to them what was happening, and they were like “How could you have your job if you are autistic and have ADHD?” I was like, you don’t get to be the gatekeeper of that. And so, there’s no ADA training for positions as far as I know.

[Some cross-talk]

MIMI: Right. And they’re enabled to be gatekeepers because they have to provide the notes



and documentation for us and for our students to get the kinds of accommodations they need.

AIMI: Yeah. It's always through the framework that says there's something really wrong with you. They can't reconcile the idea that there's nothing wrong with you *and* you may also need help in some way.

MIMI: Yeah. I think that's what my students actually find sometimes most liberating, that switch. That we all have needs. And they're different needs, and differential needs, and different times in your life, and everyone faces different kinds of structural obstacles. So then how do we normalize needing?

MIMI: Having a need doesn't mean there is something “wrong” with you, or some kind of “weakness” or “lack.” And creating structures to meet needs is a collective responsibility, not a burden. [ironic laugh] And not something that is extra, that is extraneous to the main thing that's supposed to be happening in the classroom. It actually should be a responsibility of the professor and of all the students. Otherwise, for me, you don't have “teaching” if you don't think about everybody's needs and access. You have something very limited then. I'm not sure what to call it. People want to call it “teaching” but I don't know what it is if you're not being accessible to all your students. It's actually a form of gatekeeping.

AIMI: Yeah. Totally. It's not student-centered pedagogy either. It's not putting the learning and well-being of your students at the forefront. It's putting at the forefront all these weird made up rules.

MIMI: So made up, so arbitrary sometimes! But then it becomes deeply internalized.

MIMI: I love your bringing up the term “student-centered.” That's the term I used before I was familiar with Disability Justice. For me, they overlap and they're one and the same, eventually, right? I've always centered students and that it made sense: in order to center students, you have to center access, and it's the access of the students that matters in a classroom; and that the professor actually becomes an obstacle to their learning if we buy into a lot of these arbitrary rules and regulations and norming practices, that we are indoctrinated to do.

MIMI: There's a lot of pressure as faculty to follow a lot of—some of them are definitely procedural and policy stuff that's in the handbook, but a lot of it isn't too. It's shared cultural expectations about what teaching is supposed to look like.

MIMI: I get a lot of pushback from faculty, actually, when I say I don't require documentation. I believe students when they say shit is going wrong in their life. I don't need them to provide a note in their life. Because shit is going wrong with my life, of course shit is going wrong in their life, too.

MIMI: I also don't think students owe us, as faculty, the intimacy and vulnerability to disclose everything happening in their lives in the hopes to persuade us as if we're the authority that



needs to be persuaded that this is real and happening to them. That's such an awful dynamic.

MIMI: But when I say this, there are faculty who are defensive, [have] a lot of anxiety about being tricked or lied to. I'm still trying to figure that out. Like, why is there so much anxiety about it? I don't care if a student lies to me. If their grandmother has died five times, that's fine because clearly they didn't feel comfortable telling me what's actually happening in their life. In my opinion, they shouldn't have to disclose if they don't feel comfortable disclosing. I haven't built that kind of trust with them to make them feel comfortable. Whatever reason, there is a reason, I don't need to know it. Let's just figure out how to make this feel better and workable. But that freaks other faculty out. I don't know if you've experienced that.

[some cross-talk]

AIMI: Yeah, definitely. I've never had an official institutional moment where I was told I have to get the documentation. But because faculty are part of culture too, they're afraid of people faking disabilities or taking advantage of them or whatever. And I feel like that is starting in the wrong place and asking the wrong questions. Like the question is not, "Is this person actually disabled?" or "Did their grandmother actually die?" It's like: "Do we have the relationships and trust that we need for everyone to feel like they're thriving here?"

AIMI: One of the things that I have experienced multiple times with my students—I have been teaching at Vanderbilt for eight years now, before that I taught for three years somewhere else, and this happens every semester—I say "Here's the deadline but you can negotiate an extension by this time before the deadline. And I encourage you to look at your calendar and figure out when you need an extension." And students bring such a sense of, they are so apologetic, they feel shame, they say I'll never ask for an extension again. And I am literally saying "You have my consent to ask for an extension, I want you to do that. It shows you care for yourself and you're honoring my time."

AIMI: To me, that says something about the culture of fear and discipline... and you used the word "punishment" before. They're punishing themselves because they have been punished by other people. That's harm that keeps getting perpetuated. So for us, if we want to value all bodies, minds, there are so many things to work against, if we want to get people to accept that and participate in those ways. It usually does happen and everyone asks for an extension on the final and I have had to plan for that and give myself extra time for grading. But I'm happy because it feels like a good life skill. It's really just about what kinds of collaborative relationships do we want to have with our students—and they're not usually invited in in that way.

MIMI: Yes, thank you for bringing in the collaboration aspect. When I talk about student-centered teaching, it's about how to meet students needs and access. But also it's about empowering them and including them in the process. I think the power that I'm given as a professor is actually quite arbitrary [laughs] and, like, a little OP [overpowered]. I don't think I should actually be empowered to arbitrarily do so much to students in terms of their grades, whatever fucking assignments I want, and whatever rubric I



want. Yes, academic freedom, and yes, we should be able to innovate in how we teach, but also there's no accountability to students in that process. There's nothing beyond the goodwill of a particular person to think about that power dynamic.

MIMI: So I try to actively resist enjoying the power that I'm given as a professor, and to redistribute some of that power, to ask my students' input about the assignments. I have especially done this since the pandemic where because we're remote, and all new kinds of assignments, and all this technology, it freaks everybody out including me. I now—at least the last semester then in the middle of the term when we had to switch last Spring—would run assignments by my students at the beginning of the term: “This is what I'm thinking, does this feel accessible to you all? Do you have concerns about these different formats, these different assignments? If you have any concerns, let's talk about it and figure out if this assignment works for you or not.”

MIMI: They really appreciate it. Not only the flexibility, but the idea that they get to say that this class works or doesn't work, or this assignment. They never thought about if their own assignments are accessible to them until I empower them to ask the question and give me the feedback, and then feel like I might listen and shift things, change deadlines, or allow for more flexibility because I'm hearing from them that they need it. And I think that also freaks out other faculty. [laughs] They're like, “We can't let them choose what they want to do!” [more laughter]

AIMI: Says who?

MIMI: Yeah, why not?

AIMI: Yeah. I love the way you're using the word redistribution here. Often we think of it as a financial concept. But as you point out, it is really about power and noticing where you have it and where you can transfer it to other people. I think that's how we build relationships with our colleagues, how we work on having more ethical relationships between faculty and staff and students.

AIMI: Something I've been trying to think about lately, too, is: what are the things that are transferable and redistributable that come with the job of being an educator, in any sense, whether at a university or K-12? And how to mess with the economy of that a little bit to make it more fair.

AIMI: Something I have been doing the last few semesters—I tried it out with grad students first, then moved to undergrad—is using a form of grading called “spec grading.” It's basically an opt-in model: you don't have to do every assignment, you choose the grade you want, and pick the assignments that you do, essentially for completion—like up to a certain standard—in order to qualify in the different categories.

AIMI: Then building off of that, this semester I'm teaching a graduate seminar on mutual aid and solidarity. I'm actually very excited because Lydia will come and speak to the students in a



couple of weeks. So what I did—yes, Lydia, you can come join the class—

MIMI: Speaker and student, in the class. [laughs]

AIMI: [laughs] So what I did was I prepared two versions of the syllabus. One was a traditional grad seminar version where you do weekly response papers, you write a big paper at the end—

MIMI: [laughing] I feel triggered just hearing that.

AIMI: Yeah—and then I prepared another version of the syllabus where the grading scheme is collective. So the students would have to collectively agree through consensus that they would all do some list of assignments that I had written. But if they all did all their assignments, they would get an A. There were traditional assignments on there, like they do facilitate class, they do have a smaller research project that they do. But their main project is they're doing an in-class mutual aid collective and a solidarity campaign with some other entity or collective that's in Nashville.

AIMI: The first day of class I was like: “Here are your two options, take some time, think about what are the differences between these, what do they mean politically, and we’ll vote and then we’ll work until we reach a consensus.” And I really thought they were going to vote for the first option because sometimes the fear of trusting other people that you don't know—to be in community with them, to collaborate with them, all the times you're in a group project and you feel like other people aren't showing up—I thought that would overwhelm them.

AIMI: And they unanimously voted for the second option, which made me super emotional. I was like, “Why was this such an easy decision for you?” They were like: “We just have to show up for each other, that's what we're committing to do.”

MIMI: Aw!

AIMI: And they have been. It's been amazing, and the quality of their work is amazing. I offer that to say it is possible.

MIMI: That is amazing! Thank you so much for that. For a second I was worried they would choose option one, too, just because it's familiar and familiarity is safer even as that structure—like I was joking about being triggered—that structure was awful. Like that was all of grad school, right? But we go back to the familiar even when it's abusive. It's so inspiring to see they're able to imagine a different kind of relationship to knowledge making, and sharing, and community with you, and they were totally game to do that. That's amazing.

AIMI: They have been great at every part of it.

MIMI: I want to think more about: what did you call it, “spec”? You said they choose from a list of assignments and craft together what it's going to be like.



AIMI: Yeah. There's actually a book about it. I didn't make it up—I read about it. If you Google [specs] grading, you'll get it. There's an Inside Higher Ed article I read about it. The book is by Linda Nilson. It's about understanding what motivates students to get grades and how harmful our current grading system is and trying to shift that.

MIMI: It would help for me because something I have been doing and theorizing, but haven't read pedagogical theory about—and I myself am trying to theorize it—is generating an investment in the class, and a commitment to the class and to each other, which is sort of what you were already talking about in your mutual aid class. It's something I've been doing, not explicitly, or kinda subconsciously for a while, and now more explicitly.

MIMI: Because for me, learning only happens if we care about the class, care about each other, care about the material. How do I engender that kind of care? And that's really tough because students are not coming into the class with that as an expectation. Their relationship with learning is so fucked up, where they're just so stressed out—you know that banking model, right? They just have to fill their brains with shit, reproduce it, get the grade, because otherwise they're going to lose their financial aid, or they're not going to get into their major or they're not gonna graduate with whatever GPA. All of those are the pressures and levers for them.

MIMI: To make them shift their thinking—like, this class is important for different reasons and it should matter for different reasons. But I can't just tell them that or hit them over the head with that. I definitely see some faculty try that, like: “My course matters, please believe me!” They don't believe you if you just yell it at them, especially when you're communicating to them subconsciously in your syllabus that they don't matter. That's what I'm noticing.

MIMI: Something one of my students was telling me about another class last semester that really sat with me was she felt like she didn't matter in that class. And that really clicked something for me: that if you feel like you don't matter to the professor, why should the class matter to you? That expectation there is ridiculous, that we just assume students should care about our classes. But what's happening is they care because they're in a culture of fear and punishment.

MIMI: So how do we engender a different kind of investment? I basically have created investment by myself showing my investment and being deeply vulnerable and creating spaces where I feel like everyone can be vulnerable and show care for each other. And that the stuff we're learning matters because it is about our needs and our vulnerability and how we care for each other. When they realize that we're not learning a bunch of random shit to reproduce for an exam, we're learning how to take care of ourselves and each other in a space where I try to show as much as care as possible to them through the assignments and structurally—but also just me personally—then I'm able to get a different kind of investment. I'm happy to hear about the spec grading as another way to think about how they can feel responsible and empowered in their own learning process so they can commit differently to the class. Does that make sense?

AIMI: Mm-hm, yeah. Absolutely. The whole time that you were talking, I was thinking about



what happens every semester when I teach Open in Emergency. There's a multi-stage process toward getting students to understand that their implicit knowledge is valuable, for them to be motivated from that place. They get this box and it's supposed to be a special issue, but it's a tarot deck, a book, a marked-up pamphlet and all this stuff. And they're like, ooh, here are all these modes of intellectual production that are valid. And we're giving them space in the class, and they're also really rigorous and theorized.

AIMI: Then for a couple of semesters, Maggie Mang—who is also my student and has been working on the Critical Design Lab with me, and who is now working with you on the second edition of Open in Emergency—she devised all these really cool exercises and she would come to class and teach the material...

MIMI: She did not tell me about these specific exercises! [laughs]

AIMI: She didn't tell you about them? Oh, ok, well they're on our website. [laughs] I should send them to you. We have a whole teaching guide that she made for Open in Emergency. So one of the things I loved that she did was that she created these Google maps where students could add points. And they had different prompts.

AIMI: So one was like, where do you feel unwell on campus—using your concept of the pedagogy and politics of unwellness—and where do you feel well, where do you feel cared for?

MIMI: Oh, I love that!

AIMI: A hundred percent of time there's one building on campus that's where all the science classes are, and it's this horrible concrete maze of a building. And a hundred percent of the time, the unwell map is: all the dots are on that building. Then when you read the popups about why they put the dots there, they're like: "The professors don't care about us, they don't treat us like we're human beings." Things like that. Where I'm like, whoa, that's really intense that someone is not treating you like you're a human being. And it's always in that one place.

AIMI: But then when they realize they all think that, they all get really activated by it. They come back and say "I had a really direct conversation with my professor about how I wasn't ok with how they were treating me." So I just want to share that with you. There's a triple up here of: challenge the disciplinary norm, and the pedagogical norm, and then they start to notice things and mobilize and they really care because it affects them. A fact of what they're learning about their lives becomes apparent and they've thought of it.

MIMI: I love that so much. And I love that assignment in particular because physically mapping where unwellness happens is like another kind of access mapping. It's like "where does it feel shitty?" and you're telling them that's a valid question to ask. That's step one. To even be able to ask yourself "Where does it feel awful on campus?" To name it and to feel authorized to name that, I think that is already a huge step. And to see everyone else do it, too, that collective aspect—you don't feel like you're alone in feeling that sense of unwellness. It makes sense that



from there, they decide to figure out how to intervene in that. That's amazing. The students are.

AIMI: Yeah. Maggie is amazing.

MIMI: Maggie's awesome.

AIMI: It's cool to see how she's taken these materials and created all these awesome ways for people to use them.

MIMI: That's awesome.

AIMI: I'm curious, for you, about your thoughts about Disability Justice and pedagogy for children versus adults?

MIMI: Mm. That's a good question because it is now almost exactly a year—so that's about eleven months that my daughter has been out of school doing remote learning for the most part, and not in camps or anything either. So being full-time at home, I had to think a lot about her access needs, and then mine as a parent who is sort-of working and sort-of not working at home. And my labor is always invisible.

MIMI: Academic labor tends to be invisible, especially if you work from home a lot. My family thinks I don't work because I'm always at home. You know, that kind of invisibility. And because I'm not really institutionalized—right now I have a part-time position at Georgetown, but I'm not a permanent faculty member and my work tends to be outside the scope of what I'm contracted for—so that work is always very invisible too.

MIMI: And on top of that, my daughter is at home thinking what schooling is supposed to be. That's made me think a lot about what we expect schools to be able to do and what is the point of learning. I feel like I have taken it for granted a little bit before the pandemic. I knew I wanted certain experiences for my daughter but school is like child care—she's in a building somewhere else for many many hours, and that is helpful to me and to her. Now that she's not, what kind of learning is made possible? What do I want?

MIMI: We're at a local private Quaker school, so when you said consensus I was like, ooh! We do everything by consensus, we're at a Quaker school. With a lot of parent involvement, there's a lot of expectations around teaching and how to make things accessible to our children. The language of synchronous and asynchronous has entered elementary school level education which it never would have before, right? Like we talk about synchronous and asynchronous learning at the college level, but now teachers have to think about that at the elementary school level.

MIMI: My daughter has some live time synchronous learning and then some asynchronous assignments, the school had to figure out how to do that. The school had to figure out how to make devices accessible to students because not everybody has—there were some families with three kids sharing one device at home because we didn't expect everyone to have to have a device. So that level of technological accessibility, they had to think about.

MIMI: But for me, it was also in terms of access: what are her needs at this time? And honestly her needs are not to learn math at this time. And there were some parents who were concerned the students would fall behind because “We’re not getting enough math time. We need 120 minutes of math a week” or something like that. There were actually numbers involved in talking about math learning, and they were concerned. I understand the concern but I’m also like: “What is access right now?”

MIMI: Access for me, for my daughter, is a lot of social-emotional stuff. She’s had anxiety about the pandemic, she feels really isolated. The kinds of learning that happen in communal spaces that isn’t quantifiable in terms of math skills or even reading skills—those are things she needs, so how do we find ways to create that kind of learning in this environment? I really don’t care if she learns more math skills in the next year; I want her to feel safe and connected to other people and learn skills with how to deal with the anxiety of all this change around her at this time. I don’t know if that’s a good answer about access, but those are the questions I’ve been thinking about in regards to pedagogy for kids right now. They need to learn how to think and feel about what’s happening around them, not necessarily more vocabulary or multiplication.

AIMI: Yeah, totally. As I’m listening to you, it seems like so much of that productivity imperative starts so early: you have to have this many minutes of math for accreditation or whatever, and I totally get that’s a thing. It’s a thing at the university level too. And I feel like this whole time, the question that’s been on my mind during COVID, as all levels of education are trying to figure out what to do, is: what if we all just decided we would slow down and focus on care right now until the pandemic is over?

MIMI: Why go so hard at a time when so many people are scared and extra precarious, and away from their families, and everything else? And what is the trauma that will happen because of the ways that we have been forced to always be producing and achieving in the same way during this time? If I was making those decisions, in consensus with you, it would be different, probably. [some cross-talk] That’s helpful, to hear about what is happening and all the access issues that come up around them too. Yeah, sorry, go ahead.

MIMI: I’ve actually noticed some people working harder, having more anxiety about productivity and pushing themselves to be even more productive in this time—especially academics. Especially my colleagues. I won’t name them. [laughs] But I see you all out there working yourselves even more.

MIMI: I’m trying to figure that piece out too, this anxiety around not being “productive enough.” I’m trying to understand in general, but I’m trying to understand what is making that worse in a pandemic where we’re dealing with a shared crisis. Where there’s an acknowledgment—publicly, collectively—that there is crisis and need, and we have to change all kinds of things about the way we’re living. Even that seems not enough to assuage people’s anxieties around not being productive enough, and not being “worthwhile” or a “good citizen” or “good person.” But somehow I feel like it’s amped up the anxiety for some people. I haven’t



figured out why that's happening. I just want to say slow down, take care. Pet a cat.

AIMI: Yeah, I agree with you. Be a cat.

MIMI: Be a cat. [laughs]

AIMI: That reminds me, I was planning to put the cat filter on but I forgot.

MIMI: Oh, the cat filter! So Lydia, that's our advice at the end of our talk: go be a cat.

LYDIA: There are already at least two cats here because didn't you know all autistic people are cats? So if we take a full census of cats, there are many kinds of feline critters present, here and elsewhere.

LYDIA: Thank you both so much for this incredible conversation. Perhaps there will be folks out there who really take it to heart, and really use those lessons in making their academic spaces not just less violent and harmful, but also creating the presence of care, and of love. And with that, we have some time now for live questions and answers from the folks who are here tonight and we're going to transition to that. Thank you again and we'll be with you in just a moment.