

# Access in the Making (AIM) Lab Values

## Acknowledgement<sup>1</sup>

As we write our values and principles, we want to acknowledge in bold letters that it was the methodological work of **the Civic Laboratory for Environmental Action Research (CLEAR)** that has inspired and guided us throughout the process.<sup>2</sup> We are extremely grateful to CLEAR Lab for the incredible amount of work that they have done in how to run a feminist and anti-colonial lab,<sup>3</sup> and their generosity in sharing this know-how with others. **We cannot cite you and thank you enough.**

## Citation

Inspired by CLEAR Lab's work, AIM Lab has worked on this document over almost a process of ten months (and we are still and will be working on it). This document is the result of *labour*, including doing research, collective conversations, and editing. This document is a research output. This document is *a publication*. If you quote, use, or in any way benefit from this document, cite it.

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<sup>1</sup> Please note that in our *Manifesto* and *Protocols*, we make the deliberate decision to use, not endnotes, *but footnotes*. In order to subvert the design hierarchy scripted into footnotes (which automatically decreases their font size vis-a-vis the font size of main text) we choose to use the same font size for both footnotes and the main body of the text, with the same line spacing. These design choices reflect our commitments to feminist ethics of citation. Through these choices, we seek to emphasize the shoulders we stand upon, and the various intellectual genealogies, activist, and artistic traditions that we draw from. Thank you, Annemarie Mol, Sara Ahmed, and Max Liboiron for teaching us about the importance of citations and the politics of footnotes (Mol, *The Body Multiple*; Ahmed, "Making Feminist Points,,"; Liboiron, *Pollution is Colonialism*).

<sup>2</sup> CLEAR, *CLEAR Lab Book: A living manual of our values, guidelines, and protocols*.

<sup>3</sup> For methodological projects of the CLEAR Lab, see:

<https://civiclaboratory.nl/methodological-projects/>

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As a lab committed to disability justice and feminist citational practices, we are especially concerned that the intellectual labour of marginalized folks (including BIPOC, disabled artists, activists, scholars) and those occupying precarious positions in the academia (graduate students, adjuncts, emerging scholars) are not properly (sometimes, never) recognized. Our own citational practices seek to dismantle that ignorance and erasure, and we hope that you, the reader, will do the same.

### **Values publication co-authorship**

This publication emerged out of a series of numerous conversations within AIM as well as from a litany of members' own experiences in various academic and community spaces as well as activist and social movements. The writing of this manifesto was by and large produced by Arseli Dokumaci, Amy Mazowita, and Nicholas Goberdhan in consultation with AIM's Steering Committee.

## Three Core Values

Three core values of the AIM Lab are humility, accountability, relationality. This is a living document, which means that these values and their descriptions are continually being rethought and revised. The version that you are reading now has been drafted over a process of ten months and it has been read, revised and commented on by all core AIM members.

### 1. HUMILITY

#### 1.1. Recognize our situatedness and the partiality of our knowledges<sup>4</sup>

“we” ≠ the world

our knowledge ≠ *the* Knowledge

our view ≠ *the* View<sup>5</sup>

The world is inhabited by countless beings, peoples and lived realities. It is shaped by their complex, changing and highly specific and local relations, as well as the values, meanings, and ways of being that emerge from those relations. All this to the degree that – as many activists, artists, poets, writers, theorists, and scholars have taught us –

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<sup>4</sup> Our thanks to feminist technoscience scholars for providing the vocabulary for situated and partial knowledges. (See: Haraway, “Situated Knowledges”; Harding, “Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology”).

<sup>5</sup> Here, we are thinking alongside STS scholar John Law’s classic essay, “What's wrong with a one-world world?”.

there actually is no one world but *many* worlds, *many* cosmologies, and *many* ontologies.<sup>6</sup>

Humility requires us to recognize our situatedness at this colossal scale. It asks us to be conscious of how our knowledges, thoughts, ideas, and creations are inevitably conditioned by our own situatedness. They, therefore, are always-already *partial*.

Failure to foster this self-awareness that humility demands may result in, what Donna Haraway calls, “the god trick of seeing everything from nowhere.”<sup>7</sup> This gaze from nowhere, because it is so untethered (from gravity and groundedness), can easily claim universality in whatever it produces. In so doing, it commits violence – violence of an epistemological kind – because of which there is no space left for other ways of being in and knowing the world to emerge and exist. This “god trick” is rooted in colonial western epistemologies and reiterated in its institutions, such as academia.

## **1.2. Welcoming difference, countervailing voices, and holding space open for the unknowns and the unknowable**

We approach our work together by acknowledging that what we are trying to do is messy. Troubles, frictions, and conflicts are bound to arise in all projects based in anti-ableism, and oftentimes there is no immediate answer to the questions that we are exploring. Humility asks us to recognize the limits of our own thoughts, ideas, and knowledges. What might be helpful and productive at a certain place and time may turn out to be a shortcoming or entirely antithetical to the issue at hand at another.

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<sup>6</sup> See Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse*; de la Cadena and Blaser, *A World of Many Worlds*.

<sup>7</sup> Haraway, “Situated Knowledges,” 581.

Specificities and situatedness matter. We cannot assume that our “findings” or ideas are generalizable, universally applicable, and smoothly transferable from one context to another. Where assumptions, definitiveness, and conclusiveness prevail, humility cannot exist. Humility asks us to **never ever assume** anything (more on that in the Accountability section).

In line with humility, we expect and welcome difference. We vow to listen to everyone, including countervailing voices. While we do that, we also bear in mind that there will be voices, sounds, and movements that we will never be able to perceive because of incommensurable worlds and ontologies.<sup>8</sup> We want to hold space open for all that we may never perceive, know, think of, and contemplate.

### **1.3. Recognize that we never write, think, create, and make knowledge alone**

To assume that whatever we think, write, and produce knowledge about comes from our individual genius is to deny the incredible amount of work that has been done before us and for us. If we can know, think, and talk about certain things today in the way we do, it is because many others have set the conditions of possibility for our thinking, writing, knowing, and creating to emerge in the first place. We always walk/wheel/crawl/sashay in the paths of others. We always think, create, and write alongside others. Even in the loneliest of spaces, we are always accompanied by others, whose words, anecdotes, deeds, care, and wisdom continue to shape our thoughts.

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<sup>8</sup> On the concept of incommensurability, see Tuck and Yang, *Decolonization is not a metaphor*. On the limits, dangers, and violence of colonial forms of listening, see Robinson, *Hungry Listening*.

The myth of the individual genius is a product of patriarchy, ableism, and other hierarchizing societal structures. Our antidote to it is humility. In stark contrast to ignoring or erasing connections, we, following feminist ethics of citation, explicitly celebrate and cherish our genealogical lineages, and seek to flourish within those. We acknowledge that these genealogies are multiple and spread across various practices, including not just scholarship but also art, activism, and community-building. In contrast to silencing and dismissing the work that has been done before us, we want to express our gratitude to others for their labour as loud as possible.<sup>9</sup>

#### **1.4. Perfection is ableist, racist, colonialist, and patriarchal<sup>10</sup>**

For us, nothing is or can ever be complete, or completely done (which makes “access” itself a moving target). To assume completeness, conclusiveness, and certainty is strongly aligned with Western<sup>11</sup> telos, where there is a beginning, middle, and an end. Given the partiality and limitedness of our knowledges, we are aware that whatever it is that we do, no matter how hard we work on it, will always be incomplete. We cannot afford to be assertive, conclusive, and definitive [else we risk missing those at the outer

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<sup>9</sup> For an excellent example of how to do that, see Liboiron, *Pollution is Colonialism*.

<sup>10</sup> We are thankful to Centre for Community Organizations (COCO) for the tools they have given us to recognize “perfectionist culture” (see, COCo, “White Supremacy Culture in Organizations,” 10) We are also thankful to many disabled artists, activists, and scholars who have shown the beauty of imperfection (see Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*).

<sup>11</sup> We use the adjective “Western” not as a geographic attribute but as a descriptor of the epistemologies and ontology emerging from the Western European historical traditions, which are shaped by the enlightenment and modernism.

boundaries of our definitions of “complete” thus inscribing our own margins from which we initially sought respite].

Recognizing the impossibility of perfection and completeness does not, however, mean doing a lousy job. To the contrary, it means *doing a good job while simultaneously acknowledging that there is much more work to do*. (More on that in the following section)

### **1.5. There is always more work to do than what we just did**

We are not the first collective to work toward dismantling ableism, and we will certainly not be the last. It is important to note that within our name, we emphasize the phrase, “In-the-Making.” Access is not a line we cross in a race, rather it is something we get closer towards every single day. To reiterate, access is a moving target. For this reason, a central tenet to our humility is to keep working and working because we recognize the never-ending work that is to be done to get closer to access.

### **1.6. Mistakes are welcome and should be taken as “teaching moments”**

There are no simple answers to complex questions of access, so we often find ourselves within messy and troubled questions about our world. We are open to experimentation and challenges. And given this, *we will make mistakes*.

In fact, we have the *right* to make mistakes. Nobody should be shamed or judged, be blamed, or blame themselves, for making a mistake or series of mistakes. That said, all mistakes should be followed by **reflections** (both individual and collective) so that we can all learn from these precious teaching moments, be more cautious, and grow together.

## 2. ACCOUNTABILITY

### 2.1. Acknowledge our social positionalities

Marisa Duarte describes positionality as follows:

Frequently employed in critical race theory and gender studies, the methodology of positionality requires researchers to identify their own degrees of privilege through factors of race, class, educational attainment, income, ability, gender, and citizenship, among others, before seeking the epistemological basis of their intellectual craft. Doing so helps them understand how their way of making meaning, of framing research, within their conceptual universe is tied to their positionality in an unjust world.<sup>12</sup>

Each AIM member inhabits multiple social positions which are not fixed but are fluid and relational. They may give us privileges in some areas of life and bring disadvantages in others. Crucially, our positionalities literally *position* us. Meaning, they **shape** the way we act, behave, think, and engage with others. When a social position is aligned with an existing system of oppression in society, that **shaping** happens silently. Ableism, racism, colonialism, and other systems of oppression can sneak up on our actions, behaviours, thoughts, and casual gestures. (In fact, their unnoticeability is how they become even more powerful.) Our antidote is continuous individual self-reflexivity (more on that in item 2 below), collective self-reflections, and gentle call-ins (see Apologies, Call-ins/Calls-outs Protocol). Through these methods, we need to learn to: a) recognize our own privileges, entitlements, and assumptions; b) develop a self-consciousness of how our positionalities inform our actions, thoughts, practices, and behaviours; c) unlearn our assumptions and undo our entitlements; d) diagnose and reflect on able-bodied fragility, white fragility, and other forms of fragility that may

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<sup>12</sup> Duarte, *Network Sovereignty*, 135.

come with privilege.<sup>13</sup> In short, accountability requires each of us to always be self-reflexive, and self-reflexivity needs to be followed by “how to unlearn”. As much as we are learning about the many ways in which marginalization is engrained within our world, it is equally important for us to *unlearn* the ways we may be unknowingly perpetuating oppression.

## 2.2. Never ever assume anything, practice unassumptiveness<sup>14</sup>

As a group of individuals working together, we strive to take up a position of “unassumptiveness.” Meaning, we will never assume *anything* about another person and/or their access needs. We will anticipate various access needs, but we will not assume. We will not suppose things to be the case. We will work towards leaving room for doubt and the unknown. But all this can be easier said than done since assumptions oftentimes creep into our thinking and practices without our realization. Whenever we do, say, create, make, write something, we should ask ourselves:

- Am I taking something for granted here?
- Am I making any assumptions here, based on my positionality and privileges?

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<sup>13</sup> Fragility, and the differing privileged identities connected to it, is often expressed through defensive/fragile-like reactions when the oppression of the marginalized positionality in their social category is raised. To emphasize this point, in DiAngelo’s canonical work on fragility and race, she writes that, “White Fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation.” (DiAngelo, “White Fragility,” 54).

<sup>14</sup> This word was coined by one of our members, Jessie Stainton, as we were discussing AIM values in our first AIM retreat in December 2021.

- Who or what am I not taking into account?
- Can countervailing voices co-exist with what I have written/said/created/done?  
Or am taking too much space to leave no room for dissent?
- Do I hold space open for what may be unknown, unknowable, or completely unintelligible to me? Or am I occupying the entire space?

When you notice that we as AIM, or any member of us, is making any presumptuous statement, please “call in” and gently point at the presumptions behind the person’s words. Which means, all of us must be ready to face up to our presumptions and learn to avow and take responsibility for them rather than disavow those and resort to defensiveness.

### **2.3. Acknowledge existing power relations**

We operate with a horizontal and collective spirit with the systems we put in place, such as the sharing of tasks and equal voting power. While we strive to operate from a position of horizontality, we also recognize that we, as a group, represent a variety of socioeconomic positions and identities and that operational hierarchies *do* still exist. It is, at this time, not possible, nor honest to proclaim the AIM Lab as existing under a completely flat organizational structure.

Thus, rather than assuming that we can create a space freed of power relations and hierarchies, we recognize that some of those relations might be insurmountable, and that hierarchies persist. We have put structures in place, such as consensus-based decision making, in order to mitigate power imbalances and distribute power as evenly as possible within the limits of a CRC and an institution. We approach horizontality as a moving target – something that we work towards by regularly reassessing how people

are feeling about the structure, whether it functions horizontally enough and if not, what we could do to make it so.

### **3. RELATIONALITY**

Contemporary neoliberal university models adapt corporate values and operation, prioritizing profit over anything else. In this model, education is reduced to mere service provision where teachers are service-providers, students are receivers, and their relationships are transactional. This current model equates ‘good’ research with maximum impact and gain, which is then measured and ranked. It considers knowledge to be dividable into units, transferable (across sectors), distributable (in many forms as ‘products’), and ideally, universalizable. This dominant model is only the next logical phase in the historical evolution of the academy as a colonial, exploitative and anti-ableist enterprise.

Symptomatically, colonial-academia-in-neoliberal-times:

- fosters individualism, individual stardom, selfishness (for example: in the humanities and social sciences, single-authored articles and books are valued much more over co-authored ones);
- fosters competitiveness (just think of grant and scholarship application requirements, who is eligible (and who is not), the criteria for ranking the ‘highest’, etc.);

- reproduces “bad relations.” Bad relations often occur when whatever is being studied as a research ‘subject’ is reduced to a mere resource to be dug out, extracted, made sense of, explained away, and thrown away;<sup>15</sup>
- only takes, takes, takes; never gives, never gives back (Note: don’t be fooled by the casual use of “social output” tags that we see in grant applications. What is there to gain of the subjects of research? What is research for research’s sake?)
- reduces researchers themselves to mere resources to be exploited, drained of all their energy, and left to burn out;
- (thanks to all the items above), manufactures toxic atmospheres.

Simply put, AIM is **AGAINST** all the above, and their by-products. At AIM:

3.1. **We seek to work with what in decolonial theory is described as “good relations”.**<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> In giving an example of a bad relation, Liboiron discusses the often extractivist qualities that occur when reading a text. Drawing on decolonial theorist Eve Tuck’s tweets about extractivist citational practices, they write that, “I had been reading in a Resource relation (see chapter 1) that is unidirectional, assessing texts solely for my own goals and not approaching them as bodies of work, events, gifts, teachers, letters, or any number of other ways that would make unidirectional, extractive relations seem rude and out of place.” (*Pollution is Colonialism*, 35). For this reason, Liboiron mobilizes footnotes at length to encourage a politics of genuine care, citation, and informed conversation in good relation to the author. For more examples and explanations of good and bad relations, see Liboiron, *Pollution is Colonialism*, also Murphy, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> See Liboiron, *Pollution is Colonialism*. Liboiron goes on further to give a specific example, in that, “methodologies— whether scientific, writerly, readerly, or otherwise—are always already part of Land relations and thus are a key site in which to

**3.2. In line with good relations, we believe that research, reading, writing, and knowledge-creation can all be done in generous, kind, reciprocal, caring, and ethical ways.**

Here, we take our cues from Joe Dummit, Max Liboiron, Sara Ahmed, and others<sup>17</sup> who have taught us how writing, reading, and engaging with other people's works can be done in generous, ethically responsible, generative, and non-extractive ways.

In all our work, we value generosity and kindness and gratitude and believe that these are crucial components of doing access work in both academic and community settings.

**3.3. We want to do things about things that matters to us, to the communities that we are beholden to, and to the liveable futures!**

What we wrote above in this item draws on what Michelle Murphy generously explains below. We quote Murphy at full length as every word here **matters**.

73:41 Question from audience Anne Frederickson voiced by the moderator:

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enact good relations (sometimes called ethics)." (*Pollution is Colonialism*, 7). This is important to note, as the AIM Lab is engaged with decolonial-anti-oppressive work, we are attuned to the many ways our research endeavours are enveloped in land relations, which constantly requires good relations to be considered and enacted.

<sup>17</sup> Ahmed, "A book can be a thank you note"; Dumit, "How I Read"; Liboiron, *Pollution is Colonialism*, 34-5; Liboiron, "#Collabrary: a methodological experiment for reading with reciprocity".

“I would love to ask (...) if you have any advice for researchers especially PhD students within the inescapable colonial university which constantly asks us to explain and justify our livelihoods in terms of solutionism, scalability, impact, applicability, I'd also say fundability, citations. Invariably, however, those terms are narrow and they're ungenerous in who we relate to as opposed to thinking of research as harm reduction (...).”

Michelle Murphy:

“That's a great question. **I mean universities are colonial institutions** and **at the same time (um) there's often (um) important legacies of people having long worked within and against them** (emphasis added). Legacies of working in the crevices or (...) doing work despite the university or within and against. (...) When we started our lab, we spent six months just figuring out how are we going to be together. So, when I say how do you do it is: one, you cannot do it alone. You need to do it in some kind of community and figure out (like) the responsibilities. And that doesn't mean (like) finding a community you're trying to (like) rescue or something. It means (like) **starting where you're at, right, and figuring out your relations and your responsibilities** (emphasis added). But you have to do that with others! You can't do it all by yourself. And then it's slow work. So, we spent (like yeah) a long time and (...) lots of people dropped out because they don't want to spend six months thinking what are our values, how are we going to hold a meaning, what does it even mean to (like) sit in this room, how we how we're going to eat. (Like) we literally spent so many weeks on these kinds of

questions (...) which is (like) these basic questions like: How are we going to be here in a good way? What does that look like? Who's here? What are our responsibilities? So, that's how we started it (...) And that's a survival strategy (right), because it's not just that the university (...) wants your work to be a certain way; but you know the university is kind of (like) harmful. And unless you kind of have your survival strategy to protect yourself from the ways that it wants to call you into bad relations, you're going to be a conduit for reproducing bad relations. (...) Sometimes when I say this concept, you'll think, "Well..., but I need to do this to get my grant to get my job!". I don't know what the job market's (like) in Australia. The job market is not great in academia. (Like) really, **if you're doing work on environmental justice, you're doing work for the world, for a reason, because something matter** (emphasis added)! (...) I sometimes get even a little annoyed about (...) losing sight of that; like, "why are we spending our life force on this work?". Well, it has to be because it matters! (...) So it's (like) a multiple answer. (...) You have to do with others. It goes very slow. You start where you are. It's not about rescue. It's about understanding how (like) these things are killing you too and you start from there. (...) And if it matters, then it's gonna matter!<sup>18</sup>

### 3.4. Foster collaborative spirit and create spaces for collective work

AIM is a student-and-community-practitioner-led Lab. This means most of us are graduate students and emerging scholars who are inevitably burdened by individualist expectations of academia. To list a few: We are expected to write thesis with **only** our names on it. To be considered for a tenure-track job, we are expected to publish single-authored articles in "high-ranked" journals. We need to "produce" outputs that

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<sup>18</sup> Murphy, *AusSTS2021 keynote seminar*.

can be listed, ranked, quantified. While recognizing that students and emerging scholars might still need to operate by these rules, we as AIM want to create alternative spaces for doing research, writing, thinking, tinkering, creating, practicing where all these things can be done in ways that are not competitive, self-serving, or solely concerned with furthering personal gains and individual careers. To that end:

- **We engage in collective writing.** For example, six members of AIM recently co-authored a paper accepted for publication in the *Space and Culture* Journal. This was our first-ever co-authoring experiment. We want to reflect on the process and the lessons learned, and experiment towards more meaningful and anti-individualistic forms of writing in the future. (More on that in our forthcoming Co-authorship Protocol).
- **Not all our collective writing has to be a co-authored paper!** We also co-write documents and protocols, such as this and other ones on our website.
- We engage in collective creative work-making (+++) (Listening to each other workshop, participating in an audio description workshop, producing creative responses to texts, preparing a photograph exhibit). Importantly, we engage in creative practices as an anti-ableist and decolonial method.
- **Not all of our collective work has to have an academically valued product!** Some of our collective work may be diffuse. It may produce no tangible “output”.

### 3.5. We foster “collective access” and “collective care”

Where ableism prevails and where eugenics is still alive and kicking, disabled, chronically ill people, people with mental health issues, colonized people, racialized people, and people living at the intersections of multiple forms of oppression are considered “less” than human. This has, historically, been and is still the case. The current health crisis (COVID-19) has not created but only exacerbated these deeply rooted forms of oppression. Eugenic triaging practices at hospitals; the dumping of the

chronically ill, elderly, and disabled people in institutionalized care homes where they are left un-cared for; the governments and universities rush to in-person teaching without providing options for online or alternative participation and failing to consider this as an access issue; the broader societal rush to “go back to normal” without ever pausing to consider that “normal” has always left certain people behind attest to the gravity of problems that disabled, sick, and elderly people face at many levels. In recognition of these deeply rooted issues:

- **We seek ways to both actively create “collective access”<sup>19</sup> and support its creation in places where access provision fails**

Collective access is a cross-impairment and intersectional disability justice practice and movement that seeks to move the burden of having to deal with access from the affected individual to the community level, where members care for and meet each other’s access needs with “a commitment to leaving no one behind.”<sup>20</sup> The best way to understand collective access is through its examples, and here are some:

“You can’t walk long distance, but I can speed in my chair down to the end of the block and get food; I can’t read, but you can, so you help me find my

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<sup>19</sup> Creating Collective Access (CCA), as one of its three creators define it, is a “crip-femme-of-color-made brilliance” that emerged as three disability justice activists, Mia Mingus, Stacey Milbern, and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, were organizing a workshop at the 2010 Allied Media Conference and US Social Forum in 2010 (Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work*, 47). For more information on Collective Access, see Creating Collective Access, “Crips Visiting Detroit!”; Mingus, “Reflections On An Opening”; Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work*, 47-68).

<sup>20</sup> Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work*, 51.

workshop in the schedule; You can help make calls to organize the food gathering and eating, while I carry the food up into the room.”<sup>21</sup>

Collective Access “Was truly a collective effort, centered around a simple value of *care*. Everyone pitched in getting food, helping to serve food, audio describing, reaching, pushing, texting, calling, asking, offering. We schemed together to get more accessible rooms opened for us in the dorms, access to a refrigerator and the accessible shower key from the dorm staff.

Everyday, we had lunch and dinner together, no one had to worry about not being able to eat because they couldn’t get into a restaurant, couldn’t get to the grocery store or couldn’t walk far enough. And no one had to worry about being isolated while they were eating, as often happens to disabled people when they are in movement spaces.”<sup>22</sup>

Collective access is care work, and as with many other forms of care work, it is not possible to quantify or enumerate it. (At times, it might not even be possible to identify or name it). Nor does this collective care work create concrete “societal outputs” as understood by funding agencies. Rather, it helps us and our communities to survive the everyday and keep on living and even thriving in a dominantly ableist world.

**We hope that not all our collective work will go into our CVs!** Here we draw on the existing anti-colonial and feminist lab models, such as the CLEAR Lab, Technoscience Research Unit, TkarontoCIRCLElab, and their incredible labour that continue to inspire us. Walking/Wheeling/Crawling/Sashaying in the traces of these labs, we as AIM value work that matters for more liveable futures, and we commit ourselves to doing this kind of work, even when (or especially when) the work may not take an academic form.

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<sup>21</sup> Creating Collective Access, “Crips Visiting Detroit!”.

<sup>22</sup> Mingus, “Reflections On An Opening”.

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