

Oral History with Cora Brother

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Interview of Cora Brother

SESSION 1 (4/30/2019)

BLOOM: Okay, so it is April 30th at about 12:09 (pm). This is Molly Bloom at the Center for the Study of Women with Cora Brother and we are just beginning our oral history. So, Cora, I would love if you could tell me a little bit about where you were born and where you grew up?

BROTHER: I was born in [REDACTED] and grew up there—well, lived there until I was eighteen in a very small town that was kind of suburban but surrounded by farming communities.

BLOOM: What was the town called?

BROTHER: [REDACTED].

BLOOM: Okay. How many people lived there?

BROTHER: No idea, not that many.

BLOOM: Okay. And did you grow up with parents, siblings, caretakers? Who were you with?

BROTHER: Yeah, [REDACTED].

BLOOM: Okay. What did your parents do?

BROTHER: A number of different things.

BLOOM: [REDACTED]

BROTHER: [REDACTED]

BLOOM: Do you remember anything about the house? If you were going to describe it, could you describe what it looked like, or even what it smelled like? Are there any sensory memories that you have?

BROTHER: Not really. I lived in a couple of different houses. One was kind of newer and one was, I think, over a hundred years old. Yeah, creaky.

BLOOM: Yeah. What was your health like while you were growing up?

BROTHER: Very—I'd say for the (unclear) of illness but at one point I was hospitalized for a good chunk of time. And then—just to connect this to chemical sensitivities—I would have almost isolated incidents of something, some weird reactions that we could never figure out what the cause was.

BLOOM: So, you didn't figure it out when you were younger. When was the first serious illness?

BROTHER: Well, I don't think this is chemical-related but in third grade I was hospitalized for almost a month, but that was a blood-based illness where everything was happening with my body. But I guess some of the earlier memories that I have of things that I now think were related to chemicals were in middle school, like the palms of my hands peeled off for a few months and we couldn't figure out why this was happening, little things like that.

BLOOM: And when you say "we" is that—?

BROTHER: —Mostly [REDACTED] and I trying to figure out what was happening.

BLOOM: What was it like when you couldn't figure out what was happening?

BROTHER: It was frustrating, and I think in adolescent phases it was really embarrassing, just having these symptoms that felt uncontrollable.

BLOOM: Yeah, and were you— As an adolescent, what was school like? Did you like it? Did you not like it?

BROTHER: It was fine. I was very rebellious, so—

BLOOM: Really? Do you remember incidents of rebellion?

BROTHER: Yeah, but I prefer not to talk about them.

BLOOM: Okay, fair enough. I'm just trying to get a sense of your relationships and what life for [REDACTED] was like as you were growing up.

BROTHER: I guess, in general, I felt like it was pretty average, but I think also being queer and sick in a small town was hard and isolating in different ways. But I don't know. I also didn't really identify with how being sick or chronically ill at that point and everything kind of— Most of the incidents happening within my body felt very isolated. Just a single weird problem, you know. It took me until I was older and maybe in college to connect them as things that were happening that were my body reacting.

BLOOM: Yeah. Did these bouts of illness impede your life? Or I don't know if you were working, or did they keep you from going to school or anything like that?

BROTHER: I think the more severe ones did, but in general, not really. Not as a kid.

BLOOM: So, when did you move out of [REDACTED]?

BROTHER: When I was eighteen, I moved to [REDACTED].

BLOOM: For college or—?

BROTHER: Yes.

BLOOM: Okay. What did you study in [REDACTED]?

BROTHER: I was at [REDACTED], and I did mostly printmaking and hand-drawn animation.

BLOOM: Of what?

BROTHER: Of weird bodies.

BLOOM: Yeah?

BROTHER: Yeah. A lot of the stuff that I used to make was a lot about the vulnerability of bodies and bodies moving through space.

BLOOM: Was that about— Did that have anything to do with your own body, or no?

BROTHER: A little bit, but not really. I guess it was more thinking about processing my relationships and quite a few deaths of close friends and just dealing with all bodily capacity and vulnerability.

BLOOM: Yeah, okay. And how long were you at [REDACTED]?

BROTHER: For four years.

BLOOM: For four years, okay. What was your degree, is it [REDACTED]?

BROTHER: [REDACTED], yeah.

BLOOM: Okay. What did you do afterwards?

BROTHER: I started working in natural history museums. So, right out of undergrad, I got an internship at a natural history museum, working on collection organization and curatorial stuff. And I got really into that and started doing more. That turned into a part-time job, which turned into a couple part-time jobs, and that turned into almost ten years of working with biological collections and thinking about large-scale digitization projects, and how we understand the world through biological collections.

BLOOM: What was it that drew you to that? Why did you like it?

BROTHER: I really liked the tediousness of it, of having to process millions of specimens. And I have always really liked the sciences, so it was a cool way to still be really involved in some of the curators' research but think about it from an organizational standpoint. Yeah, and as I sort of progressed in that career, I got more and more responsibility, which culminated more in doing the research alongside the curators and getting to travel and go collect insects in places and manage large teams of interns to process collections and design these whole protocols, which was really fun.

BLOOM: Yeah, that's pretty cool. This was in [REDACTED]?

BROTHER: In [REDACTED] and in a few other museums, I spent a year working in a small collection in [REDACTED]. I was hired to work on this digitization project there. I was in [REDACTED] for a really short period of time. I worked in [REDACTED] for a short period of time.

BLOOM: Wow. What was your favorite part about working on collections? I mean, you talked about what you liked, but what was your favorite part about doing the job?

BROTHER: I really liked the planning aspect of them. Especially when my last job, a curator basically handed me a couple-million-specimen collection that had yet to be ever databased or anything, and she sort of said I could design the whole project from start to finish and hire a bunch of student workers, and really do this giant project and think about all the granular steps and bottlenecks in-between and that was really an amazing experience.

BLOOM: Wow. That's pretty cool. That's amazing. So, after you— Okay, I just want to get the timeline straight before I move on. When was it that you started to sort of piece together what you call now multiple chemical sensitivities?

BROTHER: Yeah. I guess that wasn't until I was in my twenties and working— Certain natural history collections that I worked in would use preservation chemicals and I would have certain symptoms and— It wasn't until I went completely fragrance-free that I realized how awful I just felt every day, and that state of what I thought was normalcy was— I never knew I didn't have to feel like that, you know? Because I just felt it every day. So, yeah, it wasn't until I was looking into my twenties, trying to figure out some stuff with my skin, and then came upon fragrance-free stuff and started thinking, "Oh, this may help alleviate this one symptom." And then once I started changing my whole lifestyle I started feeling so much better in so many different ways. That was really eye-opening.

BLOOM: And this was after you had been doing collection stuff? So, what happened after you worked on all those different collection projects? Where did you go?

BROTHER: After a while of working—I think I had almost ten years between undergrad and getting my master’s—and then I went and got my master’s in [REDACTED].

BLOOM: Okay. But okay, so it was about ten years, so this was four years after you graduated college. So, it was during the time that you were working on collections things that you realized—

BROTHER: That I was starting to figure it out, yeah. And it very slowly kind of— I just kind of slowly, I don’t know, found more sick and disabled communities online and more resources and really started to get a better understanding of my own experience by seeing it reflected in other people’s. Which is interesting.

BLOOM: Do you remember the first time you found a community online?

BROTHER: Not specifically, no. But I remember when I moved to [REDACTED], that being a really—a really big sigh of relief, finding a sick and disabled community there who was radical or more radical politically and had other intersecting identities that were always part of the conversation. So, I don’t know, I remember the relief that felt like when I quickly made this community, or found this community in [REDACTED].

BLOOM: Yeah. Did you already have the label “multiple chemical sensitivities” in your mind?

BROTHER: Before that point—

BLOOM: —Had you been diagnosed before [REDACTED]?

BROTHER: I hadn’t been diagnosed, but I had that in my—I had found that language.

BLOOM: Online?

BROTHER: Yes.

BLOOM: Okay. Yeah. So, did you begin to cut back on fragrance stuff while you were still doing collecting?

BROTHER: Yes.

BLOOM: Okay. What was that process like?

BROTHER: What do you mean?

BLOOM: How did you first start to cut out fragrances?

BROTHER: I guess I quickly started with personal care products. That was the first thing to go. And laundry detergent.

BLOOM: Yeah.

BROTHER: Yeah.

BLOOM: And then you mention there were some places that used chemicals, preservative chemicals. Did you talk to them about that or did you just sort of piece it together for yourself?

BROTHER: Yeah, it wasn’t really—I think I pieced it together for myself and I didn’t really— At that point I wasn’t really proactive about changing the spaces that I was in. And I really accepted spaces that made me sick as they were. But I don’t know. I think it’s hard because I wonder if this intense time spent

in this long-term exposure working in these collections actually made this particular part of my illness worse? But I don't know.

BLOOM: I understand you saying that you just weren't at that level. It sounds like you weren't maybe radicalized until you got to [REDACTED]. Not radicalized but that was an exposure to different voices and different language.

BROTHER: Yeah, which is interesting because even long before—I mean, I have multiple disabilities and multiple chronic illnesses, and have had a different process with each one of those. And when I was working in natural history museums, I did a lot of accessibility advocacy anyways, even though it didn't really feel like it was about me. But when I was in [REDACTED], I did a lot of advocacy around deaf and hard of hearing folks' access to large institutions and I really did a decent amount of organizing in these museums that I was working in to try to make more content more accessible. But it wasn't personal, but it was very political, and I think as I got older, I figured out how a lot of this work was also personal and political, you know? But it was an interesting separation of myself; it was more advocating for others, for quite a few years, before I started really advocating for myself.

BLOOM: Okay, I did not know you had that background of working on access before you necessarily identified with the access.

BROTHER: Yeah, and I think it was really amazing I had a very supportive boss at that time who let me fight for all these things and supported me. And she founded a women in science initiative at a museum, which then we tried to make most of those events accessible or have interpreters available or able to be requested, and really started pushing back and making accessibility more at the forefront of this institution, so that was cool. It was good to have a partner in doing that.

BLOOM: Did you have other social networks of advocates or activists?

BROTHER: In [REDACTED], I wasn't super political but had a very large queer community which was political in and of itself and you know, thinking about queer spaces and events and things like that.

BLOOM: Okay. How did you decide you want to get your master's and what did you get your master's in?

BROTHER: Well, I had been debating getting a PhD, but I still was kind of on the fence of what exactly I really wanted to do. But I think at that point, I thought getting a master's would be a nice stepping stone to better understanding the areas I was interested in and the questions I was interested in asking, and then if I didn't really want to pursue an academic kind of angle, it would be really practical. And so, having worked a long time on digitization projects, I was really interested in systems of knowledge organization and how we can talk about colonialism when we talk about biological collections. And then thinking about access and what it means to digitally translate an archive or collection to digital interface and what services and disservices that does for information and institutional authority and colonial perspectives.

So, I was in a two-year [REDACTED] master's program, and I focused mostly on digital archives and really got way more deep into digital accessibility and assistive technologies in that program. And then I ended up organizing a bunch of events and doing a lot of disability advocacy. Again, not super personal, but really thinking about how I was in this program with all of these people creating technologies, and accessibility was always an afterthought. So, I did a lot of organizing events and talks and trying to center as many disabled voices as I could, thinking about accessibility and digital technologies.

BLOOM: So, was there something that you remember that drew you to the issue of access?

BROTHER: With a lot of my disabled friends working in tech work on accessibility, we would have these conversations of how frustrating it is that when you're a disabled person working in tech and the tools that you're using aren't even accessible. Then you kind of just start working on access because you need things to be accessible for yourself. What was your question again?

BLOOM: I was wondering what is it that drew you to access.

BROTHER: And I guess just seeing all these people from my program, previously and in my cohort, all these people going to work for these tech companies that just had so much money and— I don't know. And how just, in general, I feel like marginalized perspectives weren't centered. So I became really invested in how those things can be valued from the get-go, instead of just a technological fix or an after-thought or a, "Whoops, we can't do this thing."

BLOOM: Okay, so what year did you start your master's?

BROTHER: [REDACTED]

BLOOM: Okay, so this was in the tech bubble, yeah?

BROTHER: Yeah.

BLOOM: So that's really fascinating. Where did you get your master's?

BROTHER: At [REDACTED].

BLOOM: Okay. And so how did you find your network of people that you found in [REDACTED]?

BROTHER: Through meeting a few folks and then connecting to their networks and just slowly expanding through community events and disability-centered organizations.

BLOOM: And what was your health like while you were doing all of this work in your master's program?

BROTHER: It was pretty terrible. I think as I've gotten older, my health has just continued to decline. And that's been difficult as I've taken on more and more personal pursuits.

BLOOM: And remind me, when were you diagnosed with multiple chemical sensitivities?

BROTHER: That actually wasn't until during my master's when— My master's was the first time I actually sought out accommodations for myself. And knowing certain specific accommodations was very helpful, but then I think in regards to MCS (multiple chemical sensitivities) I didn't really know what could be done because there wasn't a framework that already existed for making spaces more accessible for chemically sensitive folks. And so I specifically sought out an MCS diagnosis, which before that never felt like it really had—I don't want to say it didn't have value, but my relationship with medical doctors has been a very fraught one— So I guess, understanding what my understanding of what a diagnosis can do, and what are its limits. And so that was the first time that I really understood this particular diagnosis as being in service of me getting accommodations for it.

BLOOM: At the university?

BROTHER: Yes.

BLOOM: Can you expand on what you mean by your relationship with medical professionals being a fraught relationship?

BROTHER: Yeah, I mean I don't think this is anything that anybody else wouldn't say, but, just years of seeing doctors and not being believed. Being very frustrated with trying to get help or support and not knowing even what that could be, you know? And I think just having doctors that doubted me, or even if they did believe me being like, "We don't know what we can do to help you." So, just a lot of frustration, I guess, on the better side of it and then a lot of harm and sadness on the (other). Being treated very poorly by some doctors, that was really difficult.

BLOOM: So, I'm going to move on but the first thing I want to do is check the battery. Okay. So, you decided you want to seek out a diagnosis. How did that go? Was that a better relationship or no?

BROTHER: No, but it was something that I really had to fight for and had this particular doctor didn't really believe me, and at a few different times laughed at me. But it was something—I had the paperwork for the disabled students program to get support and I just needed her to fill it out. And I basically came really prepared and had gone over it super-detailed so I could just tell her what to write. And I really had to advocate for her to write the things I needed her to write. And eventually she did it, but.

BLOOM: That sounds really frustrating, but familiar.

BROTHER: Yes. But I was glad I was prepared, and I was like, "In this field just write this, and in this field just write this."

BLOOM: Yeah, so you were seeking— Can you tell me what accommodations you were seeking? Are you comfortable with that?

BROTHER: Yeah, I mean for MCS-related things at that time I really didn't know. And I think my experience during my master's— It was really hard and really lonely in a way that I think my experience during my PhD was also and is still also hard and lonely, but in a very different way. And so, during my master's, I guess I was like, "This is my experience. I need more access to spaces," because I was struggling to be in academic spaces. And I didn't have a list of things (accommodations), so they were trying to support me, but didn't even know what accommodations I could ask for because having my classroom spaces be fragrance-free didn't really seem like an option at the time. People were concerned with telling other students what they could and could not do. And so, they suggested some—now, in hindsight—some very ridiculous options as to how I would kind of be safer in these spaces. But ultimately—and I think this has been my experience across the board, ultimately—I just needed to do the work myself to work with administrators, tell them what I needed and really figure out what works best for me, and put a lot of energy into reasoning with people to help make spaces slightly more accessible in this way.

BLOOM: And were you able to accomplish that? And how long did it take to get your master's?

BROTHER: Two years.

BLOOM: Were you able to accomplish that in two years and write your master's?

BROTHER: Kind of, in certain ways. I got the hand soap changed in my building which was a long fight, and eventually got some people on board with sending emails in my department to ask people to not wear certain things. But still, that wasn't perfect, it never is, you know. So, it was— Yeah, I feel like that part of advocating is never, you just can say what you need and get it. It's just constant and exhausting.

BLOOM: Did you find other people that you formed connections or relationships with chemical sensitivities in [REDACTED]?

BROTHER: Sorry?

BLOOM: Did you find other people that you formed connections or relationships with chemical sensitivities in [REDACTED]?

BROTHER: Yeah, and then other disabled folks who really prioritized that, too. So I think that was another amazing experience not only to meet people who were sick and disabled in similar ways to me, but also this cross-disability solidarity that was really powerful of how all these people and these communities that have very different needs and experiences can really help hold each other up, and that was really amazing.

BLOOM: Did you learn any of your techniques for advocacy or maybe the demands? Did you learn or share those with your community?

BROTHER: Yeah, it was a lot of resource-sharing and I think I definitely gained more language around how to talk about needs and how to organize access in this particular way from that community.

BLOOM: And so—you don't have to answer this if you don't want to—but did your advocacy in your master's program impact any of the relationships that you had with faculty or students or colleagues?

BROTHER: Definitely.

BLOOM: Yeah.

BROTHER: I mean, in a way, I think now I'm more comfortable with it but I still think about it all the time. It's this constantly outing myself as the person who needs this thing, it hardly ever can be anonymous. And so that definitely brought and still brings a lot of attention and amazingly inappropriate comments and opinions that I have witnessed. So, in some ways, I think that it humanizes the issue, having a person who my colleagues care about voicing this particular access need. And then in other ways it targets me for a lot of, like I said, inappropriate feedback and things, so, yeah.

BLOOM: Well, you did it. You got your masters and you also advocated for yourself. What did you do after you got your master's?

BROTHER: That's when I started a PhD program.

BLOOM: How did you decide you wanted to apply for the PhD program and pursue it?

BROTHER: Yeah, it was really my work in [REDACTED], which I started doing more academically during my master's with a few folks at [REDACTED]. And I was building these digital archives and learning these technical skills for accessibility, and doing some design justice work and thinking about how design can be in service of access, in a very complicated notion of access, not just for disabled folks but how design can really help make information more understandable and legible, and also how design can be community-centered and community-driven, so I did a lot of design projects, too. And so at the same time as I was making and designing and doing these projects that were moving my understanding of these technologies forward, I was also writing about them and really got into disability studies as a framework as well as queer theory and things like that. And then I really found the joy in writing and analyzing and thinking about how disability studies as a framework can really impact the way we talk about organizational systems and technologies and things like that, outside of this purely technical perspective of accessibility. Like, how all these notions can kind of be like blown out or expanded through critical theory.

BLOOM: Did you know you wanted to come to [REDACTED]?

BROTHER: It was one of two programs that I was interested in. I think I wanted to stay in a similar field. I knew I wanted to work on archives and I knew I wanted to use disability studies, so there was only a few programs that seem to be a good fit for working on this topic, but then also working with disability and feminist methodologies, and using theory as the predominant way that I'm analyzing these systems.

BLOOM: Did [REDACTED] as a space have anything to do with your choice, or no?

BROTHER: No.

BLOOM: Okay. So, you applied, and you got in. Was it hard leaving [REDACTED]?

BROTHER: Yeah, it was really hard leaving my communities that I had there. I also formed new ones here, but they feel very different than in [REDACTED].

BLOOM: What's different about them?

BROTHER: Well, I guess it's also hard to say because I've just been so consumed by this program, so I have a lot less time to put that energy into making a bigger community. But I don't know, I have a lot less disabled friends here, and I don't know, it feels like less of a collective, and more of just a lot of individual friendships that I have.

BLOOM: One thing I forgot to ask is, did you see any changes with your health when you were able to advocate for the things that you needed in your master's program?

BROTHER: Yeah.

BLOOM: What was the move like coming to [REDACTED]? You can take that however you want to take it, or I can guide you if you need guidance.

BROTHER: I don't know, maybe a more pointed question.

BLOOM: What did you think when you first started in the program when you first started in [REDACTED]? What did you think of the people? What did you think of your program? Did you like it? Were you feeling fulfilled?

BROTHER: I guess when I started the program, I was pretty excited and the cohort who I joined with is really amazing and supportive, and collectively, we have so many different perspectives and opinions but I think many of us were working towards similar liberatory goals, which was cool. But in very different areas so that felt very good.

BLOOM: Yeah. And has your project shifted since you got here? Or has it stayed about the same?

BROTHER: It's shifted a little bit. I think I've backed up a lot in my research.

BLOOM: What do you mean?

BROTHER: Well, when I came here, I was really interested in—I guess I had questions around disability more abstractly in natural history museums and their digital archives and I think now I've really become—it's a very minor change—but I'm more interested in foundational things and I guess now I'm asking more questions around how do we talk about disability in the history of natural history museums. And so, thinking more along the lines of the impossibility of finding very many, if at all, disabled people in these histories when there's little to no evidence. It's very similar to the project that I proposed but it

feels more like thinking about the foundations before jumping to talking about technology and more contemporary questions, thinking more about the roots of how these systems have formed and how disabled people may have played a part or how ableism is central in settler colonial knowledge.

BLOOM: And what kind of advocacy did you do— What kind of projects have you taken on since moving here?

BROTHER: Since moving here, not a ton, but that's outside of my own research. But I've done a few—it's been a lot of self-advocacy—but a few, helping with access with conferences or symposia. That's very standard. Now, I have a few freelance things on my plate or helping with other conferences or helping with institutions who want to implement things that are more inclusive of disabled and ill folks. And then my work with [REDACTED] has been a big piece of that, too, which has been specifically around chemical sensitivities and MCS.

BLOOM: How did you get the idea to do the fragrance-free policy? Was that something that you guys decided together? Was it you bringing it to the table?

BROTHER: Well, I'm not sure—actually how that specifically came up, let me think about that. Because the [REDACTED] staff found me because I had had my department send out these department-wide emails that our building's fragrance-free and this is what it means and blah, blah, blah. And so then they reached out and an admin person in my department was like, "Who's behind this?" And that's how I found [REDACTED]—or they found me—and then I became part of the [REDACTED] working group and then they had a position available. Yeah, but I don't know specifically the—I think they had been working so much already, it seemed, before I got here, around fragrance-free stuff, so it seemed like a great fit for me to work on projects that felt a little more academic and then simultaneously work on projects that felt more advocacy-oriented.

BLOOM: Where did this one fall, this project?

BROTHER: So we—for the [REDACTED] Conference—I wrote a paper around natural history museums and chemical preservation and was on a panel with [REDACTED] folks around how chemicals are related to disability or impact disabled folks. So that was a little bit more on the academic side and then on the more advocacy side, doing the Fragrance-Free Toolkit, that was a big project, or just helping with language and events and making things happen.

BLOOM: Were there already toolkits that you'd seen before this one here at [REDACTED], before you began working on this project?

BROTHER: I'm trying to think— We had interviewed somebody from another university who had a slideshow with some stuff and I'd seen—I wouldn't call them toolkits—but I had seen many, many resources on the internet or through friends or through other organizations and so I had this collection of resources. I believe they're all listed in the toolkit, too, because I definitely credit them for doing a lot of the work.

BLOOM: Yeah. So, what did the toolkit— It brought something new? What did it bring [that was] new?

BROTHER: It's specifically geared towards universities and organizations of that sort of nature. So we have, in the toolkit, different pieces that are what faculty can do, what TAs can do, what staff can do. Thinking about these different levels as different levels of power and control and agency and what can all of these people— What is in their power? How can they advocate or what personal changes can one make that can go towards this goal?

BLOOM: Yeah. So, before you talked about how your advocacy felt like you were advocating on behalf of other people. Does your work here—and I'm talking about at [REDACTED] and the work that you've done at [REDACTED], which is theorizing access still—does it still feel like this is work you're doing on behalf of other people?

BROTHER: It feels like both, and I think that makes it—I think about it a lot. It feels really heavy because I think even the self-advocacy that has been very turbulent here feels like something that I don't want to give up on, even though I'm not taking classes right now, so I'm not around as much so it would be easier just to ignore. But I think there's such a sense of responsibility and accountability to disabled folks in general in academia that I hold very close. That fuels a lot of my work: not just advocating for myself but thinking about how any little bit of change that I can cause is for all the other sick and disabled folks. Not just folks with MCS but how do I get some departmental authorities to take disabled people seriously? Which feels like— That's not MCS-specific but it's like, how do you treat people who are struggling in academia when academia is already so exclusive and has so many access barriers built into it already?

BLOOM: Yeah. Do you feel comfortable commenting on what has made your self-advocacy turbulent here?

BROTHER: What?

BLOOM: You don't have to, of course.

BROTHER: I don't know. I'll think about that. We can come back to it.

BLOOM: Okay. That sounds good. I respect that. Let me check the time. It's 12:59 (pm), so we have— Ten more minutes okay?

BROTHER: Yes.

BLOOM: Okay. Are there any other significant projects that you've done at [REDACTED] that you want to talk about? That you want to get on this oral history record?

BROTHER: Just along the lines of academia, part of my research is interviewing disabled folks about their experiences with archives, which is a very loose parameter. So, I think that has evoked so many conversations of how disabled people and sick people struggle in these systems. and I think I've seen that from so many different angles, from advocating for myself to working at [REDACTED] and organizing the [REDACTED] Symposium, when we have all these conversations around these issues and understanding the nuances of access through people who I am interviewing as well as students in classes that I (am a) TA (teaching assistant) for. It feels so huge and present and needs to be accessed, needs to be so much louder.

BLOOM: Yeah, you're also a TA every now and then, right, when you have to?

BROTHER: Yes.

BLOOM: Do you see a lot of students thinking and talking about disabilities, besides the fact that you TA— Well, tell me what you TA for?

BROTHER: [REDACTED]

BLOOM: Yeah, so do you see students thinking or grappling with these ideas?

BROTHER: In the Disability Studies courses, yes, for sure. And definitely I love having these conversations with the students about it, too, and seeing how their ideas grow more and more as they learn more about the field. And I would say in archives, not so much. But there have been a few students who are really interested in this, in different ways, like some more from a theoretical perspective and others from more like a technological perspective for thinking about access or use of materials or things like that.

BLOOM: How's your health now?

BROTHER: Not very good. Living in [REDACTED] has been really hard, I think, in part because of the air quality. So yeah, I think that has made this program even more difficult than PhD programs already are. I think having to navigate a really unpredictable health on top of moving as fast as I can to try to make all of these milestones that are required of me— That's been hard. And seeing other folks struggle with that too, it's been really hard.

BLOOM: Have you found any allies?

BROTHER: Yeah, for sure. I think a lot of my cohort is really supportive but yeah, I guess, like I said in the beginning, a lot of this advocacy is ongoing. And I think even now when I'm so concrete about the access needs and I am very clear and I have clear directions for folks, it's still is just a lot of— it feels like constant work to have to remind people to advocate for different things, or every quarter, taking different classes, having to meet with different people in the different levels of authority to try to maintain access, if I can.

BLOOM: Do you seek any support, and whatever that looks like to you? Do you seek support from—

BROTHER: I have supportive partners and roommate and— Yeah. And go to therapy.

BLOOM: Yeah. Okay, so before we finish up, is there anything else that you want to talk about, about your history? I'll ask you to do sort of a looking forward question, but before we move on from the history, is there anything you want to get across, anything else we haven't talked about?

BROTHER: I don't know. I guess, across all of my varying experiences of both advocating for myself and advocating for others and not knowing what I need and knowing what I need, I just feel like even the existing accessibility services are really, or can be, one-dimensional. And I think, for me, I've realized, both in an embodied way and in my community, how bodies and minds are constantly changing and how these services can often just aim to check a box when really we need a more holistic understanding of how everybody's minds and bodies work differently and work differently all the time, you know? So I think a lot about complex access systems and what it means to actually be responsive to— You know, if don't need— You can't always provide a three-day warning before you need an extension for a paper— I guess, how flat access services can be.

BLOOM: Okay, well, and maybe that leads into what you see in the future, so if you could just reflect or comment on— If we're thinking about some changes, just a few key changes that you want to see in terms of access, (which) has been a big theme for us today, what would those changes be in the future?

BROTHER: I don't know. I think having done so much work around fragrance-free access, I've seen the intense attachment that some people can have to personal care products, which I never really had in the first place. So I think for me, cutting out stuff was so easy because I didn't really do anything like that, you know? It was like, "Okay, I'll just change my soap, it's fine, I use one soap for everything, okay." Yeah. I don't know if it's necessary but I think for me, it's been really useful to think about where we are

in capitalism, and kind of this proliferation of products which I think forms a particular type of attachment or a type of affect around the things that you have and the things that you put on your body. And for me, keeping that in my mind is part of these systems of exclusion and it's tied to economic stability or class and race and place and time. And so yeah, I guess, for me, having a sort of zooming out a little bit and thinking about chemical exposure as this really particular racial justice, disability justice, economic justice issue, and it's really important.

BLOOM: Alright. You know, that sounds great, and is there anything else you want to add before we turn the recorder off?

BROTHER: I don't think so.

BLOOM: Alright, thank you.

[End of April 30, 2019 interview.]