

# CRITICAL DESIGN LAB

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## PROTOCOLS FOR UNFINISHED TECHNOSCIENCE

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*Critical Design Lab director Aimi Hamraie meditates on the uses of "protocols" for destabilizing the typical "checklist"-style approach to accessibility.*

-Aimi Hamraie-

A protocol is an outlined procedure for action. Protocols can be prescriptive and bureaucratic, medical and normalizing. But, as I will outline here, protocols can also serve as design templates. As such, they can be re-iterated, re-designed, tinkered with, and hacked to produce a new state of things.

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Disability activists often point to accessibility as a quality of built environments that is often produced through technical protocols, such as checklists. As Mia Mingus argues, the checklist approach to accessibility renders "liberation" as "logistics."

But protocols also have a history in activist technoscience. In *Seizing the Means of Reproduction*, Michelle Murphy describes "protocol feminism" as a set of practices through which technoscience is made

"accessible, routinizable, and do-able." For feminists in the women's health movement, protocols defined shared practices of knowing, perceiving, and making health beyond the expert domain of male-dominated medicine.

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Outlining a protocol formalizes our practices. But protocols also place us in the middle of things. Writing or drawing a protocol helps us understand our ongoing projects as comprised of iterations and prototypes.

Critical Design Lab members have been experimenting with defining protocols for our ongoing, unfinished work. We were inspired by the design collective spurse, particularly their "eat your sidewalk" protocols. Their diagrammatic meditations on human-nature entanglements, including one called "tools to make tools," inspired us to map the processes and flows in our own work, including the methods we hope to disperse through the Lab's projects.

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Protocols can be accountability measures. Often, I am asked to share protocols for Mapping Access with others who want to replicate the project. These requests are often for reading materials. "Is there a Mapping Access syllabus?," a geographer recently asked me. But these ideas are very much in formation. There is, of course, research to

review (and I have an article on Mapping Access that will be in the journal *American Quarterly* this fall). To simplify things, I offer a brief methodological overview, which in its simplicity eliminates the messiness of access for the sake of transmitting information.

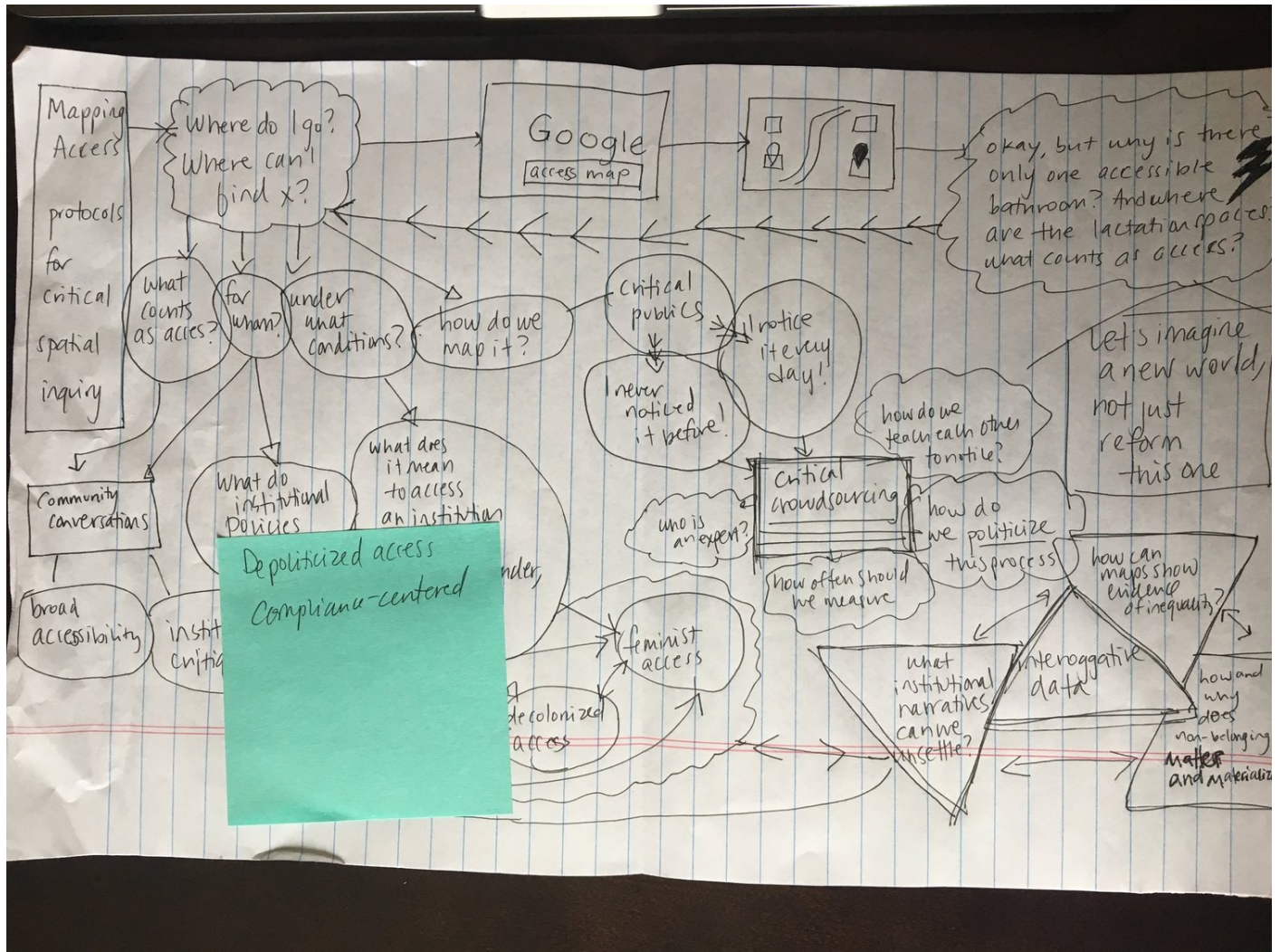


Image description: In the messy middle of things, a hand-written diagram on lined legal paper. Circles, squares, and lines connecting words and questions: Mapping Access: protocols for spatial inquiry --> Where do I go? Where can I find x? Google, access maps. Okay, but where can I find an accessible bathroom? Back to the original question. Now we look at what counts as access, for whom, and under what conditions? The questions go on like this, circling back on themselves, until finally we arrive at: "let's imagine a new world, not just reform this one." A bright turquoise sticky note on top of the diagram reads "depoliticized access. compliance-centered."

But to me, the answer to the question of how to *do* accessibility mapping is more conceptual. Above, I am sharing a diagrammatic protocol that I recently drew while trying to explain the project to two

anonymous reviewers, who read an article that I am trying to publish. The protocol focuses on the *questions* that Mapping Access begins with, produces, and returns to. It is a messy sheet of lined paper covered in boxes, thought bubbles, cloud shapes, and arrows. The paper is folded and crumbled. A turquoise sticky note rests on top, with two scribbled notes: "depoliticized access. compliance-centered."

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Critical access theorists often point to the messiness and gestural qualities of access-making: that we ought not follow standardized formulae, but rather reach for creative access solutions, recognizing access as an open-ended and unfolding process. Protocols strike me as an alternative to accessibility checklists in two ways: first, by focusing on the *doing* of access, they destabilize the idea that there is a single type of disabled user, access need, or way of achieving inclusion; and second, they provide a tangible map to follow, fulfilling the desire for a "how to" that nevertheless leaves us restless, with questions that reach toward (but also problematize) the ideal of an accessible future.