

## Epistemic Oases and the Disability Rights Movement

### Les oasis épistémiques et le mouvement des droits des personnes handicapées

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#### Abstract

Historically, people with disabilities have been denied the agency to create their own narratives about their lived experiences. This silencing has led to cultural misunderstandings of disability that have contributed to institutionalism and other physical and epistemic harms, casting disability to the lower rungs of society. The powerful impacts of the disability rights movement, including deinstitutionalization, were made possible by grassroots groups of disabled activists who worked in community with each other and formed what we describe as *epistemic oases*. An epistemic oasis is a localized group of individuals with a shared marginalized identity through which hermeneutical resources are developed that lead to collective resistance. We draw on Fricker's (2007) and Pohlhaus' (2020) work on epistemic injustice and identify examples of epistemic oases that led to prominent events throughout the disability rights movement, resulting in positive political change. We examine the communities developed at Camp Janed, the University of California, Berkeley, and Gallaudet University and contend that these are examples of epistemic oases that fostered collective resistance in the twentieth century.

#### Résumé

Historiquement, l'agentivité (« agency ») nécessaire pour narrer son propre récit et ses expériences vécues a été refusée aux personnes avec les handicaps. Ce silence imposé a mené à des malentendus culturels en rapport avec les handicaps, lesquels ont contribué envers l'institutionnalisme, d'autres maux physiques et épistémiques et la projection des handicaps aux échelons inférieurs de la société. Les impacts puissants produits par le mouvement des droits des personnes handicapées, ce qui inclut la désinstitutionnalisation, ont été possibles grâce aux groupes « grassroots » consistants d'activistes avec des handicaps qui ont travaillé en communauté l'un avec l'autre et formé ce que nous décrivons comme des oasis épistémiques. Une oasis épistémique consiste en un groupe localisé d'individus avec une identité marginalisée partagée qui développe des ressources herméneutiques qui peuvent aboutir à une résistance collective. Nous tirons des œuvres de Fricker (2007) et Pohlhaus (2020) sur l'injustice épistémique et identifions des exemples d'oasis épistémiques qui ont mené à des événements essentiels

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pour le mouvement des droits des personnes handicapées et à un changement politique positif. Nous examinons les communautés développées au « camp Jened », à l'université de la Californie à Berkeley et l'université Gallaudet et nous proposons que ceux-ci constituent des exemples d'oasis épistémiques qui ont incarné l'esprit de la résistance collective au XXe siècle.

### **Keywords**

Epistemic injustice, disability rights movement, disability studies, epistemic oasis, critical disability studies

### **Mots clés:**

L'injustice épistémique, le mouvement des droits des personnes handicapées, les études sur le handicap, l'oasis épistémique, les études critiques sur le handicap

## Introduction

When Bill Baldini (1968) and Geraldo Rivera (1972) exposed the horrific conditions of the institutions that housed children and adults with disabilities throughout the United States to television audiences, the nation was outraged. These primetime exposés not only revealed the shocking realities faced by the residents of Pennhurst State School in Pennsylvania and Willowbrook State School in New York, but also did something unique and groundbreaking by amplifying the voices of the disabled people living in these institutions.<sup>1</sup> These productions offered a glimpse into the lived experiences of people in institutionalized facilities. For the first time, viewers at home were visually face-to-face with the dehumanizing effects of the longstanding medical practice of institutionalization as they saw actual footage of the residents of these institutions and heard their stories. While journalists had previously covered institutions through newspaper articles, such as *Bedlam 1946* by Albert Q. Maisel and his follow-up piece in 1951, the written words and two-dimensional photographs did not have the same visceral impact that the reports on television elicited (Ben-Moshe, 2020).

During every interview aired on these two broadcasts, residents expressed unhappiness with their living conditions and often said they wanted to leave. One resident, interviewed by Rivera, said he would like to return to school and called the lack of adequate resources a “disgrace.” Residents told Baldini they “would like to get out of

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note here that although the voices of the residents of institutions were given a national platform for the first time, these two broadcasts still centered the perspectives of the reporters, doctors, staff, and politicians in the telling of these stories. Baldini states that there had been no “orator” to tell the stories of those with disabilities prior to his broadcast. This stands in stark contrast to the self-advocacy and empowerment demonstrated by countless disabled activists as the disability rights movement took hold during the twentieth century.

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Pennhurst” and just wanted to go home. Doctors and staff shared appalling details on camera about the lack of care and abuse that the residents experienced. Viewers of these broadcasts saw firsthand how living in an institution robbed the residents of their agency. Silencing of this marginalized population occurred not only through the injustices inflicted by segregation, abuse, and neglect, but also through how they were prevented from having opportunities to communicate how these injustices affected them. When interviewed, the inhabitants of these state-run hospitals clearly articulated that they were unhappy but had no resources to address their deplorable conditions. While progress had been made to support deinstitutionalization through efforts in Medicaid, Social Security benefits, and advances in medical research in the mid-1950s, the television exposés sparked a broader conversation across the United States about disability (Ben-Moshe, 2020). Organizations such as The League of the Physically Handicapped garnered national attention as early as the 1930s; however, these mid-century exposés catalyzed significant progress toward disability rights (Longmore & Goldberg, 2000). This attention still reflected the cultural narrative that people with disabilities were helpless and unable to care for themselves, implying that dependency is harmful and that all people must strive for autonomy in order to be productive and contribute to our capitalist society (Carey, 2009). This understanding of disability endures today despite efforts from disabled activists to demonstrate the diversity within the disabled community and advocacy work emphasizing the validity and importance of interdependence.

In contrast to institutionalization, a practice that worked to systemically prohibit the disability community from acquiring the epistemic and hermeneutical resources to self-advocate by way of the creation and maintenance of structural barriers, the disability

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rights movement has empowered many disabled activists to communicate their own stories and fight for their civil rights. While institutions facilitated a context in which epistemic resources were denied, disabled people have worked to resist oppression and generate knowledge before, during, and after the era of institutionalization. With the onset of the disability rights movement, disabled activists were increasingly able to break down systemic barriers and build epistemic resources. It is important to note that this movement was not a monolith; not all found it empowering, including many who held multiply marginalized identities, such as nonspeaking, chronically ill, Mad, queer, and racialized individuals (e.g., Egner, 2019; Erkulwater, 2018). However, the disability rights movement did move the needle forward to increase equity and access for disabled people through acts of resistance. These actions of collective epistemic resistance, as described by Pohlhaus (2020), were made possible by the development of a community of marginalized knowers with shared identities and experiences. The power of having this sacred space, which we identify as an epistemic oasis, enabled these activists to build the hermeneutical resources needed to engage in meaningful action and oppose injustice. These spaces still hold power for disabled individuals and are regarded as places of enduring meaning decades after the events occurred. We seek to build on the work on epistemic injustice by Fricker (2007) and Pohlhaus (2020) by demonstrating the existence of epistemic oases within prominent events in the disability rights movement and how these oases have created political change. In particular, we focus on the community at Camp Janed, the historic sit-ins in response to the lack of implementation of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, and the Deaf President Now movement at Gallaudet University.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The concept of epistemic injustice is multidimensional and evolving, to which many scholars have contributed. Based on Miranda Fricker's (2007) original work, naming epistemic injustice and related concepts such as testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice—as well as additional elements of epistemic injustice, including epistemic violence (Dotson, 2011), willful hermeneutical ignorance (Pohlhaus, 2020), epistemic exploitation (Berenstain, 2016), and hermeneutical labor (Anderson, 2023)—help us to understand the forms of systemic oppression related to knowledge and agency that disabled people experience. This framework is relevant to how the disability rights movement fostered the development of epistemic oases, which we identify as spaces that led to sustained change.

Miranda Fricker's (2007) book on epistemic injustice names two types of injustices: testimonial and hermeneutical. Testimonial injustice occurs when an individual is not granted the credibility to name and explain the events in their life. When a hearer is situated in a culturally dominant position and lacks lived experiences of marginalization to draw on to understand the speaker, marginalized speakers must use culturally accepted narratives to explain new information. The ability of culturally dominant hearers to comprehend this testimony is, therefore, processed through a narrow framework that was neither created nor embodied by those outside the dominant structures. The inability of the hearer to understand and accept the knower's ability to interpret and express their own experiences causes harm by perpetuating systems that do not include and account for differences outside of the dominant narrative (Fricker, 2007). Fricker explains that hermeneutical injustice occurs when the knower lacks the resources or frameworks to

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make sense of their lived experiences. When an individual or group of people cannot express their own stories, they cannot influence the dominant structures that could provide greater clarity to members outside a non-dominant community, which, in turn, would lead to more productive collective hermeneutical resources (Fricker, 2007). When empowered with hermeneutical resources, as described by Fricker (2007), one can name and, perhaps more effectively, stand against injustice. Fricker likens this experience to the story of Carmita Wood experiencing sexual harassment in the workplace. She knew that what she was experiencing was harmful and inappropriate. However, she did not have the hermeneutical resources available to name this experience for what it was—sexual harassment—because this term had not yet been developed. When empowered with this new term, she was given the hermeneutical resource to more effectively fight against the discrimination she encountered as a result of this harassment and her related unemployment case. Similarly, when neurodivergent or otherwise disabled people have the hermeneutical resources to identify unjust experiences using terms such as *ableism* or *neuronormativity*, we are empowered with language to advocate for ourselves more effectively.

Kristie Dotson (2011) builds on these ideas with the concept of epistemic violence. Epistemic violence occurs when there is a denial of a speaker's message due to pernicious ignorance. Pernicious ignorance is “any reliable ignorance that, in a given context, harms another person (or set of persons)” (Dotson, 2011, p. 238). Dotson names two potential effects of epistemic violence: testimonial quieting and testimonial smothering. Testimonial quieting occurs when, despite attempts from the knower to express information, the audience fails to accept or understand the knower's perspective.

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Testimonial smothering occurs when the knower self-censors or remains quiet because they feel unsafe sharing their knowledge (Dotson, 2011).

People from communities outside the dominant culture often face pushback when explaining their experiences to those with limited exposure to diverse perspectives. Marginalized communities routinely experience microaggressions, which are comments or actions that cause harm, whether intentional or unintentional (Fatima, 2019). These comments and actions often demean the target by reducing credibility or minimizing their experiences. In addition to microaggressions, marginalized communities also experience willful hermeneutical ignorance when sharing their perspective and stories. Willful hermeneutical ignorance occurs in “instances where marginally situated knowers actively resist epistemic domination through interaction with other resistant knowers, while dominantly situated knowers nonetheless continue to misunderstand and misinterpret the world” (Pohlhaus, 2020, p. 716). Willful hermeneutical ignorance creates epistemic exploitation (Berenstain, 2016).

Epistemic exploitation occurs when individuals are expected to engage in emotionally draining labor at the behest of the dominantly situated person. The dominantly situated person demands explanations or other intellectually draining tasks that do not further an inclusive dialogue but keep the marginalized individual busy defending their capacity as a knower (Berenstain, 2016). Further, epistemic exploitation can be presented in a way that positively situates the skeptic when one chooses to disengage or refuses to justify their lived experiences (Berenstain, 2016). In addition to epistemic labor, hermeneutical labor is required from a marginalized group to comfort members of the dominant culture. Ellie Anderson (2023) explains that hermeneutical labor

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requires individuals to be aware of others' feelings and to navigate situations to avoid potential negative harm that can arise from discussing ideas in contrast to an audience's point of view. The navigation between expressing one's personal story and the feelings of those receiving the information creates a burden of labor that is placed solely on the person dissenting from the dominant cultural narrative. On top of debating the dominant culture to have their insights seen as valid, marginalized groups are required to self-reflect and mitigate the emotional experiences of those denying the lived experiences of those burdened with educating.

One such marginalized group that has historically been affected by testimonial, hermeneutical, and other forms of epistemic injustice is the disabled community. Often, people with disabilities are not viewed as credible merely because of their disability, especially for those who use assistive or augmentative communication devices (Dohmen, 2016). The act of simply using a means of communication that sits outside cultural norms results in testimonial quieting from the ableist, dominant system. Even for those who use oral language as a primary method of social communication, ableist structures perpetuate epistemic harm. The very notion that autistic people, for example, lack the "theory of mind" precipitates the discrediting and subsequent testimonial quieting of their voices/knowledge/experiences (Dohmen, 2016; Grace, 2012). People with intellectual disabilities also face this barrier to credibility, as they are "rarely viewed as experts, even about their own experiences" (Taylor, 2018, p. 7). Additionally, there are many accounts of testimonial injustice occurring toward disabled patients when attempting to receive medical care (Allen, 2024; Dohmen, 2016; Peña-Guzmán & Reynolds, 2019). When

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doctors fail to believe their disabled patients due to a lack of perceived credibility, this testimonial injustice can lead to medical neglect.

Epistemic harm also arises when decisions are made regarding disabled individuals or when they are represented in media without the involvement of the affected individuals themselves. Starting in Eastern Europe and then popularized in South Africa, “Nothing about us without us” has been the call from the disability rights movement for decades, and yet there remains a need for the inclusion and input of disabled people in educational research spaces (Charlton, 1998; Taylor, 2018), the media industry (Vertoont, et al., 2022), and policy-making (Löve, et al., 2018). Attempts by the disabled community to organize to achieve social or political change have often been affected by epistemic injustice, as the perspectives of disabled people are frequently discredited. Dohmen (2016) speaks to the testimonial injustice that occurred when disabled people attempt to speak out against various forms of institutionalization. Professionals and family members alike have discredited the testimonies of disabled people who share their experiences with psychiatric hospitals, group homes, and nursing homes—the existing remnants of the institutionalization movement (Dohmen, 2016; Friedman & Bekwith, 2014). Still, the disabled community has persisted in organizing to fight for equity and accessibility. The collective epistemic resistance demonstrated throughout the disability rights movement has been most effective, we argue, when epistemic oases were formed that empowered community members to achieve practical political actions resulting in social or political change.

### **Epistemic Oases**

Like an oasis in a desert, epistemic oases exist in small, localized environments. Individuals from a marginalized group operating within the dominant culture are depleted of epistemic resources while interacting with people and environments that do not account for their existence. The epistemic exploitation and hermeneutical labor demanded from individuals in marginalized groups create harsh environments that impact their quality of life. When two individuals with comparable experiences and shared identities meet, they engage in new ways of understanding. Access-knowledge is an idea that centers the lived experience of people with disabilities as experts on how disability interacts with space and society (Hamraie, 2017). Fluency of access-knowledge is the foundation of an epistemic oasis. This act of togetherness allows others with similar experiences to identify a place where they will be accepted and understood. Grassroots organizing, such as organizing a community social gathering, creates additional entry points into the epistemic oasis for individuals who desire a community of like-minded fellowship and shared experience. The resulting collective epistemic resistance through protest and other communal action provides avenues for allies to amplify the voices of community members and echo the message originating within this oasis, as described by Jose Medina (2022). This act of allyship and echoing increases the power and efficiency of resistance and allows for trickles of epistemic justice to flow into previously unwelcoming environments.

When the dominant culture shapes the narrative and undermines the credibility of marginalized knowers, individuals from these groups are unable to remain within it and cultivate the hermeneutical resources necessary to gain agency. Dotson (2011) speaks to this with the concept of testimonial quieting. When an audience is unable to recognize

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the speaker as a knower, the speaker's testimony can not be offered, and testimonial quieting occurs. For a speaker to be understood, they must seek out individuals who 1) can recognize the marginalized speaker's capacity to know and 2) are capable and willing to understand the message of the speaker. When marginalized individuals live in environments where these conditions are not met, it is difficult to develop the epistemic or hermeneutical resources needed to understand and explain their own experiences of epistemic injustice. This silencing perpetuates both the status quo of the dominant culture and ignorance of the perspectives of those in marginalized groups. Furthermore, expecting epistemic and hermeneutical labor from a marginalized knower exhausts the individual. It encourages testimonial smothering, thereby decreasing the frequency of challenges to the dominant narrative and preventing meaningful social change. A place free from this epistemic exploitation, in which members of a community recognize each other as knowers who have testimonial competence, is an epistemic oasis that fosters the development of hermeneutical resources that lead to collective resistance.

In epistemic oases, individuals from a marginalized community come together to take respite from microaggressions and systemic discrimination. Through reciprocated understanding, the needs of group members can be uniquely accommodated, as speakers and listeners alike hold mutual respect and empower one another as knowers. Shared experiences deepen individual understanding, and even if specific vocabulary cannot be produced, the audience's competency allows for the development of defined hermeneutical resources and actionable steps to reduce or eliminate barriers. Piepzn-Samarasinha (2018) describes the idea of collective access, where access is woven into the fabric of a space by the individuals who occupy it. This establishes an ease of

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participation and creates the conditions necessary for individuals to produce epistemic resources. This leads to both internal and external actions that affect social change. Epistemic oases foster mutual aid, collective care, and accessibility. This mutual support enables and empowers individuals to articulate their needs to the dominant culture and engage in collective epistemic resistance, often through political action or advocacy, thus creating conditions more conducive to the development of additional epistemic oases.

Epistemic oases are thus spaces where members of a shared marginalized community can express their own realities and create collective realities in which epistemic and hermeneutical resources can be developed, affirmed, and disseminated. Here, members can counter the harmful effects of gaslighting. These are places where group members engage in conversation free from epistemic demands of justification or reassurance and where mutual understanding leads to empowerment and action. While sharing similarities with concepts such as epistemic communities (Haas, 1992), counterpublics (Fraser, 1990), and collective epistemic resistance (Pohlhaus, 2020), epistemic oases are unique in their formation and resilience. Epistemic oases center the access-knowledge of marginalized individuals, particularly those with disabilities, and actively work to create collective access where environments are barrier-free, and community participation is actualized. In any effective social justice movement, it is possible to identify epistemic oases that provide the solidarity and collective care needed to enable actionable, lasting social or political change. Although epistemic oases have arguably existed across all social movements, we will focus specifically on examples within the disability rights movement as we identify and explore the epistemic oases that led to disability rights.

### **Epistemic Oases and the Disability Rights Movement**

There are multiple examples of epistemic oases that have helped establish and maintain the Disability Rights Movement. We will examine notable examples of epistemic oases and the civic engagement that followed. We will discuss Camp Jened and its impact on creating disability rights leaders who helped build momentum for the Disability Rights Movement as a whole. From here, we will discuss how organizing in Berkeley, California, led to sit-in protests across the country to encourage the signing of 504, which gave people with disabilities denied participation in organizations receiving federal money recourse. Specifically, we will discuss how the protests in San Francisco outlasted every other sit-in and how they chose to move to the Capitol building in Washington, D.C. Lastly, we will discuss Gallaudet University, the only university in the world designed for the Deaf community. The primary mode of communication is American Sign Language (ASL) and has been the heart of the Deaf community since its founding in 1864. In 1988, students held the Deaf President Now (DPN) protests after the board refused to appoint a Deaf person as the university's president.

As we discuss the three key epistemic oases in the Disabled community and the direct impact they had on the movement, we will focus on the creation of each and the characteristics that made these locations so fruitful for broader-scale action. We will also investigate the media's response to these actions and its attempt to use a predominantly focused narrative to describe them. We will explore the hermeneutical resources the disabled community created in response to narratives of their portrayal, and how these resources have redefined the cultural narrative.

#### **Camp Jened**

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Camp Jened was created in the early 1950s as a place for people with disabilities to experience a sleepaway camp experience (LaMotte, 2020). With the rise of counterculture movements in the 1960s, Camp Jened saw a blossoming of hippie culture among counselors and campers. Campers were encouraged to participate in activities that the outside world generally ignored. The documentary *Crip Camp*, released on Netflix in 2020, presents footage of campers reflecting upon their initial experiences with sexual activity and cannabis use. Another scene shows campers discussing their individual frustrations about life outside of the camp. One camper speaks slowly with a significant speech impairment, while the other campers listen quietly. After this individual finishes speaking, another camper clarifies what he heard to the rest of the group. These demonstrations of care and attention were rare occurrences for campers outside of Camp Jened. During a period in which institutionalization was the dominant method of managing disability, Camp Jened demonstrated an emerging philosophy built around social awareness and acceptance of disability. Jim LeBrecht, former Camp Jened camper and director of *Crip Camp*, said, "For two months out of the year, I had this experience where I wasn't an 'other.' I even found my first girlfriend there" (Smith, 2020, para. 5).

Camp Jened is often noted as the birthplace of the Disability Rights Movement. Many counselors and campers became deeply involved in the movement, including notable figures such as Judy Heumann (LaMotte, 2020). Heumann, who went on to become one of the most influential leaders during the 504 sit-in protests, originally aspired to become a teacher (Wall, 2022). She was denied a teaching license because she was a wheelchair user. Despite a legal victory, Heumann instead became involved with Camp Jened as a counselor. In *Crip Camp*, Heumann can be seen discussing potential activities

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and menu choices for campers. The voices of all people were valued at Camp Jened. LeBrecht reflected, “I wasn’t exactly sure who was a camper and who was a counselor. I think that’s really indicative of one of the many things that made that camp feel special” (Brice, 2023, para. 2).

Camp Jened is a clear example of an epistemic oasis. At camp, disabled campers had access to spaces that accommodated their individual needs. Many participants used wheelchairs or had mobility considerations that made environments outside of camp difficult to access. In addition, individuals at the camp were equipped to recognize and affirm messages from the perspectives within the disability community. Most people were disabled, so they could relate to the direct lived experiences that were shared, and those who were not were willing to accept the capacity of the speakers. These shared experiences fostered the development of hermeneutical resources. Through the formation of these hermeneutical resources, camp participants developed and benefited from the protection of a safe and accessible environment. At Camp Jened, people were free from the epistemic exploitation of seeking accommodation, engaging in teenage behavior, or explaining their experiences to people who would not hear them. LeBrecht said he felt the world was an unfair place, but he realized he could inspire change through his time at camp. Former campers and staff went on to develop, lead, and rewrite the national cultural narrative on disability.

### **Berkeley and the 504 Sit-ins**

In the 1960s, UC Berkeley established a scholarship program for people with disabilities to attend the university (UC Berkeley, n.d.). This was one of the first gestures from an institution of higher learning in the United States. Ed Roberts was among the first

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students to participate (Zukas, 1975). Roberts contracted Polio as a child and used an iron lung. As a result of his medical needs, UC Berkeley housed him in the health services office, while other disabled students were housed in a hospital wing. The original cohort consisted solely of white men. However, in 1968, Cowell Hospital added three disabled women, Cathy Caulfield, Sue Ward, and Judy Taylor, and a Black disabled man, Billy Charles Barner, into the group; however, this did not lead to collaboration between feminist or Black activist groups in the area (Danforth, 2018). Roberts and his peers founded Rolling Quads, which later became the Disabled Students Union. The Rolling Quads began advocating for more integrated housing options. In 1972, the Center for Independent Living (CIL) was created as a means to continue its activism. The CIL provided employment and independent living options (Center for Independent Living, n.d.). The CIL also served as a place where people with disabilities could learn and collaboratively discuss and solve problems they were experiencing. Eventually, the CIL opened the Ed Roberts Campus, the organization's headquarters. Careful consideration was given to how this building would look, and Universal Design principles were incorporated to create a space accessible to as many people as possible. Through the work of Rolling Quads and the CIL, the city of Berkeley became an accessible hub for people with disabilities, a characteristic that remains evident today.

By 1977, disability advocates were still waiting for Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act to be enacted. Section 504 would make it illegal for any organization receiving federal funds to discriminate against people based on their disability. After over four years of trying to rally presidential administrations to take action, disability advocates decided to adopt a more confrontational approach. Judy Heumann, Kitty Cone, and other disability

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rights advocates across the country planned a joint sit-in in Health, Education, and Wellness (HEW) buildings in the United States (Wallis, 2020). Occupations of HEW buildings occurred in Seattle, Atlanta, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. Each protest fizzled out after only a few days. The second-longest protest in Los Angeles lasted just four days. However, San Francisco endured.

Protestors in San Francisco occupied the fourth floor of the HEW building, and government officials attempted to make their stay as inhospitable as possible (Iman, 1997). Being a disabled protestor came with additional challenges, and protestors needed to find solutions. Medication required refrigeration, individuals with physical disabilities needed places to sleep that would not exacerbate existing medical conditions, and providing enough food for everyone brought additional challenges. Officials shut off the hot water and refrigeration for the protestors and cut the phone lines, isolating them from outside organizers (Iman, 1997). Heumann, Cone, and the other 150 protestors would not back down. They created makeshift refrigeration units using air conditioners and duct tape, while Deaf protestors signed to the outside crowd through windows to spread information without phones (Wallis, 2020). The Black Panther Party (BPP) assisted by bringing food and other supplies to protestors (LeBrecht & Newnham, 2020). The support and collaboration between different organizations comprised of activists and community members of a variety of marginalized identities during this action is critical to highlight, as the dominant narrative of the 504 sit-ins tends to focus on white disabled activists. The involvement of the BPP in this movement prolonged its duration and increased its impact, underscoring the importance of interpreting this history through an intersectional lens (Schweik, 2011). San Francisco's sit-in stretched on for days and then weeks. Heumann

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and Cone knew they needed to keep protesters engaged to maintain their spirits. Protesters sang songs, held wheelchair races, and even held an Easter egg hunt (Wallis, 2020). Heumann also supported the formation of multiple committees by protesters to address various challenges and undertake specific tasks (Shapiro, 2002). After 24 days of protesting, the longest non-violent occupation of a government building in US history, officials agreed to meet with protest leaders to discuss the signage of Section 504.

UC Berkeley demonstrates how the creation of an epistemic oasis flows outwards, creating political change and inspiring additional oases. Through the scholarship program, disabled individuals gained access to higher education and the opportunity to live and learn with other disabled people. Through their collective work, students formed organizations that gave them greater power to advocate for social change, with the Rolling Quads at the forefront of efforts to expand access and inclusion. Ed Roberts and other Rolling Quad members extended their scope of access and created the CIL, which opened up San Francisco to the Disabled public. A major reason the San Francisco sit-ins were successful was the accessibility CIL created in transportation and the ability to gain economic power through greater employment opportunities. Even while protesting, the disabled community created its own oasis. Disabled people found disabled solutions to navigate the manufactured barriers created by HEW employees. Deafness is a disability often viewed as isolating, due to systemic barriers that impact those within this cultural-linguistic minority group. However, Deaf protesters were empowered to use ASL as the means by which information flowed between the inside and outside worlds, using it as a tool for political and civic engagement. The protests were also a place of affirmation

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for many people with disabilities who had rarely been in environments where disability was not marginalized or judged. A protester reflected on her experience by saying:

We had had a glorious experience together, and it had been our home, probably in many ways the most accepting and loving home we'd ever been in. I think that there were no people in that building that didn't feel that they were affirmed and reaffirmed and then reaffirmed again. It was almost like we were in a Nirvana, we were in a heaven, we were in a place of great safety and love, and we were going back out into that world to struggle as individuals again. (Shapiro, 2002, para. 35)

Protesters stayed in the HEW building for two additional days after Section 504 was signed in order to clean up and say their goodbyes to fellow comrades (Wallis, 2020), demonstrating the close community built within this epistemic oasis.

### **Gallaudet University and Deaf President Now**

In the early 1800s, Thomas Gallaudet was hired by the Cogswell family to travel to England to learn more about Deaf education, with the goal of providing a quality education for their daughter, Alice (Calton, 2022). The educational philosophy in England emphasized an oral focus, and Gallaudet went to France to learn more about their philosophy of manual language. He brought back his understanding of French Sign Language, and American Sign Language slowly developed through its use in Deaf schools across the country (Calton, 2022). In 1864, Abraham Lincoln signed a bill into law creating a university for Deaf and blind students, originally named the Columbia Institute for the Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb and Blind (Gallaudet University, n.d.). This organization aimed to provide instructive practices for the education of Deaf and blind individuals. In its early years, there were debates about whether signing or oralism should be at the heart of Deaf education. Throughout the years, the institution increased its advocacy for students and faculty to use sign language. In 1894, the name Gallaudet

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University was first introduced and was entirely accepted in 1954. Gallaudet is the first and only institution of higher learning specifically for the Deaf in the world to this day.

In 1987, the university president stepped down, leaving the Board of Trustees to find and hire a new leader (Gallaudet University, n.d.). The board received 87 initial candidates, which were narrowed to six semifinalists, three of whom were Deaf. At this stage in the decision-making process, student groups were allowed to interview candidates and submit a ranked list of their preferred choices, resulting in the selection of three finalists: two Deaf professionals and one hearing. National advocacy groups, faculty, and students all publicly urged the board to pick the first Deaf president in its then 124-year history. The board announced its decision to hire Elisabeth Zinser, a hearing woman with very little signing ability.

Student-led protests erupted across campus in response to this decision (Gallaudet University, n.d.). Three students, Jerry Covell, Greg Hlibok, and Bridgetta Borne-Firl, took the lead in organizing protesters. In *Deaf President Now!* (2025), a documentary exploring the protest, Borne-Firl details how her identity as a woman provided challenges in maintaining a leadership position during the protest. Despite these challenges, as more students saw the three students as the primary organizers, the three shared responsibilities. All three organizers are white, which created additional power imbalances between organizers and the multiracial demographics of the protesters. More than 1000 protesters, including students, faculty, and Deaf advocates around the country, came to Gallaudet to make their frustrations heard. Students took over campus buildings, blocked streets, and held multiple daily rallies to send a message to the Board of Trustees that the Deaf population is capable of leading and organizing around their lived

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experiences. The students created a list of four demands: 1) Zinser needed to step down as president, 2) the resignation of the board of trustees' chairperson, 3) a 51% Deaf majority on the Board of Trustees, and 4) no retaliation for students and faculty who took part in the protests (Gallaudet University, n.d.). After a week, each condition was agreed to. Dr. I. King Jordan was appointed the next President of Gallaudet University, making him the first Deaf president to hold the position.

Gallaudet could be considered one of the oldest continual epistemic oases in the United States for disabled individuals. For over 100 years before the Deaf President Now protests, Gallaudet served as the premier center for state-of-the-art Deaf education. Deaf individuals had full language access to education with professors who were leaders in their fields and fluent in ASL. There is no epistemic exploitation of Deaf students to justify a need for interpreters or other related accommodations because interpreters were not needed, and the structure of the classrooms was developed specifically for disabled students. The entire university is fully accessible to people with hearing loss. Today, 95% of the undergraduate population at Gallaudet University is Deaf (Gallaudet University, n.d.). From 1993 onward, the Deaf population saw its highest number of legislative victories in the country's history (Gallaudet University, n.d.). One related victory was the Telecommunications Accessibility Enhancement Act, which expanded access to TTY systems and the development of relay services, enabling Deaf citizens to call businesses or engage in other telephone communication. Another notable piece of legislation during this era was the Television Circuitry Act of 1990, which required television manufacturers to include a chip in their products that enabled closed captioning on 13-inch television sets. This allowed Deaf people greater access to entertainment and news (Gallaudet

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University, n.d.). All these developments were a direct result of the epistemic oasis fostered at Gallaudet University.

### **Conclusion**

Epistemic oases must be fostered within the disability community to create meaningful and lasting political and social change. Disabled participants in these spaces are experts in their own needs and have demonstrated the ability to provide effective collective care and accessibility to one another through their shared knowledge and mutual understanding. However, the existence and accessibility of epistemic oases vary. People with invisible disabilities may not be able to identify members of their shared identity readily. The current age of misinformation has also influenced cultural narratives and may be a barrier to the formation and sustenance of epistemic oases. People with disabilities are uniquely situated to experience isolation due to challenges around accessibility, such as transportation and physical location. People with disabilities are generally not accepted by dominantly situated hearers as having the capacity to know or understand their own lived experiences. The societal narrative and lack of political agency led to the underrepresentation of the disabled community in spaces where decisions are made, thus perpetuating the narrative that disabled people lack expertise about their own experiences. We recommended further exploration of the existence of epistemic oases within the disability rights movement as we deepen our connections to literature in the Disability Studies field. This paper only represents a small slice of disability history. Further identification and exploration of additional examples, especially within the neurodivergent community, is recommended to gain a fuller understanding of the nuances and the impact of epistemic oases. We believe that identifying epistemic oases is relevant

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to the Disability Studies field as another avenue for scholars and practitioners to explore, through either group membership or allyship, as we collectively work to advance disability rights.

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