# JEN WHITE-JOHNSON

Interview Date: December 5, 2022

Image Description: Text reads "The Remote Access Archive" atop a screenshot of a Zoom shared screen, which shows a work of art by Yo-Yo Lin. The art is a white and grey blob on a black background. The bottom shows a series of grey buttons, along with an orange chat button that is lit up. A speech bubble above it "From Dominika to everyone" says "yes same issue with audio."

## KEYWORDS
accessible technologies, artistic content creation, Black and disabled, COVID-19 pandemic era, digital course infrastructure, digital divide, disability arts, disability culture, HBCUs, online teaching, remote work, technological equity, video chat, Zoom

## IDENTITIES GIVEN
Afro-Latina, woman, disabled person, person living with an autoimmune disorder, neurodivergent person

## LOCATION
United States

# Introductions

Aimi Hamraie:
Okay, so today is December 5, 2022. And this is Aimi Hamraie speaking. And I'm here with Jen White-Johnson. Jen, can you please tell us your name, age, and where you currently call home?

Jen White-Johnson:
Yes! First off, thank you, Aimi. This is beautiful. Thank you. I respect the work that you're doing and that you have done and continue to do, so I'm just excited. My name is Jen White-Johnson. I'm actually currently in Baltimore, Maryland. Washington, DC, Prince George's County, the DMV is where I call home, but I've been living in Baltimore for about 15 years. So this is definitely home for me as well. Yeah, I'm excited.

Aimi Hamraie:
Great, yeah, thank you. And since we're on video, we can each do a visual description of ourselves. So I'm an olive-skinned Iranian person, I present as transmasculine. I have short, dark, curly hair and glasses, and I'm wearing a plaid shirt and a red hat today. And what about you, Jen?

Jen White-Johnson:
Yes, I am an Afro-Latina woman. I have caramel cinnamon skin. And I'm wearing a braided black headband, and I have crazy funky blondish goldish curls right now. And I'm wearing a black T-shirt that says, "Raise Good Humans," since that is something that we are lacking a lot of these days. And I have on cream-colored, cream and brown-colored cats eye glasses. They're my favorite glasses. And yeah, that's me.

Aimi Hamraie:
Thank you. So do you identify as a disabled person or a person with disability?

Jen White-Johnson:
Yes, I do identify as a disabled person, someone who, you know, lives balancing an autoimmune disorder, specifically Graves' disease that, you know, attacks a little bit of my immunity and my metabolism and impacts, like the thyroid gland, you know, just impacts so much of what my body is able to consistently do on a daily basis because of the lack of thyroid

hormone that my body produces. And I've had Graves' disease since I was 21 years old. And I was actually, you know, I wasn't even identifying as having a disability at the time. I just thought it was something that, you know, I could, you know, exist with and mask and try to, you know, not so much hide, but I could press through, you know, like how many people think that disabled people live, oh, yeah, you have to persevere, you have to press through it, and act like it doesn't even matter. And I didn't realize that I was also balancing life as a neurodivergent person as well with undiagnosed ADHD. And, you know, general anxiety disorder, or just general anxiety, you know, balancing act. And so, yeah, so I kind of, you know, I live my world between, you know, invisible disabilities.

Aimi Hamraie:
Yeah. And do you consider yourself to be part of disability community or disability culture?

Jen White-Johnson:
Yes, I do. I very much do. Yeah, it's a very beautiful space. Once I began to see just the beautiful culture that disability, that disabled folks are able to uplift for each other, I knew. I was like, yes, this is something that I want to be a part of and not want to shy away from or act like it, you know, it doesn't exist. So yeah, it's an honor to be a part of the community.

# Remote Participation - Teaching and Digital Promotion in the Arts

Aimi Hamraie:
Wonderful. So I'm going to ask you some questions now specific to remote access that will hopefully get to discuss your work in disability culture and community as well. So have you ever participated in remote forms of participation such as using Zoom for like a class or a meeting during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Jen White-Johnson:
Oh, yes, yes, definitely. At the time when COVID just really took up a lot of space on a global scale, I was actually teaching as an assistant professor at Bowie State University, which is the oldest historically Black college and university in Maryland. So a really vibrant space that is just nestled in

Prince George's County and Bowie, Maryland, you know, it originated as, you know, a teacher's college in 1860. And so they really uphold a lot of those values where they're, you know, ripening these really beautiful, you know, Black educators to go out and to, you know, uphold spaces of liberation for students. And so a lot of my students wanted to go on and become teachers, or they wanted to go on and to become, you know, artists, and whether it's independent artists or artists that are, you know, working on a commercial scale, you know.

So I really had a lot to embody in terms of expectations, and in terms of, you know, making sure that, you know, my students still felt like, they were learning something throughout the pandemic, and it became very challenging. And, you know, a lot of students that I saw pre-pandemic that were really excited and working on their portfolios, you know, began to get really discouraged, you know, once the pandemic hit, because it really changed, you know, the overall vibe and their productivity levels, you know. A lot of my students were Zooming in from work or Zooming in from their cars or Zooming in from, you know, a friend's house where, you know, a friend had better WiFi access, or they were, you know, maybe Zooming in, you know, from the school library, you know, once the campuses, you know, opened back up for students.

So, yes, I spent, you know, two years, you know, teaching remotely, kind of helping students still practice their whole entire emergence of the designers that they wanted to be. And then I also got a chance to teach a really beautiful remote class at the University of Minnesota, the Minneapolis St. Paul campus, and I was able specifically to teach a class entitled "Disability Justice Design" where we were able to uplift, you know, design and art... disability, design, and art culture presence, you know, specifically highlighting Black and brown communities. And, you know, a lot of the students, you know, I think I maybe had one Black student in the class, out of, I think, 15 or 16 students. And so, it really gave me an opportunity to, you know, take up space as like, you know, an Afro-Latina, you know, Black woman to, you know, uplift, hey, like, these are the projects, these are, this is the art that has really helped to shape the culture, these are the folks who you didn't even realize had, you know, were disabled, that have been, you know, uplifting, and really holding spaces for freedom within disability culture, you know, from the 1960s, you know, on to present day.

And if anything, remote teaching, allowed for me to be really, you know, really much more intentional about what I was going to present, because I knew that if we're going to be online for two hours, you know, on Zoom, then I have to really make sure that the content and, you know, the curriculum is a space that just feels like the students can really hold on to that wouldn't necessarily go over their heads, but they felt that they, you know, just to be able to strip away a lot of the academic jargon and to let students know, like, on day one, when you signed up for this class, you know, you're a part of the community, you're a part of building something really beautiful. And it was great. That was probably one of my favorite remote experiences was to kind of have space for fellow artists and designers to come together, you know, two times a week to really talk about, you know, how we can uplift the disability justice, specifically, art culture framework. So yes, it's been, I've had a lot of really fun experiences with students online.

Aimi Hamraie:
So just to follow up on that, what were some of the kind of like accessibility practices or challenges or opportunities that came up while doing remote teaching?

Jen White-Johnson:
Well, I was definitely always very transparent from day one, and I would tell students look, you know, these are my access needs. You know, I would love to know, like, what your access needs are, you know, and I would always, the great thing about remote teaching is that, you know, I could, you know, infuse more breaks, and I could, you know, allow students to turn their cameras off, I could allow students to use chat to engage in any kind of conversation. And then, you know, I would also allow a lot of time for students to, you know, do a lot of things outside of, you know, participating in like, an actual camera-based session, you know, and I would make the recordings accessible. And, you know, I would really, I would feel the room, I would always say, hey, like, does anyone have any access needs, does anybody want to uplift projects that, you know, that they're working on, and I would always thank the students for showing up, you know, it wasn't necessarily about me as the professor. I'd be like, first of all, I want to hold space for everyone today, thank you so much for being here.

Like, I would literally treat it like a genuine gathering, you know, where we were... yeah, for me, like any kind of opportunity to teach and to facilitate is like, a moment to celebrate, honestly, it's like that we can all just join together in one accord to just talk specifically about the things that we want to see more of, you know, in the world, which made the students excited to kind of, you know, go on this journey, you know, alongside me, alongside each other. And, you know, I always told students, I was, like, look, like this format is something that, you know, is going to consistently continue to be, you know, flexible, there's no wrong or right way to hold an online class. And I think that because, you know, I was able to teach a group of students that, you know, identified as, you know, being neurodivergent, or having, you know, physical disabilities, and because I was very transparent, in upholding space for access needs, I felt like they knew that this was going to be a space of freedom, and, you know, no fear, where they could just be themselves. And that's how I really framed the projects.

You know, that was, I feel like that was definitely, you know, like in a space of privilege, you know, at a predominantly white institution. When I was, you know, teaching at a historically Black colleges, I definitely feel like there were some differences, you know, some inequitable differences, where students couldn't necessarily, you know, just turn their lives off, they had to keep it moving, they had to make money for their families, they had to, you know, possibly share devices with their younger sibling. You know, there were a lot of spaces where I saw like that. I was like, man, I was like, it was a clear cultural and racial divide that I definitely noticed from, you know, teaching at one institution, you know, from teaching from one to another. And that was the thing that was really challenging, it was really hard for remote access to be, sometimes, viable.

But then I also felt like, well, you know, the student is making an effort, if they're joining me from their car, or if they're joining me from work, you know, in the break room, I was like, to me, that means that, you know, remote access, that's exactly what's being upholded, it's like, you know, hey, like, if a student's safe space is in their car where they don't want to be distracted in their house, or if they physically can't be in an actual physical space at the moment, then that means that I just have to be that much more intentional about making sure that their experience, you know, is, again, uplifting, and you know, that trickled down to the projects and it's like, look like, you know, if we're going to be meeting once or twice a week

through Zoom, let's make it you know, a happy space, like let's make it a space where we can lift each other up, and where we can have a lot of talk back and open discussion, and then you spend the rest of the time, you know, offline creating and making. And then when we gather together, you know, it's really to kind of uphold and to, you know, show what we've been producing, show what we've been creating, so that we can, you know, talk a little bit about it and support each other. And, you know, I'm just so happy that I was able to, you know, create as much as I was able to create with the students, because it was definitely some challenging times.

Aimi Hamraie:
Yeah, I want to get into that a little bit more. So what do you think was important about being able to teach those classes remotely, and what was challenging about it?

Jen White-Johnson:
Yeah, I definitely felt like, you know, I owed it to the students. Because, you know, as an educator, I talk a lot about celebratory practices, and liberated practices. And I learned that very much from, you know, fellow educators like bell hooks, and you know, that the classroom should be a space of freedom and not of oppression. And so, because students were very much oppressed in other ways throughout the pandemic, you know, whether it was, you know, literally getting kicked out of their apartment, or living in a hotel for a certain amount of weeks while maybe a relative had COVID, or having to move off campus, where being on campus was like their safe space. And so, you know, some students were literally like, Professor, I cannot leave campus, like, you don't understand, like, I can't go home, like, at home is a very oppressive toxic space for me, and I won't be able to learn there.

And so it was a challenge, and so I just kind of had to make sure that the assignments, again, were... you know, I think one of the biggest concerns was, well, how are we supposed to continue learning? How are we supposed to be able to, you know, to compete with other, you know, campuses that still have access to all of these resources. And of course, you know, some students didn't have access to accessible technology. You know, so a lot of students didn't have their own personal laptops, and they were really relying on the lab. I mean, most of the courses that I taught were studio courses, where students had access to all of the software, the

labs, you know, we had open lab hours, where students can come and go in between classes. And so a lot of those spaces were readily available. And it took a minute for us to even establish and to have staff to be in those labs, to open up those labs so that students can come, and even our fashion design students, you know, needing access to the costume shop to make designs.

And I was teaching seniors at the time, you know, who started the semester in person and who had to end the semester, you know, virtually, but I told students I was like, remember, you know, y'all live like on the internet, like, y'all were raised on the internet, think about what power, think about digital, you know, think about how you can take up space digitally so that your work can reach even more folks, because a lot of the students' work, you know, they had portfolio pages. But, you know, I was taught in undergrad, especially grad school to create some sort of like accompanying website so that, you know, you can have people access your work and access more of the story, access more of the behind-the-scenes, and I feel like we had been stressing so much attention towards, you know, like the exhibition, they have to build this physical space. And so a lot of the students were like, oh, everything's gonna change, it's not gonna have the same impact. We're not building, you know, we're not having our work printed and showcasing it in this exhibition space for people to see. And I was like, yeah, but you can actually build a website that allows for you to really stretch your entire idea even more.

And it was the first senior show, where every single student was able to have a really beautiful web space and a website that was just dedicated to their, not just a section for their portfolios, but specifically for their senior thesis. And so that really helps for them to embody even more of the reach that, you know, viewers and fans and potential job recruiters can have access, you know, to their work. Because there are still, you know, spaces where, you know, some students really only see design in one way and, oh, you know, everything will be fine if I just have an exhibition, and it's like, no, like, you have to continue to think about all of the accessible ways that people need to access your, you know, framework, your creativity. And so I knew that it was hard, because, you know, not all of the students were well-versed in terms of digital design. You know, like most fashion design students, or even film students, you know, they spend most of their time in the costume shop, building, sewing, they're not online, you know, digitally

building worlds. And so just, you know, being able to guide them in creating really beautiful websites, and also having them collaborate and team up with friends to photograph their pieces. And, so yeah, it was a really beautiful time to kind of allow for them to, you know, remix and to reconfigure, like, the world that they were building. And I just don't know if that would have happened, you know, If COVID hadn't hit. Because they would have been like, well, why do I need to make a website? Or why do I need to...? You know, it's like, no, like... [laughs]

You know, so some students understood that, yeah, like digital presence, and, you know, a digital world that you're building is very important. And if you want for your work to reach, like, global scale, you know, because our senior thesis show is our show, it's like, on our campus, we're asking people to literally come, you know, and then, you know, it allowed for us to, you know, create entire remote access events where all of the students and their families, we could just have a huge Zoom party, and everyone could just get online, uplift each other's work. We would have film screening parties for all of the film and animation students to showcase their work online. And, you know, we would have digital fashion shows, where all folks were able to, you know, like, model their clothes and showcase behind-the-scenes work of them sewing and creating, you know, their overall looks. And so it allowed for the students to really become so much more intentional about showcasing their design work and their creativity.

Aimi Hamraie:
Just to summarize, it sounds like you're saying that the fact that remote participation was, you know, institutionally mandated and necessary because of the pandemic meant that the students had to develop this digital presence and make it accessible and have events. And so it changed the way that their work was getting out there. Is that, would you say that that's like a...?

Jen White-Johnson:
Yes, yes. Because before that, it wasn't a requirement for our students, specifically within our department to create some sort of accompanying website that, you know, accompanied the thesis because it was always that extra step, you know. They're like, oh, well, I'm already building like this huge poster exhibition or poster series of infographics, or I'm already creating, you know, this full line of like, you know, five pieces for this really

cool, you know, like fashion explosive idea that that I've had on sustainable fashion, and then it would stop there. Because a lot of the students would be burnt out, you know, and I would before, pre-pandemic, I would still require students, document your work, document the actual exhibition experience, but it was very much, you know, an option that they had to create some sort of digital presence, because by, usually by the time, you know, there wasn't enough time to really fill in, and to create an actual design... like a digital presence. You know, and a lot of the students were very much burnt out. And so usually the last step would be, okay, well, after the exhibition opening, I would have each, you know, just go back and document your work and create some sort of blog. That was with the portfolio classes that we had, you know, it was very much the like, create a blog presence, create a portfolio, just create some sort of like, you know, online space where people could view your work, but we didn't necessarily... there wasn't, you know, the overall experience that was being presented. That was usually up to the student if they wanted to go the extra mile.

And so with the actual thesis show, they were required to create an entire, you know, online presence, online experience that they built from scratch and that they curated. You know, because, I just felt like, look, trust me, this in itself was gonna be a portfolio piece for you. And this is something that you can walk away with afterwards. And so remember, the thesis, as much work as you're putting into this thesis experience, you want it to continue to live on long after you leave campus. And so what? You're gonna have, y'all are still paying back student loans, you don't have studios, so you have to be able to share an actual website with folks, you know, so that they can see how you actually built your world. You know, it's like, you know, because at first it was very much, sure, we did talk about, you know, marketing and Instagram and social media spaces where you can, but because the algorithm continues to suppress views, especially for very, you know, like, up and coming small businesses and designers, students don't have the funds to be able to, you know, pay extra fees for boosting their posts. And they're in class all day, they don't have time to make all of these reels, to get all this visibility. And they don't have big huge names that are sharing their work and that are like, you know, reposting things to bring them more visibility. So it's like, look, like, it just allows for me to be able to have much more intentional conversations with them about, you know, making sure the work itself, you know, gets out there. And encouraging that

they can build their own avenues of like remote access and their own avenues of digital, you know, celebratory spaces that they can curate outside of the classroom.

Aimi Hamraie:
That makes sense. So I'm wondering if, you know, given the increase in production of digital materials, and these portfolios and stuff, were you also talking about how to create accessible online materials, like, for example, like teaching image description and stuff like that, like, how is that all going?

Jen White-Johnson:
Yeah, especially with, you know, our film students and animation students that said, you know, I'm like, you're using, you know, voice actors who have a certain, you know, lack of tone, and we always can't understand what they're saying, I'm like, you need to go back, and you need to caption this entire video. And then, you know, even with, with my photojournalism students, and, you know, when we return back to in-person events it allowed for me to, you know, uplift the conversation even more of anything that we put out there in the digital sphere, to allow people to, you know, to engage with the work, make sure that these spaces are captioned.

Make sure, you know, yes, that you are providing full on descriptions of the materials that you use. And that was something that we would have to do a lot. You know, and that I would encourage them. It's like, you know, no one's going to know what kind of fabric this is, no one's going to know, specifically, you know, what software you're using. So all of that, you need to embody all of it, you know, anything that's a really vibrant and complex, like have fun with being able to bring people into your world. And so yeah, it really gave me the opportunity to make sure that they thought about that, you know, yeah, I mean, thankfully, with design, like I can, you know, incorporate that into the conversation in terms of making sure that, hey, you know, this is looking a little too cluttered, think about spacing out the images a little bit better. Try not to use, like, you know, script-like fonts, you know, when you're creating headline text, and we would have a lot of those really great discussions about accessibility, about color palette, and I would always, like, let people know, look, like, these are the folks that are going to be looking at your work, these are the folks that are going to be engaging with it. And if they can't read it, then, and it allows for me to also talk a lot about screen readers and how certain information needs to be presentable

for that audience. And, you know, one of the things that my son does, my son, you know, he's 10 years old and he's autistic. Because he's such a digital kid, he enjoys the screen reader access on his iPad, and anytime that there's text on any of his images, he'll automatically turn on the screen reader so that he can hear it read back to him. Like there's just something really sensorial about that experience.

So some folks, you know, very much rely on the power, or, you know, not just some, but a big huge population of our world really much, you know, really rely on screen readers and having the information spoken to them. So, you know, again, it just allowed for the students to be that much more intentional, and for them not to necessarily overthink it. And so, you know, there was always a really beautiful space on the website for an artist statement and a brief bio that allowed to usher in the viewer to just say, look, like, on this website, or in my collection, you will see dot, dot, dot, dot. And I was like, feel free to talk about your color choices, your color palette, the materials that you used, because it's just going to continue to immerse folks, you know, into your space.

Aimi Hamraie:
Great. I'm also curious, since you mentioned that the disability justice course that you taught had a number of disabled students in it, were there ways that in participating in these forms of remote learning, disabled participants, such as students, and also yourself as a professor, were there kind of like methods or approaches that people were bringing from their lived experience with disability to like, help navigate the space or to make it work for them? And, you know, like was there anything like that that you noticed?

Jen White-Johnson:
Yes, yeah, that's a great question. You know, and that was something that I spoke on, you know, during our classroom introductions. I said, look, students, I said, you know, whether you're, you know, in your, you know, your dorm room or in your apartment, you know, or whether you're on campus, you know, I was, like, get comfortable, you know, like, grab your coffee, grab your tea. And I would say, look, you know, the first part of the class is going to be mostly us having a dialogue, and then the second half is going to be us, you know, showcasing each other's work. But, you know, to kind of change things up a bit, and these are one of the things that I

really loved learning, you know, when I was even researching Critical Design Lab, and, you know, whether, what are some other methodologies.

And because art and design is so immersive, I knew that I could assign podcasts and articles and then have students... and collectively, you know, we decided that we weren't going to have a semester full of just papers, papers, papers, and I would tell them, I'm like, as hard as it is for me to read my own work, or to read the work of other scholars, like, I can't be reading, you know, pages and pages and pages of like, of your perspectives, unless it's a very intentional, you know, space where we're gonna hold, where we're going to actually take time to read, but you can respond to these particular readings with doodles, or with sketches, or with a collage, or you could, you can give me like an audio recording of your thoughts of like this particular article.

So really uplifting different modalities of, you know, of learning. And I think that was the most fun thing that we were able to collaborate with, you know, collectively as a class. And the students were all about it. They were excited. And I was like there's a reason for all of this, and that I'm choosing to collect the work from you in these, in this variety of really beautiful ways. And at the end of the... well, the art, at the end of the semester, we were able to take all of that work. And the students had already been working on a whole bunch of posters and really beautiful artistic responses to engage each other with their own kind of positionalities on disability justice and disability art culture, and then we were able to take all of those designs and all of those sketches and doodles, and we were able to create zines that really helped to, you know, just deconstruct all of that positionality, and then, the students were able to take that entire process, and teach other students to create zines that kind of that, you know, that uplifted all of the research, and we had fun creating our own visual artistic tributes to disability justice principles and disability culture, you know, the actual disability cultural movement as it pertained to art and design.

And so, I made sure that, you know, I was like, okay, if the students are going to embody all of these principles, it's not going to mean anything if these principles and if the work that they're creating doesn't actually get seen, and if it doesn't actually work as an educational tool for their peers, you know, disabled and non-disabled. And it was great because we had, we were able to form a really great relationship with the Weisman Art

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Museum, which is right in the center of, it's like the intersection of where the St. Paul campus and the Minneapolis campus meet. And I just really love that the museum is a space for, you know, student, you know, liberation. And, you know, they were like, they rolled out the red carpet to have us, you know, to have us curate a poster exhibition. And then also to facilitate a zine workshop where the students can just bring in all their artwork that they had made all semester. And they could have, it was like a zine party, where they were able to share their zines and to give away their zines, but then also teach and showcase other students on how to make zines, specifically upholding you know, the ten principles of disability justice, and, you know, just uplifting the movement that really played a part in shaking up the conversation.

And that really just came from, you know, me allowing to make sure that the students just had, you know, that they just had the space to do that. It was very, you know, I would spend a lot of time asking, yeah, so what do y'all, how do y'all really want to showcase and get this information out there? How do you really want to engage like your campus community in with everything that you have been making? And essence, like, that's really what disability culture is about. It's about collective liberation. It's about you know, cross movement solidarity, and it's not about, you know, just creating, you know, liberation in a silo, like this is not what this class is about. And even though the class wasn't necessarily even meant to be like, a studio class, it was basically, okay, well, if we're able to come up with like, some studio projects that get out there, that's great. But it's not like, you know, we were obligated to showcase them in any kind of, you know, community engagement activity, or any kind of exhibition that was something that collectively that the students were wanted to actually, you know, make space for. It was, it was awesome.

Aimi Hamraie:
I'm wondering, just given everything that you're describing, and also that you're... so you teach graphic design, and these forms of participatory design. Have there been innovations in those practices through remote access? So in other words, are there things that people can do now that weren't as possible or weren't really like thought about or imagined, because we all spend so much time in a remote kind of mode versus before the pandemic?

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Jen White-Johnson:
I think that definitely the innovation part, to me, comes from creating sparks with folks who never thought that they could produce art in this way, and that they can never engage communities in this way. I feel like that's where a lot of the innovation lies is sparking that, you know, imaginative space for the first time where folks are like, oh, I can actually imagine, envision this, and make this happen. It's like, I can actually, you know, start from an in-person space and create a more vibrant world, you know, remotely, especially with zine making and storytelling.

And, you know, with one of my photojournalism classes at Bowie State, you know, that we started working on the fall of 2019, and then spring of 2020 is where the printed matter finally existed through [this actual newspaper zine called **Even The Score** ](published by my amazing friends at Homie House) published by my amazing friends at Homie House Press. And the newspaper really encapsulated just the whole student vernacular and student thought on voting, you know, voter suppression, you know, uplifting the fact that you know, college students, you know, Black college students, especially, they do vote, and it's a beautiful newspaper. It's like, and, but right when you know, when that first wave of COVID hit, all of the, you know, in person and planning that we had scheduled to uplift, you know, the actual printed matter and you know to get this into the hands of as many people, you know, yeah it was kind of suppressed and you know we didn't, we weren't able to get it into as many hands as possible. And granted, sure I had it available on my website, Homie House Press had it available on their website, but we were thankful for zine festivals that continue to plan you know virtual zine fests as much as they could to be specifically innovative. Like remember like zine and art book festivals, you know, that's very much an in-person thing where we gathered together, we go to like folks' tables and you know, we're actually holding the paper and feeling the paper and we're interacting with the actual printed matter.

But, you know, a space for innovation became important so that those particular festivals and, you know, art book fairs could transition to an innovative space online where they could say, oh, well, we can have, you know, a space for facilitating workshops, we can have a space for facilitating panels, like those were innovative spaces for a lot of people who weren't used to operating and navigating in that type of way. Because they were afraid, okay, well, is it going to have the same kind of impact? Are we

going to have, you know, the same kind of level of engagement? Are we going to have enough, you know, folks to help facilitate all of these access needs, you know, that we need, you know, because they weren't even thinking about, you know, ASL interpreters and all of these things that were so important to have. And so, you know, it taught many people. Yeah, like, these are the decisions, and these are the access needs that you're going to have to hold space for. And it was cool, because with the DC Zine Festival, it was great, because Homie House Press was already, you know, involved and included. And it was going to be a very small festival, but we still wanted to make an attempt to say, hey, like, well can the zine, you know, be featured and, you know, can we have some of the students come and do a virtual panel, so that they can actually, you know, participate and talk on, you know, and speak on this really beautiful piece that they made was, which was, in a sense, like a very innovative space for them.

And I feel like innovation is, to me, innovation is liberation. It's like, if you're able to give, you know, space to a person that has never been able to use these materials in this way, to uplift this particular community, or to be able to uplift their own stories, to me, that's innovation. That, you know, because it's new, it's fresh, you're able to actually, you know, folks have if you've been able to unlock something different and new for someone, like, to me, that's like the true definition of innovation. It's not necessarily rooted in, you know, oh, like, well, I created this piece of tech that's like brand new, not everyone is going to have access to that kind of tech. And is the tech in itself going to be accessible for everybody? Or are you going to be able to lay out a bunch of opportunities for someone? And if they build something that's innovative for their community, and that's a brand new way of sending a very particular message that they've never used before? Then yeah, to me, that's innovation.

## Remote Participation - Virtual Technologies and Capacity

Aimi Hamraie:
Yeah, that's great. What an interesting framing, I completely agree with you. In the last few minutes, we have left, I wonder if we can kind of go back to before the pandemic. So what were your experiences with remote access prior to the pandemic beginning and you teaching these classes?

Was it a significant part of your work? Did that shift? Or has it been a continuous thing for you?

Jen White-Johnson:
Yeah, that's a great question. And so, of course, I would have, you know, meet ups with other artists online. And like, one of the first times that I had actually used Zoom was when I was collaborating with another group of artists to participate in this huge art build for the Women's March in 2019. And, you know, up until that point, I wasn't even really using Zoom as much. And I was, I had used Skype, you know, a handful of times with friends. And I had used Google Meet obviously and then, you know, mostly most of like the remote, because my time was just so filled up with teaching, you know, we had Blackboard Collaborate, but I felt like a lot of time wasn't taken to make Blackboard Collaborate accessible, you know, because it was something that was very much, you know, optional to use with students and teachers, and, yes, some, some folks might use it for office hours, but it was always very, you know, like, I just felt like, connectivity was always an issue for me, I always felt like, you know, the overall design of it was hard to navigate. And, obviously, if someone isn't used to using a remote tool, it's gonna seem kind of difficult for them to navigate around it as much. But it's like, but no, like please make the actual interface itself, you know, easy to navigate, you know, so I always felt very much like, uh uh, this is, it's like, an ugly space, like I just don't want to use it. And it was even frustrating to use when I would have like, meetings with with other faculty was, I always just felt that it was just, you know, not really designed in a very engaging way to us. And so yeah, it was very much kind of like, not even 50/50. It was very much like a 20, kind of, like, 20, what? 20/60 space or whatever, in terms of me using remote tools to really embody, like my own, you know, like my own activism, but different aspects of remote access that I would use would be social media, obviously.

I had like a huge web presence, where I was always sharing work online, and I was always getting my work out there because I wanted. So a lot of the way that I shared my work, before pandemic was how I still share it, you know, through hashtags, sharing it with friends, through newsletters, or printing it and wheatpasting it and photographing it and posting those images online. Like, that's how I was always, you know, really getting my work out there and sharing it. But definitely, I feel like because, you know, the world, you know, transitioned to complete, like remote experience, I just

felt like more eyes were like on the work, more eyes were on, you know, the work, like the student work that I was sharing. You know, it just brought more of a visibility to it, where I feel like certain artists and designers who, you know, come from a place of privilege, or maybe, you know, just had a little bit more a little more solidarity with other spaces, you know, they had all the visibility, you know.

But it took, I almost feel that sometimes it took for the pandemic, for certain voices of privilege to be, I don't wanna say suppressed, but you definitely saw a difference, in terms of whose voices were specifically, you know, uplifted. You know, because even when, you know, we have Mike Brown and Ferguson and Freddie Gray in Baltimore, and this is, you know, pre-pandemic, and, you know, Black, the Black community, we were still very much creating our own avenues, as best as we could, to remotely meet up into, you know, if we didn't have physical spaces to meet up. Yeah, whether, you know, there were like phone conversations or whether, you know, whether there were like, whether it was like, you know, like using Facebook Live or Instagram Live to kind of, like, gather people together, so that everyone had the ability to kind of, you know, like, hear you and to kind of hold space for your presence.

You know, there were ways that a lot of folks were being creative, but it just wasn't mainstream, at least within certain spaces that, you know, that I was a part of, but yeah, I mean, it was a lot, but I know that the disability community was using, I mean remote access a lot before like, because, you know, we had to, but you know, unfortunately always takes levels of anxiety and oppression and, you know, death, to allow for folks to say, well, what can we do to make this better? How can we make, how can we turn all of this oppression into a more liberatory space for everyone?

## Remote Access Now

Aimi Hamraie:
Yeah, what a beautiful reflection. My last question is, you know, so we're in year three of the pandemic now. And I wonder if anything has changed with your teaching, or the forms of remote participation you're either doing or watching other people? Has it stayed the way that it had been when you taught those classes, or what is... what's going on now?

Jen White-Johnson:
Yeah, I definitely, you know, I would just kind of let the students guide the conversation, and I know that I mean, I'm no longer at Bowie State. But I do know that it took them a minute to resume in-person exhibitions. And I honestly don't know if there's still like, a virtual component to it, because so many places are, you know, trying to get back in person and pressing for that. And so I always respect different spaces, that, like, I've been a part of, you know, a few different conferences, whether it's the Adding Voices conference, you know, that really uplifts like social justice, and socially engaged, and, you know, art activism practices within the classroom.

And I know those, like conferences that continued to remain hybrid, where there always make where there's maybe like a list of panels that are going to be hybrid access and then a list of in-person panels, or even, you know, making sure that the in-person speakers and in-person panels are actually, you know, accessible online, where people can tune in through Zoom. Those are the spaces that I always really love to see. And more, I feel like, hey, those are the actual spaces that are making, that are actually upholding everything that they learned throughout the pandemic, that we're still in, to make sure that it's accessible. And that's why, you know, if it's going to be disability-led, it's always going to be virtual. I mean, right now, like the NAMED Advocates Leadership Summit, which is the [National Association of Melanated Advocates, which is led by an amazing disability activist, and just social presence, Keri Gray](), who's actually based in DC, and those different types of spaces, they still create really beautiful, you know, spaces of engagement and of impact, because they're virtual, because they know that they can continue to reach as many folks as possible. They have in-person leadership workshops and really beautiful opportunities for, you know, interconnectivity that they do during the summertime for folks that are local to the DMV [District of Columbia, Maryland, Virginia].

But when they definitely want to plan things that have more impact, they're like, no, it's going to be virtual, we're going to make sure that as many people can access these spaces so that we can continue to like, you know, uphold leadership in the disability community, specifically within Black and brown spaces. So I've been, yeah, I've been observing, you know, folks who are like, let's try hybrid, or let's push this so that it could be this four

day conference. And I'm like, oh, like how draining? You know, I mean, some of the most liberatory conferences, like and I say, quotes liberatory conferences that are supposed to be upholding actual spaces of liberation and freedom of thought. And these are like art education conferences, or, you know, art research conferences, and they're still like four days. And I'm like, wow, I'm gonna dedicate like, a whole almost a week of my spoons, to be in and out of spaces tired. Walking around with bags, walking around with supplies, especially if I'm speaking or if I'm facilitating a workshop. I'm like, you mean to tell me that, like, navigating, going back to flying here, flying there, you know, to kind of rush from panel to panel. I'm just like, I don't, I just don't even know if I could do it anymore. Like, I just don't even know if I want to do it, you know?

And so I feel like it's gonna be really interesting seeing how all of those, and yeah, sure, I've been seeing some really beautiful captures online of everyone kind of getting back together in person. And it's great. But yeah, maybe if, like literally what the Adding Voices conference that I went to in Philly, it was literally like, just the weekend. And I felt so fulfilled and so empowered, just from those few days of holding space with all those art educators. And I felt completely full, I didn't feel drained. And you know how those conferences can be, those in-person conferences. You're just like, oh, my god, like another day of sessions at like eight o'clock in the morning, just for me to be like, sitting there, like almost falling asleep. And then you just want to go back to the hotel after like the first few sessions. And then, and I felt like, wow, if this was, if this whole thing had been remote, I felt like I just would have had a little bit more energy to invest into this, into the actual community.

So I definitely feel like hybrid has, its... I feel like hybrid is the best if there's a way where it can be a really beautiful hybrid experience, you know, for folks who still prefer to, like meet in person and to have these really beautiful spaces of engagement. Or, because we're still in a pandemic, don't make the conference for five days, like just have it be like, a nice weekend. And, you know, maybe like one, you know, guest speaker for that day. And then, the other day is full of maybe some workshops and some really beautiful art making experiences. And, you know, that's why, like the Remote Access Parties are just so fun to vibe with, and I just really love like the first one that I attended, you know, with the DJ and the interactive art experiences, and, you know, the opportunities to have to chat and to hear

all... just to be a part of this really beautiful vibe. I just felt like that was like, it was awesome. And I still came like for camera ready with like lipstick, and I was like, yeah, let's do this, you know? [laughs] I was like, yes, like, I came ready, I came ready to vibe. So I just, I feel like, you know, we just need to continue to just take up more space in that way.

Aimi Hamraie:
Did you come to the Allied Media Conference version of that party, or a different one? Do you remember?

Jen White-Johnson:
It was the one where we, where you and I actually met up in like the dance room. And then like Aminder Virdee had her artwork. I think it was, I think it was like in 2020.

Aimi Hamraie:
Yeah, in the virtual space, right? The Yo-Yo Lin.

Jen White-Johnson:
Yes, yes, yes, that one.

Aimi Hamraie:
I remember. I remember walking up to you in that and we were kind of [unintelligible] the technology.

Jen White-Johnson:
That was amazing. I think that was the first time, one of the first times we had interacted with each other like in that way.

Aimi Hamraie:
Yeah, definitely.

Jen White-Johnson:
Yeah, it was beautiful.

Aimi Hamraie:
[unintelligible] out of those opportunities, yeah.

Jen White-Johnson:

I loved it. I loved it.

Aimi Hamraie:
Me too. Well, that's all my questions for you. Do you have anything else you want to add that we haven't touched on?

Jen White-Johnson:
Yeah, I mean, if anyone is interested in, you know, checking out some of these projects and some of the work, the zines that I've made with my students specifically, you know, uplifting disability solidarity and, you know, what we can actually do when we actually use art and design with a very beautiful, intentional purpose to, you know, reclaim and to just use artmaking to just create a really beautiful, visual, I mean, exciting landscape. I don't know, I just, I love, my favorite form of art making is, you know, digital collage, and because I love that voice of collage, and how improvisational it is, and how you can just remix imagery to create a whole new image to create whole new worlds. And so that's why zine making is so much fun.

And so, you know, with each zine that the students are able to create, because they curate all the images, or they use prefab images to create just a whole engaging narrative on disability culture, definitely, like, just visit jenwhitejohnson.com and see what I have, it's not just my work that I share on my website, it's like student work and work that I'm also making with, you know, different disability spaces and different schools with different disability cultural initiatives. And it's been great being able to kind of see how all of these different academic spaces are really, you know, uplifting disability cultural practices. And it's great, because, you know, usually, whenever I'm invited, they'll always tell me, yeah, like, does virtual work, or in person? So I always love being given that option, I feel like now, it's a part of, I feel like it's just common practice now for a lot of folks to be able to like, to hold space for that option, which means that they're making sure that they, you know, that they uphold those accessibility practices, you know. And it gives me the opportunity just to say, yeah, yeah, virtual, yeah, you know. [laughs] Or, you know, if I feel like I have the spoons to go in person, or then you know, it works too.

But you know, it's like, virtual is always definitely like a really beautiful speaking engagement. Like I could, doing virtual is always really beautiful,

but if I'm, but any kind of like workshop, having some sort of like hybrid, I've done some workshops, where like, the students are all together in the classroom, and then I'm on screen kind of, like, facilitating, like the making practice. And so I've done all different types. So there's a lot of the, for those educators that are, you know, listening, it can be done, it can be done. And also feel free to, you know, collaborate with the students on how they want to embody like the workshop too, if this is something that you're working on with them and for them. Hey, you know, like, ask them yeah, like, what, how would y'all really like to engage with my work? But yeah, so just definitely, you know, I'm all about sharing, so check out my website so that you can see what the students have, with what my students have been up to, and what, you know, I'm hoping to create more with various disability-based student-run, you know, collectives, and those are my favorite folks to collaborate with, for sure. So, yes, thank you, Aimi

Aimi Hamraie:
Thank you so much, Jen. This is so wonderful.